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Interpreting the Assam Revolts of 1893-94: A Retrospective Discourse With Special Reference to its Unsuccessful Factor

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Abstract

Anger emanates from hunger and hunger gives birth revolution. The peasants of Assam resorted to the path of violence against the Colonial Government in the close of the 19th century but their attempts met with failure. This paper is an honest attempt through which some of the major factors that precipitated the fiasco of the upheavals of 1893-94 are addressed.

Keywords: Assam Revolts, Retrospective Discourse, Unsuccessful Factors

Key-words with glossary:

Augmentation, *mandal* (a village surveyor), *maujadar* (in charge of mauza) *mels* (assembly), *raij-mels* (people's assembly), *Marwaris* (people from Marwar), *tahsildar* (in charge of tahsil), jealous gossiping, crest-fallen, disgruntle, inapt-handling,

The peasants, who constitute the largest single segment of mankind, play a special role in shaping our destinies. Unfortunately, these sections sometime resorts to violence as and when their minimum interests are not met, rather seek to impose additional burden on them. Anger emanates from hunger and hunger gives birth to revolution. The pages of history are filled with their revolutions break-out in different countries in different times. Similarly, a series of protest did burst out in the districts of Kamrup and Darrang of Assam in 1893 and 1894 mainly against the revenue augmentation of the Colonial Government. Revenue hike in 1892, settlement of infertile land in the name of indigenous people, survey of 1893 and abolition of surrender of land, rude and harsh behavior of M.C.Bordoloi, the Extra-Assistant Commissioner of Barpeta sub-division and his reluctance of peasants request for remission of revenue, assault on the *mandal* and *maujadar* on the 21st January, 1894 at Lachima, rapacious and avaricious nature of *mandal* and *maujadar*, banning of *raijmels* by R.B.McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup – all these factors are solely responsible for the outbreaks of 1893-94. In addition to that, revenue, tea plantation and planters' exploitation, Government's apathy towards agricultural development and fight against natural calamities, migration, money economy and problem of adjustment with the new economy, decline and ruin of indigenous industries, rural indebtedness, red-tappism of the colonial bureaucrats, slow and imbecile education scenario, declaration of grant of lease system, role of the Christian missionary, injustice in the land, exaction of the *Marwaris* and the local traders- these also made local people ignited and irritated. The furious peasants of Kamrup and Darrang, therefore, did gird waist-band on their loins

against the local white government in the close of the 19th century. Notwithstanding having their defensive capability, they fail toto against the government in 1894.

Behind the success and failure of each and every outbreak, there are some factors that work. The outbreaks of 1893-94 were also not exception to that. From study, some general as well as peculiar factors come to surface that contributed immensely for the crest-fallen and downfall of the outbreaks of 1893-94. Let's review these factors which precipitated their tragic fall at the hands of the Colonial Government.

Apply of obsolete and conventional weapons as against the modern and sophisticated weapons was the main reason of the defeat of the peasants of Kamrup and Darrang. The peasants of Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat applied traditional weapons i.e. spears, bows arrows as against the modern weapons of the British. Their weapons could not be compared with that of the British. The peasants sought to vanquish the mighty British with their bamboo pop guns. The peasants of Patharughat failed as they fought pitched battle with the help of their fish-spears, branches of trees, bamboo sticks and clods of earth. They applied these as missiles on the colonial gunmen. While the armed men of the colonial power fought with their belligerent dresses and shoes, the peasants fought with scanty wearing, barefooted and bare-handed.

Underestimation of the power and number of the British was the main reason that led to the hasty defeat of the peasants of Kamrup and Darrang. Seizure of license guns was one of the causes of their quick defeat. People of Kamrup could have applied their guns had their guns not been seized by the Government. All license guns in Rangia, Nalbari, Barama and Bajali tahsils- the storm centers were seized following the order of R.B.McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup. Lack of unity and worth organizers among the local leaders and absence of proper leadership precipitated their haste defeat. Compared to their military skill, efficiency, decision making and adroitness; the local leaders were proved to be inferior to the colonial leaders. They have no any planned and long-termed scheme at their hands. Lack of common cause and parochial interest among them precipitated their catastrophe as and while the course of revolutions developed. They failed out and out to show the peasants the right way to fight. They could have gained something from the government by pursuing the conciliatory and moderate way. Idea of compromise did not develop in their mind and most of the time the revolts became conflagrable owing to their inapt-handling.

R.B.McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup became successful in winning some of the leaders to his side. Probably, he won them by fulfilling their parochial interest. Moreover, by appointing the rebel leaders as constables at the disturbed areas, the power of the rebels was weakened. Thus, the shrewd and astute British created division among the leaders.

Most of the time, it was found that the leaders of the *mels* had no control upon their people. For example, Kan Goswami appealed to the people not to give high revenue to the *tahsildar* of Rangia. Though initially, his appeal was welcome, but finally his appeal was dashed to the ground by Rudra Sarma of Septi. In addition to that, the leaders of Patharughat wanted to pay revenue of the Government. It means that somebody wanted to pay revenue defying the order of their leaders. It proves they had no control over their own people.

The people of Assam at that time groaned under economic hardship. Probably because of this, they could not fight a decisive battle against the administration as economy has a great role to play in the revolt.

Strong espionage system also helped the government in curbing the tide of the revolt. The administration could know about the rebel leaders and their *mels* through their spies. Some native also informed the government about the rebels and their whereabouts. As a result, their secrecy leaked. Unfortunate is that native betrayed native only for coins and invited ultimately their own defeat.

Rumour, false propaganda from the side of the government also brought success to the government. On the other hand, the innocent peasants they did not resort to such policy.

The strong British intelligence and quick and timely decision of the Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police brought easy victory for the government. The government could collect secret information of the rebels and their sitting of the *mels* through their intelligence at a regular basis and took quick and haste decision on it which brought failure of the peasants. If sometime the number of troops sent to quell and disperse the *mels* was found short, immediately additional troops was sent again on the basis of the report of the intelligence. For instance, the situation of Lachima became tense following the assault on the *mandal* and *maujadar* on the 21st January, 1894. But timely arrival of R.B. McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup at Lachima on the 24th January, 1894 saved the situation from being conflagrated. The quick and prompt decision of J.D. Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang to open fire on the mob who continued to approach towards him inspite of his order to leave the place resulted scores of them lay dead and wounded along the Mangaldoi road. His that moment decision brought government victory on one hand and defeat of the peasants of Patharughat on the other.

The uprisings of 1893-94 were confined at the two districts only. Moreover, entire Darrang and Kamrup districts especially South-Kamrup was not influenced by them. The revolt was highly localized and restricted to some areas. Many areas remained undisturbed. So, the administration found no problem to curb and quell them. Sporadic outbursts helped the government to quell the uprisings of the peasants instantly.

The uprisings failed to embrace all sections of the society. Had all sections irrespective to high and low, rich and poor, government and non-government employees stretched-out their helping hands to the peasants and fought sincerely for them, probably there was scope of lasting the revolts for more time. Many did not help the peasants in spite of having sympathy due to losing their jobs. For example, Sonaram Talukdar, a school teacher had been discharged from job due to his taking part in the *raij-mels*. Even his primary school of Byaskuchi was also banned. This however, created scare in the minds of people and therefore, they remained silent.

Some sections supported the peasants but they did not stretch-out their helping hands to them. For instance, some Barua of Jayantipur told Kan Goswami, Rahmat Khalipha, Abhay Choudhury that he would not go openly against the government. Moreover, the incident of Lachima and Patharughat failed to stir the imagination of the elite minds.

In addition to that, though all peasants fought together but their social and economic disparity created division among them. The rich and well-to-do peasants how much sincerely they did fight with the poor peasants, that is under suspicion.

Some of the leaders they did not join openly against the British in spite of having their grievances against the government. These disgruntled men were waiting for a chance to wreak vengeance on the government. The uprisings of 1893-94 gave opportunity to this sections who wasting no time began to instigate the peasants to move forward. The peasants, they could not ignore their leaders' command as they were the source of credit in the villages. They appeared as saviours but they were the first to retreat. According to Saikia, 'in the face of government repression, the peasantry stood their ground, made sacrifices but the leaders betrayed them and disappeared. Their proxy resistance broke down.'

Ever-preparedness and ever-readiness also brought victory to the British government. They were ever ready to face any type of situation. The rebels, on the other hand, whatever they did, they did that secretly. Ever-preparedness and ever-readiness was not found in them.

The Colonial Government always resorted to well-equipped strategy and manoeuvre. But the peasant mode of protest was obsolete and outdated. Defamation, nameless sabotage, tales, jealous gossiping, rumours, character assassination and nicknames-these were probably the symbolic resistance of the peasants against the government. Foot dragging, house burning, hypocrisy, petty thief – these were probably resorted by the peasants which evaporated in front of the gun-fire of the government. The language of the British protest was guns and brains. But the peasants of Kamrup and Darrang fought with passions and emotions. Their main weapons were their bombastic words. The leaders instigated the mob not to scare of the colonial guns. Emboldened by this, the mob jumped onto the fire like moth and brought their tragic ruin.

To bring all under one roof, the leaders of the *mels* resorted to some psychological strategy i.e. blessing and cursing. But how much and what way their strategy acted, it cannot be said. Had the *mels* adopted some practical and well equipped strategy to unite their men, probably they could have won. Their utopian, traditional, obsolete and superstitious strategy brought their failure.

Awkward position of the peasants might also be responsible for making the condition of the peasants unstable and fragile. The ryots were in between two fires. If they supported the government, they were socially ostracized and if supported the society, their properties were seized. They therefore, felt unstable, insecure and nervous which precipitated their fiasco.

Putting ban on the *mels* on January 10, 1893 by R.B.McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup gave birth crest-fallen in the minds of the peasants. The ban disheartened and dejected their minds. They probably began to think that if the government could put ban on the *mels*, it was too easy for the administration to quell them personally. So, ultimately it resulted in their degradation.

From our observation, it can be said that there was not a single factor that brought defeat of the peasants in the uprisings of 1893-94; there were a series of factors which precipitated their fiasco. Notwithstanding their decisive confrontation against the Colonial Government, they failed. Use of traditional weapons as against the modern weapons of the government, lack of unity among the local leaders, underestimation of the power and division among the peasant leaders by the government, weak control of leaders upon their people, economic hardship, strong espionage system of the government, false propaganda spread from the side of the government, strong and prompt decision of the government, sporadic outbursts, leaders failure to embrace all sections of the society, retreat of some of the leaders at the peak time of outbreaks, cool and meticulous decision of the administration, obsolete and outdated strategy of the local leaders – all these immensely contributed for the failure of the revolts of 1893-94.

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