

# Colonial Economic Policy and Peasant Uprisings in Second half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Assam: Understanding the Phulaguri Dhawa of 1861

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**Abstract:** In the history of colonial India, the peasant agitations which were took place against the colonial authority in different periods regarding different issues has been interpreted from different perspectives in Indian historiography. Establishment of British rule and introduction of economic policies created discontent among the peasantry of the country which led to the peasant uprisings at different level. In these peasant agitations, the peasants raised voices against the colonial exploitations. Likewise the other parts of the country, due to the introduction of new revenue as well as taxation policies which were hitherto unprecedented to the native peasants of Assam caused resentment among the peasantry and therefore under initiative of *Raij Mel* (public assembly) they agitated against the colonial authority in different time. Among such peasant uprising, the peasant uprising of Phulaguri, 1861 which was popularly known as Phulaguri Dhawa has immense significance in the history of peasant uprising. Therefore, in this paper an attempt has been made to understand the colonial economic as well as taxation policies which led to the Phulaguri peasant uprising and its development.

**Key Words:** Phulaguri, Peasant, Uprising, Colonial, Revenue, Tax.

**Introduction:** The introduction of British rule in Assam in the first half of nineteenth century is a remarkable issue of Assam history. Although as an alternative to Burmese rule, the people of Assam welcomed the colonial rule however, due to the introduction of new administrative as well as economic policies which were hitherto unprecedented to the people of Assam created discontent among the people. Being a colonial country British government followed the policy of revenue maximization since the time of its establishment. In order to increase the economic strength they imposed various taxes which affected the economic as well as social life of Assamese people because the native of soil had to take heavy burden of taxes. Likewise the other sections of the society, the peasant class had also been affected by the new taxation policies of colonial government therefore, under the initiative of *Raij Mels* (people's assembly) they revolted against the colonial authority for many times. Among these important peasant uprisings of colonial Assam, the Phulaguri peasant uprising of 1861 which was known as Phulaguri Dhawa was a remarkable event which inaugurated a new era of peasant's protest in Assam. Therefore, in this study, an attempt has been made to understand the Phulaguri peasant uprisings of 1861.

**Methodology:** In this study both historical and analytical methodology has been used and data are collected from secondary sources mainly from books.

**Discussion:** The establishment of British rule in the first half of nineteenth century had not only brought political changes in Assam rather it changed the socio-economic life of Assamese people. As we know that before the British rule, historic Ahom dynasty ruled Assam for about six hundred years and during Ahom rule the revenue had been collected either in form of manual labour or in cash. A *paik* (an adult male age between 16 to 50) was supposed to pay his revenue by rendering manual labour to the state or paying at the rate of Rs. 2 or 3 per annum to the state. For his personal service each *paik* was allotted two *puras* (unit of land measurement) of revenue free cultivable land. Apart from this, the *paiks* had their homesteaded land called *Bari Mati*. At the initial stage of Ahom rule the *Bari Mati* was revenue free but later on due to the increase of such private properties a poll tax of rupee one was imposed on it which collection was determined according to the custom of the locality. However, in Lower Assam due to the existence of Mughal pattern of *Pargana* revenue settlement, Ahom did not make any drastic changes in this revenue settlement rather they mixed it with the *paik* system.<sup>1</sup> The peasants were more or less convenient in these revenue settlements however; the establishment of British rule and their new taxation policies had given a breakthrough to these conventional revenue settlements of pre-colonial Assam.

From the very beginning of its foundation, the British government through different economic policies had exploited people of Assam. The colonial revenue reform of 1832-33 had increased the burden of taxes. Similarly too many classification of land and its assessment in Kamrup under the settlement of 1836-37 had also been created infinite troubled and harassment to the peasants. Moreover, introduction of uniform rate of assessment of same crops without reference to their actual productivity had also created discontent among the peasantry. In this regard, Anandaram Dhekial Phukon, a middle class leader, informed Mills in 1853 to justify the assessment according to the productivity of lands. However, the deficit in colonial economy during the revolt of 1857 had further accelerated the process of taxation in India as well as in Assam.<sup>2</sup> This taxation policy had adversely affected the peasant of Assam in general and Lower Assam in particular therefore, under the initiative of *Raij Mels*, they revolted against the taxation policies of colonial authority.

The *Raij Mels* lead the anti-colonial peasant revolts which were occurred in the second half of nineteenth century. *Raij Mels* were the people assembly organized and controlled by the peasants. In the history of Assam first reference of existence of *Raij Mel* can be noticed during the reign of Ahom King Laxminath Singha. Against the decision of incensement of revenue, the people of Darrang revolted against the King through the *Raij Mel*.<sup>3</sup> Till 1861, *Raij Mel* was not a revolutionary force against the colonial authority rather it worked by maintaining a good relation with the colonial authority. However, due the introduction of new economic as well as taxation policies which affected the peasant class it started revolt against the British authority from the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

## Prelude to the Phulaguri peasant uprising and its outbreak:

In the history of peasant agitation in colonial Assam, the historic Phulaguri peasant uprising was a remarkable event. It was a resistance of peasants of Nowgong against the new revenue policies of the British government. Although it was a peasant's uprising of tribal peasants of Lalung and Kachari community however, the middle class peasant proprietors, *mouzadars* (a revenue collector), traders and government servants who were also the victim of recent taxation policies of government had extended their cooperation towards the Phulaguri uprising of 1861.<sup>5</sup>

The increase of land revenue on dry crops in 1861 had affected the peasant class of Nowgong. Moreover, the government order of 1861 regarding the band of pappy cultivation had also been affected the economic life of people of Nowgong. During that time Nowgong was the highest opium producing district of Assam.<sup>6</sup> Likewise the economic life it had also been touched the social life of the tribal areas of the district because it infringed the social custom of the people.<sup>7</sup> The chief colonial intention of abolishing the pappy cultivation was to increase the sale of government opium and it can be testified by the letter of Jankins to his higher authority regarding this opium issue where he stated "There will be no difficulty in supplying any part of Assam with the government drug through ordinary vendors and in fact the necessary measures to this effect already been established". Similarly, like in other places of the country the income tax and license tax had also been imposed in 1961 in Assam.<sup>8</sup>

According to Amalendu Guha, the income tax act which was amended in 1861 had failed to touch peasantry of Assam rather due to an information gap it created misapprehension about the colonial intention. Moreover, people of Nowgong came to know about the arm resistance of peasants of Jayantia hills and against the colonial taxation policies. In the meantime the order of government of Bengal to the officers of Assam to prepare a report on the feasibility of taxation in betel nut and *paan* (betel leaf) cultivation had accelerated the anti-colonial tempo of peasants of Nowgong which ultimately led to the Phulaguri peasant uprising.<sup>9</sup>

Being dissatisfied in the government policy of multiplication of taxes which became a serious threat to the economic life of the peasants, on 17<sup>th</sup> September, 1861 about one thousand *ryots* (peasants) gathered at Sadar Court of Nowgong to ventilate their grievances and some of them went to the office of Deputy Commissioner. However, instead of solving the peasant's problem, the indiscreet Deputy Commissioner Herbert Sconce arrested the peasants for their disorderly conduct and released them in the evening of same day. After some days the *ryots* of the adjoining areas of Phulaguri organized *Raij Mel* on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1861 for 15 days and decided not to pay taxes to the authority. However, the British authority was not intended to negotiate with the peasants and therefore, they tried to suppress the agitation at the very outset. Initially Deputy Commissioner sent the police force under the leadership of a Daroga however, failed to bring the situation under control. Therefore, on 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1861, according to the order of Herbert Sconce, Lieutenant Singer arrived at Phulagari where more than three thousand people armed with clubs or *lathi* (a strict) gathered there.<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant Singer tried to bring the situation under control by negotiating with the leaders of the agitators. Jati Kalita, a spokesperson of the agitators told Singer about their grievances regarding ban on opium cultivation and their apprehension about the income and *paan* taxes. When Singer failed in this mission of negotiation with the protesters, he ordered them to disperse but instead of dispersing they killed him and his body was thrown to river Kalang.<sup>11</sup>

According to the report of police *mohurrer*, while Singer tried to seize the *lathi* of Moira Singh and while they were poling the strict in opposite direction a person named Bahoo of the Koshigpur *mouza* (a revenue collection circle) felled down singer to the ground by a blow on the head. Moreover, the same report mentioned the names of Kati Lalung, Thomba Lalung, Jobo Lahung, Katia Lalung, Mohi Koch and Koli Deka who were involved in the murder case of Singer. After getting the news of death of Singer, accompanied by the rumour that the *ryots* would attack his office and loot the treasury, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong felt insecure. Therefore, he sent a police party to Phulaguri and sent an urgent communiqué to the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang for reinforcement. On 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1861, when the police force reached Phulaguri, the situation became more chaotic where the police force compelled to fire on the protestors. The *ryots* with their traditional arrow and bows offer feeble resistance to the police firing but they defeated and several of them lost their lives whereas many of them severely injured. However, Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam with the help of Assam Light Infantry could bring the situation under control. In the case of murder of Lt. Singer, forty one persons were arrested.<sup>12</sup>

**Conclusion:** In the above discussion it has been noticed that the new taxation policies of British government had created dissatisfaction among the people of Assam in general and peasant class in particular and the uprising of Phulaguri of 1861 which was popularly known as *Phulaguri Dhawa* was also a reflection of such peasant's discontent. Although the Lalung and Kachari peasants were in the vanguard of the movement but people belonged to different social standard like land owners, government servants, *mouzadars* and traders extended their cooperation to the uprising because they were also not less affected by the new taxation policies of colonial government. Although the Phulaguri uprising was failed however, it inaugurated a new wave of peasant uprising and paved the way for the development of more organized peasant movement in colonial Assam. Therefore, in the history of peasant uprising in Assam, the Phulaguri uprising has immense significance.

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