

Historical Study of the *Raijmels* : A New Approach

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Introduction

Since time immemorial, the *raijmels* have been the part and parcel of the rural life of Assam. The Assamese term “*raij*” indicates the people and “*mel*” the assembly. *Raij*, in Assamese, simply indicates a body of raiyats gathered for a common purpose. The concept of *raij* is even today very strong in Assam. The *raijmels* or people’s assemblies mostly acted as the local judiciary and solved the day-to-day minor offences/disputes, though at times raised other socio-cultural issues concerning the local areas. Generally, the *raijmels* were held in the premises of *naamghars*, *masjids* or *sattras* but sometimes they were also organized in some popular spots of the locality that were *rajahua* (public). *Raijmels* were of immense importance on the ground that the very nature of medieval Assamese society was fully rural. The Assamese peasants carry the glory of organising *raijmels* against anti-peasant policies since the medieval period. Earlier, the *raijmels* were organized during the Ahom regime also to protest overtaxation but it became stronger and more organized only in the colonial period. From the early stage of the colonial rule in Assam, the *raijmels* had been acting as the common political platform of the peasants where they could show their grievances against the issues such as high rates of revenue increase and burden of overtaxation. The whole idea of protest against exorbitant taxes was formulated in these *raijmels* and the *raij* staged the protest. Thus it took the most vital role in the colonial resistance movement in the different parts of Assam.

Economic Condition of Assam on the Eve of the British Colonisation

Medieval Assam, being isolated from the rest of India, had a peculiar socio- economic pattern of its own. Soon after taking over the administration of Assam, the colonial rulers reformed and remodelled its economy. The revenue collection was demanded in the form of cash instead in kind. Under consumption-oriented petty mode of production, the step towards monetisation put the Assamese peasantry under severe strain. To the end of the 1860s, the colonial administration became too much revenue- hungry. The reason behind it was the huge deficit caused by the revolt of 1857. Thus, a number of taxes were imposed

upon the people including stamp duties, income tax, forest and grazing tax etc. As the economy of Assam was agri-based, the burden of overtaxation went directly to the peasants. The revenue increase and overtaxation generated discontentment among the peasants and inspired them to lead anti-colonial uprisings.

Raij in the Mels

The first anti-colonial peasant uprising took place in the Phulaguri region of Nowgong district in 1861. The peasants of Assam were already harassed by overtaxation under the reformed economy. In such a situation, poppy was banned by the government in 1860 which was a popular addiction item of the Assamese people and formed a large portion of agri-economy. The ban on poppy cultivation grew discontent among the peasants of Nowgong-Raha region, mostly populated by the tribals. On 17 September 1861, some 1500 peasants marched to the District Court and demonstrated peacefully before the Magistrate by presenting a petition. The petition referred to the harm due to ban on poppy cultivation and prayed not to levy more taxes on betel-nut and betel-leaf orchards. The District Magistrate Sconce who was very provocative and oppressive-minded, treated the demonstrators casually and was deaf to their grievances. Rather, he put some of their leaders in captivity for some hours and released them later on. A wide ranging *raijmel* was thereupon called on at Phulaguri, 12 K.M. away from Nowgong town in October to take the next step. The *raijmel* session lasted for five days so that peasants from distant villages could participate in it. Almost 1000 people assembled by 15 October,

500'600 of whom were armed with lathis. Though police came to disperse the gathering, they failed in front of the people's resistance. By 17 October, nearly 3000 people gathered newly on the spot. The police tried again to break up the *mel* and arrested some leaders but the people rescued them forcibly. The next day, Lieutenant Singer rushed to the spot with a police force, ordered them to disperse and himself tried to seize the lathis from the peasants. Singer was beaten to death in the scuffling. The police force fled in panic. Hearing the news of Singar's death, the panicky District Magistrate took shelter in a safe place and sent a small armed troop to the spot. The troop fired on the crowd and this led to several deaths. Many others were punished with long term imprisonment and transportation. This episode of heroic resistance by the Phulaguri *raijmel* is still alive in the folk memory as the Phulaguri Dhawa. Thus, Phulaguri Dhawa opened a new chapter of people's resistance to the colonial rule and led to a series of such outbreaks. In 1869, the revenue rates were made double without any consideration of the backward state of agriculture in Assam. As a result of it, many minor and major 'no-revenue' *raijmels* held in different areas of Kamrup and Darrang districts in the last decade of 19th century. Of them, mention may be made of Patharughat, Bajali, Govindapur, Hadira, Sarthebari, Rajkadamtal, Hajo-Dihina and many parts of Patidarang.

In 1892, William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, again increased the land revenue rate upto 70%—80%. Following the 'no-revenue' trend¹,

several major peasant uprisings took place in 1890s. The 'Patharughatar Ran' was the most prominent and tragic episode of the colonial peasant uprisings performed by *raijmel*. On 28th January 1894, thousands of people gathered in Patharughat to protest the revenue enhancement. While the protest was going on, J.D. Anderson, the then Deputy Commissioner of Darrang district, Mr. Barrington, Superintendent of Police and Mr. Remington, SDO, arrived at the spot along with a full police force. The peasants demanded relief from the overburden of taxes. But the authority cleared that under no circumstances the tax would be reduced. The peasants present in the *raijmel* got furious and advanced to gherao the officials. Mr. Barrington ordered a fire upon the mob. In the counter attack, the peasants threw dolisopora (soil balls) and farmuti (branches of tree). Almost 140 people died and more than 150 wounded in the incident of Patharughat. The Government documents hid the facts and figures of this tragic episode. The „Dalipurān , a folk epic, composed by some unknown Narottam Das, acts as the people's version and a primary source to the incident. The „Dalipurān has great significance from the perspective of oral history, too.

Another notable anti-colonial *raijmel* was held at Rangia tehsil on 24th December, 1893 to protest 100% increase in land revenue. It is said that the 'no revenue' trend started with the ransacking of Rangia bazar by the local Kachari people. Some people related to looting of Rangia bazar were arrested. On 10th January, 1984 some 3000 people gheraoed the Rangia Police Station. They raised¹ Modern India, Sumit Sarka, Pp.

45-46 the slogan of not paying tax and forcefully tried to release their comrades. The Deputy Commissioner R.B. McCabe ordered to fire. The mob tried with lathis but could not resist in front of guns and bayonets. The non-official record says that more than 50 people were killed and many others wounded. The police concealed the dead bodies of the peasants over night. The site has been preserved now as the Rangia Raijmel Memorial near the Rangia thana. After the Rangia incident, McCabe announced a ban on holding mels without permission from the District Authority but it went on actively in the neighbouring areas like Nalbari, Barama, Bajali etc.

On January 21, 1894, a mouzadar and a mandal were severely assaulted near Lachima in Sarukhetri mouza of Kamrup district while forcibly collecting revenue. A few days later, the mouzadar died. 75 people were arrested in the connection but a mob forcefully released them. To put down the threatening attitude of the peasants, McCabe arrived at Lachima and the District Authority unleashed a spate of terror and barbarity among the people and kept them away from organizing any *mels*. Yet, many *raijmels* were organized and continued despite all strictness and ban order. India became independent in 1947. Things had changed over time but even today the *mels* are continued in many village areas of Assam.

Interpreting the *Raijmels* from the New Historical Outlook

Thus, we see, the colonial authority tried to suppress the anti-colonial nature of the people's movement, prior to the emergence

of pan-Indian nationalism. What actually was the colonial legacy behind this anti-peasant policies will be a much discussed topic. It is already mentioned that the economy of Assam was in its decayed form on the eve of British colonisation. Therefore it was the primary tasks of the British colonisers to make a reform in the earlier mode of production. The whole idea was to attract a class of European planters along with their capital to Assam's wastelands which were deemed suitable for the production of sugarcane, indigo and such other commercial crops². After the successful introduction of tea in Assam (1837), this scheme of colonisation became more impactful. Demand for local labour made the colonisers think of new policies, though in the long run, they succeeded little in that purpose. He (Jenkins) was afraid that „if the government assessments upon the natives were generalised and not heavy, they would not be available as tenant-cultivators under European planters.³ The first phase of the colonial resistance movement (1828-33) in Assam was totally guided by the royal persons who were the immediate sufferers of colonial rule. The *raijmels* shifted the discontentment against alien rule from the royalty and aristocracy to the mass of the people of Assam. Even the Revolt of 1857 in Assam was planned by only a few notable persons who were dissatisfied at their own positions under the British regime and not for the common people. The democratic nature of the *raijmels* allowed the common people to raise their voice and take common actions against unjust law. It is important to note here that the peasant movements in the other parts of India such as Moplah revolt

(1921-22), Santhal rebellion (1955-56), Deccan riots (1875) and Indigo revolt (1859), all were against the immediate oppressors like zamindars, revenue collectors, money lenders etc. and not against the colonial rulers. However, the peasants of Assam showed the first instance of grievance directly against the colonial rule. We learn from the study of the *raijmels* that the view of the emerging Assamese middle class towards these peasants' outbreaks was not only neglecting but condemning also.

² Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Amalendu Guha, Pp 149

³ Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Amalendu Guha, Pp149

They felt disturbed from the instability created by these outbreaks while trying to be close to the white *sahabs* and make a comfort position. The famous Assamese magazine *Jonaki* (1889-1903) that played an important role in awakening the Assamese society made no mention of *raijmels* in its golden chapters, even a word. Famous Assamese personalities like Gunabhiram Barua, rather, insulted and condemned the revolting peasants of Phulaguri in his article '*Nagaya Drohilokor Charitra Barnan*'. The missionaries, very dear to the Assamese chauvinists, criticized the Phulaguri Dhawa in the tight words. Even today, the *raijmels* are a topic of less importance in the history of India's freedom struggle. The heritage of the *raijmels* and their abiding relevance in the anti-colonial movement can be discussed in the new lights of, history from below. In doing so, we must shift our focus from the written documents to the oral traditions. The ballads and folklores composed upon these

episodes will serve as the primary sources in this regard.

A contrast between the middle class-led famous anti-colonial movements and the popular peasants' uprisings will show that the latter was not guided by any „great man or ideology but by the „common people themselves. It also reveals that unlike the national movement, no privileged group emerged out of these outbreaks. Rather, it awakened the people about using their power and protest against injustice. The concept of „Raijei Roja (people are the supreme of all) was emboldened by these raijmels. Thus it helped in arousing and strengthening the people's movement. The *raijmels* also carry the heritage of Hindu-Muslim unity in Assam. Both the Hindus and Muslims, tribals and non-tribals, assembled in one platform and fought putting their shoulder to shoulder for a common cause. It is remarkable that this common cause above all cultural, religious and linguistic plurality, was economic. The Dalipuran describes an episode where peoples of different sections rushed to participate in the *raijmel* :

“... .. Baraberia Jogi goila haatot tokan dhorì Byasperia ganak goila saaulor bepari Pradiprai Patgiri goila gof keidal mosari Baneikusia deka goila jolonga jokari Turaigawa musalmaan goila alla alla kori Sisuram Ulai goila panji haatot loi....

.....kalajerìa musalmaan e fur e manuh mati Dutiraam bamune likhei sithi gaat nai uliRanjit saloi ulai goila jaalor pahi guthi Bodhoru koch ulai goila soijyar pora uthi....”

From this, we may draw the valuable conclusion that an overall economic agenda and not only linguistic nationalism as formulated by the Assamese chauvinists, can

serve as the cementing force among the diverse ethnic groups of Assam.

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