



Social Impact of Agrarian Policy on Colonial Assam

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Abstract: The economic policy of the British brought a social change in Assam. The profit generating attitude of the British is attributed to the social mobility and peasant unrest. The cash crop cultivation in Assam provided a space for commercialization, but it has compelled the local peasants to work for the British instead of supporting domestic consumption. The British revenue policy has destroyed the self-sufficient rural economy of the people of Assam by introducing a monetized system of revenue payment. In order to meet the revenue payment, peasants became dependent on money lenders which eventually created indebtedness. The *Paik* system was the early practise of paying the tax in the form of voluntary service to Ahom State in lieu of revenue payment. Private ownership of land was not mandated to the peasant communities except the religious institutions, Brahmins and the *Satgharia* Ahoms who were better known as seven blue blooded Ahom Family associated with *Gohains* owned the private lands. It has created inequality in ownership of land. Assam having a less population with vast tracts of fertile land offered a living space for land mongers who did not hesitate to come and occupy the waste and marshy land. The Cash crop cultivations compelled the British to devise a new strategy to procure more labour which finally invited thousands of skilled and hard working immigrants to Assam for cultivation. The influx of immigrants brought a demographic change. Since the local people lacked monetary power the advanced communities from mainland India were invited to manage the economic activities in Assam. Literally British did little for the improvement of agriculture and use of agricultural implements. Since, majority of the people were engaged in rice cultivation, they didn't bother to work in British owned tea gardens where the wages were lower than the requirement of family maintenance. Land and revenue settlement policy of the British gave rise to peasant mobility. This policy has ruled out the middlemen and victimized the peasant communities with the heavy burden of tax. Besides, diseases and natural inundation have aggravated the condition of peasant communities.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Immigrants, Cash Crops, Policy, Tax

I. INTRODUCTION

After the political reorganisation in Assam, the colonial state government has adopted various policies that impacted the destruction of agrarian relation. The peasant communities of Assam primarily relied on agriculture. The flight of the peasant community has been reflected in the peasant mobility. The economic oriented motive of the British exercised various experiments to invest their capital on land. The fertile and vast tract of unsettled land along with less population has attracted the planters, Colonialists and peasants from other provinces to come and occupy the land. Cash crop cultivation remained a colonial interest in Assam. Commercial mindset of the British pressurized the colonial government to adopt new policies. These new policies favoured the British planters, moneylenders and the hardworking peasants from East Bengal. The self-sufficient rural economy of the peasant society was shattered due to the monetized system of revenue payment and the exploitative nature of the moneylenders which directly turned the peasants into victimization of indebtedness and loss of lands. Besides, there was hardly any initiative taken by the colonial government to improve the tools and technology usage in the agricultural sector. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the debut who has taken a great interest in agrarian revolution. He has closely observed the problems of the agriculture and detected the fundamental drawbacks such as outdated implements, the feeblest animals which were used for ploughing, scanty earmarking of food stocks, non-reliance on the irrigation system, drainage system, embankment system and the ignorance of the peasantry about having proper knowledge of using manures¹. Apart from colonial policies the natural calamities such as frequent floods, Capital deficiency, marketing problems, lack of education and knowledge about the changing economic conditions² and diseases such as *Kalazar*, Cholera caused immense hardship in the lives of the people of Assam. The immigration factor became a severe phenomenon which subsequently turned to a demographic change. In fact, the hard working peasants of East Bengal have made a big difference by contributing their labour in cultivation which eventually supplemented a great economic boost. This paper attempts to highlight the factors relating to the British policy that caused severe atrocities in social aspects as well as in their activities.

British Policy

The British agrarian policy on Assam was associated with the economic gain. The traditional practice of agriculture was not literally given any importance instead intensive interest on cultivation was focused on cash crops cultivation. The main objective of the British land settlement policy was to recognize all traditional rights to land and formulate the long term hereditary and transferable rights in land³. After the political reorganisation in Assam, power was ceded to the British, subsequently, various policies came into force. The trial and error experiment has been witnessed in the sphere of land and implementation of policy. The various policies has been formulated between the years 1854 to 1893 such as Wastelands Settlement Rules, 1854, the Prohibition of Opium Cultivation in 1860, Farming of Settlement Rules, 1870, the recasting of the settlement Rules in 1883, the promulgation of the Land and Revenue Regulations in 1886.⁴

In order to make waste lands available for special cultivation on attractive terms, a set of rules were formulated. These were known as the Wasteland Rules of 6 March 1838. In this spectrum, waste lands were given to the applicants on a lease of forty five years.

The wastelands settlement rules provided full access to the British in Assam to occupy or reclaim the vast tracts of land on grounds of investment in land associated with cash crop cultivation. The grazing land and some forest lands were converted into tea gardens. It was also a period where the new venture of the British began their start up either in private or in public. Assam being a land of fertile ground offered easy access to embark upon the new experiment of their investment in land. This policy also gave access to the immigrants to occupy more land in swarm and char areas of land for extensive cultivation. The land hungry peasants of East Bengal never hesitated to come and occupy the land. At that time the population of Assam was less which finally provided the living space for the outsiders to come and settle. Since the fundamental objective of colonial government was associated with the commercial agenda and more generation of economy, cultivation of cash crop seems to be appropriate on the part of British to invest their capital on tea cultivation and other cash crop cultivations.⁵ Under 1854 rules land became transferable and such land could be sold in the case of unearned profit.

The colonial administration settled a long term revenue assessment over a period of tenth years in *rupit* land where wet rice cultivation or transplantation of rice is feasible. The *faringati* lands were settled with annual assessment of land. The land and revenue regulation policy of 1886 has furnished an extensive legal basis for the colonial administration that mandated to avail the defaulters land which will be put on auction⁶. In case of mortgaged land, money lenders can lawfully appropriate the land by the court decree which earlier belonged to the peasants.

By 1840, the system of revenue payment was exclusively monetized. Due to cash oriented revenue payment, the peasant communities were by and large put under severe strain. The intensity of the exploitative nature of the colonial administration was felt in the wake of various policies. The stability of the peaceful existence of the village was over time turned into disparities and public outrage. The people of upper Assam hardly experienced any sort of cash transaction. However, the barter system was a common practise of transaction. Besides, some pockets of lower Assam had already experienced cash transactions in trade and selling of land. Agriculture being the chief source of sustainable livelihood, the peasants had left no alternative except to give their land on lease which finally resulted in indebtedness and loss of land due to high rate of interest. The exploitative nature of the British revenue officials as well as the rich peasants destroyed the self-sufficient village economy and happy life of the peasants' communities. In addition, the abolition of slavery had triggered severe blow to the rich landholders and aristocratic noble families of Ahom. Tea plantation began in the 19th century which was intensive labour oriented. Since the self-sufficient local peasants refused to work in British own tea gardens, the colonial state has chalked out the plan to augment the rate of revenue payment which resulted in domestic cultivators to give up the earlier practice of agriculture and turn them as labour for the tea gardens. The *zamindari* and *ryotwari* system failed to bring improvement in agriculture and the advanced tools were not introduced in agriculture. The indifferent attitude of the British as well as the landlords led to the stagnant rural economy.

Impact

The augmentation of revenue had a substantial impact on the agrarian communities who had left their cultivable land ensued by causing inflation of food grains. Prior to the colonial administration, civil

war and the Burmese aggression in Assam had shattered the social, economic and political structures⁷. The prevalence of vast tracts of wasteland and depopulation was impacted due to the act of Burmese soldiers. The colonial government imposed various taxes by reorganizing the financial system which was earlier de-escalated owing to revolt of 1857⁸. As far as land tenure system of colonial Assam was concerned, by and large the people settling in hill districts were exempted of land tax instead house tax was paid. On the other hand, permanent settlement or *zamindari* system was exercised in Goalpara districts and *ryotwaris* system prevailed in rest of the plain district areas of Assam⁹. Before the implementation of revenue policy, land assessment was carried out so as to fix the rate on land on the basis of cultivation. In this respect, in order to escape the payment of revenue some of the agriculturists relinquished the land and moved into a forest land. The relinquishment of land resulted in waste land as well as less food production followed by dearth of supply to tea labourers and railway workers. According to Guha, the increased land revenue policy has compelled the peasants followed by driving the peasants to depend on the Marwari traders for loan to meet the revenue demand who in return took full advantage of exploiting the peasants. Over and above, stressing on more cash crop cultivation and high revenue collection affected the food producing peasants' community to depend on the moneylenders for favour of financial assistance who over time seized the land that belonged to the defaulter.¹⁰

Peasant movement

The peasant movement of Assam can be attributed to the grievances inflicted by the colonial administrators and Indian agents who acted as money lenders. The exploitative nature of revenue officials and the agents of the British destroyed the very existing economic structure of the peasants¹¹. The primary factor accountable to the peasant mobilization was a monetized system of payment and increased rate of revenue. The collective and cohesive solidarity of the peasant communities has been created so as to rule out the colonial government's proliferation of revenue¹². With the objective of procuring labour for the cash crop cultivation led to augmentation of revenue which caused severe burden on the peasants. In fact, the policy of the colonial administration was to directly force the peasants to flush out from the land and turn them as labour in tea gardens. The resettlement and revenue escalation of 1893 played a flagship role in triggering the peasant to organise themselves to upsurge against the colonial state¹³.

PulaguriDaoha was one of the examples which was organised by the *ryots* through the institution of *raijmel* (people's Assembly) against the colonial government in British Assam. The prohibition of poppy cultivation in Nowgong has triggered resentment of the peasants. This ban has destroyed the very existence of the domestic tribal economy. However, the ban was looked upon as the violation of the social habit and customs of the people. Eventually rumours disseminated that the colonial government would impose additional tax on betel leaf cultivation, house tax and gardens. This rumour created peasant mobility which finally led to the demise of Lieutenant Singer¹⁴. Over and above the ban on opium plantation affected the peasant economy of Nowgong, which was one of the leading opium producing districts in Assam. As per the report of A Descriptive Account of Assam, Robison and Miss have articulated that over three-fourth of the population of Assam was addicted to opium.¹⁵ The Income Tax Act amendment of 1861 did not relieve the single agriculturist of Assam which added more fuel on the burning sentiment of the peasant community of Assam. Eventually, *PhulaguriDaoha* became inevitable.

After the upsurge, the colonial government continued to augment the land revenue and new taxes were introduced which finally caused another peasant revolt in Darrang and North Kamrup. As a result, the rioters launched 'no tax campaign'.¹⁶

Patharughat upsurge was another phenomenon which reflected the plight of the peasant's discontent and anger in response to new revenue policy and augmented land revenue. After a series of petitions put forward by the *ryots* to revise the revenue policy did not bring any positive repercussion which finally led to peasant's organisation of *mel*. It was in this *mel*, where all the plights of the *ryots* were expressed and future course of action was chalked out.¹⁷

Influx of Working Force

In the later period of Ahom rule immigration of a small group of people came to Assam. However, right after the British annexation of Assam in 1826 continuous inflow of immigrants occurred in Assam. As soon as the British annexed and consolidated their dominion in the entire region, the process of influx of immigration has risen to attain a vigorous momentum. In Assam over four fifth of the cultivable waste

lands remained untouched by plough at the close of the last century. The local authorities encouraged immigrants into both the Brahmaputra and the Surma valleys. They invited people from outside Assam and offered rent-free wastelands for a turn of years.¹⁸

The migrations are of six major types:

1. Tea garden labourers, from the states of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh.
2. East Bengal (present Bangladesh) Muslim peasants.
3. Bengali Hindus as office clerk and professionals.
4. The Nepalese who came to the region for agriculture and also to work as soldiers and office attendants
5. Marwaris from Rajasthan as traders.
6. Hindustanis from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh as artisans, porters etc.

H.K. Barpujari observed, at the beginning most of the newcomers were mere fortune seekers and in due course many of them settled down permanently and linked themselves with the people of soil.¹⁹

The tea cultivation by the British in Assam has opened the door for the European planters to invest their capitals. This led to a need for a workforce in the tea gardens. Though the locals were given first preference as a working force in tea gardens, however, due to disregard of the British's offer, the colonial government had to substitute with the labour from central India and neighbouring provinces. A. Guha said, "Until the beginning of a still bigger population movement from East Bengal to Assam in this century tea remained the biggest factor responsible for immigration".²⁰

The discovery of oil in Digboi, coal in upper Assam and construction of railways line in Assam demanded skilled and educated working force. Due to lack of eligible working force in Assam, the skilled and educated folks were brought from outside Assam.

II. CONCLUSION

The colonial state policy associated with revenue augmentation has been the primary cause where domestic economy and agrarian relation were shattered. The peasant mobility was a response to the excessive burden of tax. The cultivation of tea was another commercial interest of the British which neglected the domestic food production as a result no such measures have been taken to improve the tools and method of cultivation in agriculture. The immigration issue became one of the serious phenomena which subsequently changed the demography of Assam. 'Grow more food' campaign invited more hard working Muslim peasants from East Bengal to turn the char and marshy land into jute cultivation. The money lenders always posed a trap for the agriculturist who had depended for advance loan in order to meet the revenue demand. Lack of capital was the cause where peasants could not develop the method of cultivation and commercialization of food crops. Besides, Colonial states put more hindrance against the native agriculturists to rule out the interest of food production and cultivation of poppy. However, the economy of the colonial state was facilitated with the contribution done by the hardworking Muslim peasants and workers imported from Bengal and central India. They made a big difference in the economy of the Colonial state. But the poor peasants from Assam suffered the most due to the new land and revenue policies of the colonial administration.

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