

Development of Anti-British uprisings in the first half of 19th Century: Understanding the Revolt of Gomadhar Konwar and Dhananjay Borgohain

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Abstract: In the history of colonial Assam the introduction of British rule in the third decade of 19th century was a remarkable issue. As an alternative to the Burmese rule, at the initial stage the British rule had also been welcomed by the native of the province. However, due to the introduction of new administrative policies as well as reforms affected the people of Assam. In this new political as well as administrative equation the native of the province lost their earlier privileges and other traditional aspects. Therefore in the first half of 19th century the discontentment of people of Assam reflected in different form at different level. Among these discontentments of native of the province, the revolt of Ahom prince Gomadhar Konwar and the revolt of Dhanajay Borphukan which were organized in order to restore Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam are remarkable in Assam history from various perspectives. Therefore, in this study an attempt has been made to understand the anti-British uprisings of first half in general and revolt of Gomadhar Konwar and Dhanajay Borgohain in particular.

Key Words: Anti-British, colonial, Gomadhar Konwar, Ahom, Uprising.

Introduction:

Establishment of colonial rule in Assam in the first half of 19th century was a remarkable issue of colonial Assam history from different perspectives. Being disappointed in autocratic Burmese rule people of Assam welcomed the British government as an alternative to Burmese and according to the Yandabo treaty of 1826 they established their rule in Assam. In order to established economic as well as political hegemony in Assam they adopted different policies and reforms in Assam which affected the traditional systems of tribal peoples as well as Ahom nobility. Before the coming of British, the historic Ahom rule was there in Assam where the Ahom nobility used to enjoy different power and prestige. However, the newly developed administrative mechanism of British authority deprived them from their positions at different level. Therefore, the Ahom nobility tried to restore the historic Ahom dynasty as an alternative to the colonial government and declared revolts against the colonial authority at the very outset of colonial rule. Simultaneously to the revolt Ahom nobility, the tribal people like Khasi, Sinphos and others took part in anti British uprising due to the introduction of new administrative policies as well as imposition of different taxes in the first half of 19th century. These were anti British

movements representing the early phase of the Assamese nobles and tribal resistance to the imposition of British rule. Therefore, in this study an attempt has been made to understand the anti-British uprisings in the first half of 19th century in general and Revolt of Gomadhar Konwar and Dahanajay Borgohain in particular.

Methodology:

In this study both historical and analytical methodology has been used. The data are mainly collected from the secondary sources as books, journal, internet etc.

Discussion.

The historic Yandabo treaty of 1826 had withdrawn the Burmese rule from Assam and allowed the British authority to rule Assam. At the very outset of the British rule, due to the introduction of new economic as well as administrative developments the discontentment of people of Assam was reflected in different ways at different level. Likewise the other section of the society, the new administrative setup of colonial government dissatisfied the Ahom nobility in different way. As we know that before the introduction of foreign rule in Assam, the Ahom monarchy ruled Assam for a prolonged period where the Ahom nobility got tremendous power and prestige. However, after the establishment of British rule the Ahom nobility lost their earlier power and privileges as well as they became like subordinate class to the colonial authority. In order to restore the earlier power and privileges they tried to restore the rule of historic Ahom dynasty as an alternative to the British by declaring different revolts in the first half of 19th century.¹

Towards the end of 1828, the first attempt of restoration of Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam was made by Ahom prince Gomadhar Konwar, the son of Phena Konwar. Towards the close of the same year, a group of noble headed by Dhananjay Borgohain, a former minister of Ahom administration indented to declare Gomadhar Konwar as the King of Ahom. They tried to restore the Ahom monarchy by declaring Gomadhar as their king. They thought that it would be a golden opportunity to capture the Rangpur, the Ahom capital as because during that that British had already withdrawn their regular troops. Moreover, at that same time the British authority was also busy in solving the problem of resistance created by Kahsis under the leadership of Terrut Singh, Kahmtis and Singphos as well.²

In order to plead his case before the colonial authority he went to the Jorhat. According to the letter that he given to the political agent in Upper Assam, his objective was only to receive the country from the company and he would allow the company to do what they wish. Moreover, in the same letter he had also mentioned about his desire of not to fight with British. Whatever the statement of these statements might be, it is a fact that he joined-or was prevailed upon to join–some nobles whose intentions were anti-british, they used him due to his royal blood.³

However, the British authority was not in the mode to negotiate and renegotiate with the issue of Gomadhar Konwar and therefore Gomadhar was bound to declare himself as the King of Ahom at Basa in the south-west corner of Jorhat. He came to the throne by performing all royal rituals by the Bailungs (Ahom royal priest). The people from neighboring villages also joined with Gomadhar and launched a 'no-tax' campaign. In order to recapture the Rangpur, several brisk preparations were done by the rebel group by recruiting men, arms and levying contributions.⁴ In this anti-British task of Gomadhar Konwar, apart from Dananjay, many members of dispossessed nobility like Haranath Gohain, Dharmadhar Rajguru, Dhenudhar Konwar, Dhanajay alias Piyali Borgohain, Rupchand Konwar, Dhanajay's son Haranath and son-in-law Jiuram Dulia Baruah, Deuram Dihingia Phukon and others were the associates of Gomadhar Konwar.⁵ Moreover, the followers of Gomadhar Konwar were given the training of using the war weapons in Taratali region of Jorhat.⁶

Very interestingly in this context it is to be mentioned that there were several camps of the soldiers of Gomadhar Konwar. The responsibility of camps of Gharphalia Gabhuru, Sakial, Morongial were entrusted to Manbar and Harbar senapati. Similarly under the leadership of Titaboria Baruah, there were several camps.⁷ After the needed preparation the force led by Gomadhar Konwar and Dhananjay Borgohain marched towards Jorhat. However on their way they were intercepted by Lieutenant Rutherford at Marinai. Although initially Gomadhar and his force could put up strong resistance but in the confusion that followed most of his followers abandoned him and compelling him to flee. However, after a period of time he had to surrender before the colonial authority.⁸ He along with his principal supporters brought to the trial before the Panchayat at Jorhat. Although the Panchayat gave him the capital punishment but due to his immature age instead of capital punishment he was imprisoned for several years. His associate Dhanajay was also sentenced to death but he escaped to the Naga hill.⁹

In order to fulfill the incomplete task another uprising was took place in Upper Assam in the subsequent period under the leadership of Dhanajay Borgohain. He eluding the vigilance of the police entered into Legge, a village of Matak community and made a preparation for another revolt against the British authority. In this process he was associated by his son Haranath, his son-in-law Jeuram Dulia Baruah, Piali, the son of Badan Borphukon, Roopchand Konwar, Deuram Dihingia Baruah, Krishnanath and others. In order to create a heavy resistance against British government he kept secret contract with some tribes like Matak, Khamtis, Singphos, Naga, Khasi and the Boro. More the rebels had some efficient spies through whom they could come to know about all aspects of political agent in Upper Assam and this issue has been testified by the letter of Neufville to Colonel Fugan, Adjutant General of the army, Calcutta.¹⁰ The candidate of the rebels to the throne was Rupchand Konwar, a person of unknown antecedents. After performing traditional rituals-the Deu Puaj, the rebels advanced towards Rangpur. Moreover, Piyali Bophukon wrote a letter to Sadiyakuwa Gohain seeking military assistance regarding their Rangpur mission. However, being a loyal person to the British, Sadiyakuwa Gohain informed about the plan of Rangpur attack in advanced. Therefore, Captain Neufville could suppress the revolt very easily.¹¹

Conclusion: After the above discussion we can come to this conclusion that in the first half of the 19th century several anti-British uprisings were taken place. Among such anti-colonial struggle, the revolt of Ahom prince Gomadhar Konwar and Dahanajay Borphukan were noteworthy from different standpoints. Basically due to the disappointment of the Ahom nobility regarding their privileges they started such revolt in order to restore Ahom monarchy and withdrawn of British rule. Although the British officers able to suppressed these anti British uprising however, these revolts paved the way for the mass movements against the colonial authority.

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