

COLONIAL LEGACIES AND TRIBAL MARGINALIZATION: ECONOMIC DISRUPTION AND THE GENESIS OF BODO UNREST IN ASSAM

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Abstract: The colonial period was known for administrative confusion, of extortion and oppressions and miseries of the people. During the whole period of colonial rule the indigenous tribal people had come in contact with various advanced social groups and had gone through existential experiences of conflict and change. They have gone through a number of contradictions such as inter-tribal inequality, the grabbing of land of the poor tribal peasants by the money-lenders and landlords, the differential interaction and communication with the agents of civilization, viz. administration, educational facilities had led to the creation of inequality; the new forces of modernization had developed a unique middle class, the mercantile capitalism had developed a dependent economy characterized by the surplus production of raw material and agro-industrial products like jute, tea, pulses. In Assam the tea and oil industries were in the hands of the British bourgeoisie. The trade and commerce were in the hands of migrants businessmen. Wage earning labourers class was imported. The colonial system of administration and management instead of solving the tribal's problem of survival had made their survival at stake. They did not take this oppressive system for granted. The British colonial rule witnessed a chain of killings, uprisings, insurrections were surfaced when the tribals suffered incursions and loss of land, swindling, bankruptcy and deprivation of their livelihood. Thus, the interest of the indigenous tribal people was ignored or neglected. They were under perpetual hunger and poverty, economically dependent, and politically subservient to colonial rulers, and their middlemen.

Keyword: Plains Tribals, Economic exploitation, Indigenous, Land alienation, Encroachment.

INTRODUCTION

In this research paper, the focus would be given to the economy, subsistence strategies and livelihood patterns, traditional methods of resource mobilizations of the plain tribals particularly of the Bodos who were largely affected and had been the major victim of colonial penetration and their raj in the Assam plains. The Bodo tribe constitutes most numerous indigenous inhabitants among the other tribals of Assam plains in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Bodo people, who spread over the whole of Brahmaputra valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid *bloc* in North-eastern India, are the most important Indo-Mongoloid people in Eastern India (S. K. Chatterji: 2011: 45-46).

As the Bodos were gradually approaching the modern age, they failed to face the challenges mainly because of their tribal insularity and the poor economic structure of their society. The economic vitality that they had displayed during their heyday in the medieval period could not be sustained by them when they faced the challenges of the modern age and being afraid of the challenge they coiled back inside their tribal cocoon and were thus left behind by their more adventurous neighbours. In fact that had been the case with most other tribal societies in the north-east. It was only the Assamese people, who were mostly descendents of the earlier Aryan settlers, who faced the challenge boldly and thus surged ahead in the modern age (Ajay Roy: 1995: 19).

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER:

1. To highlight the colonial penetration and the introduction of their new system of administration in the Assam Plains.
2. To highlight the impacts of Colonial Raj on the tribal economy.
3. To highlight the age old economic disruption of the tribals by the Colonial administration and the ultimate emergence of tribal unrest in the Brahmaputra Valley.

METHODOLOGY:

In this study I have followed the Socio-Anthropological and Historical methods mainly basing on secondary sources.

THE PRE-COLONIAL TRIBAL ECONOMY OF THE ASSAM PLAINS

Self-sufficient village economy was the basic feature of the Tribes of Assam plains like the Bodo tribe. Agriculture constituted the backbone of their economy. In the days of yore they generally practiced *jhum* cultivation. In the later period plough cultivation had replaced *jhum* cultivation. They cultivated many crops of which rice is the principal one. They not only cultivated rice of different varieties but also cash crops like mustard seed, cotton, sugarcane, vegetables, and seasonal fruits like orange, banana etc. But they were always obsessed with the idea of mono-cropping. They had a firm belief that multi-cropping robbed the land of fertility and they were averse to using any other manure except burnt weeds and cow dung (Ajay Roy: 1995: 20). However, it is noticed that compared to other plains tribal people, they now became more prone to the use of chemical fertilizer, pesticides and use of scientific knowledge in agriculture (B. N. Bordoloi: 1987: 21). As the chief pursuit of the people was agriculture, the village site was generally

placid along the river banks which made the irrigation easy and raising of crops more secure. In fact, most of the settlements mentioned in the epigraphs were on the banks of river (*N.N. Vasu: 1980: 70*). The Bodos now found to have settled on the vast alluvial plains of the northern bank of river Brahmaputra. The Boro community was, however, well-known for its migratory way of life. For a Bodo essential preconditions for their permanent settlement were a high land to construct the house, vast grazing field, cultivable land, availability of rivers/ponds/rivulets or lakes, forests in nearby areas for collecting firewood, leafy vegetables, animals to hunt, etc. (*Sucheta S. Chaudhuri: 2014: 35*).

The Boros of the Brahmaputra valley had acquired a peculiar form of irrigation system in their surrounding villages for undertaking agricultural activities. S. Endle remarked that the people were especially skilful in the construction of irrigation canals and earthwork embankments for diverting water from river-beds into their rice-fields and their efforts in this direction were very largely aided by their closely clannish organization (*Rev. Sidney Endle: 2010: 4-5*). The Brahmaputra valley was endowed with abundant natural wealth and forest products, the tribals of Assam were also largely dependent on forest for the purpose of alternative living through forest resources everyday and whenever their crops failed to meet up their livelihood, the forest resources such as firewood, medicinal herbs, leafy vegetables, fruits, tubers, housing materials, hunting etc. provided alternate source and backup for their living.

Besides agricultural operation another related economic activity in which the tribals had a natural propensity was animal husbandry, particularly rearing of pigs and fowl. But seldom did they take to it for commercial purposes i.e. selling in the market on any large scale. Another economic activity in which the tribes like Boros, mainly their womenfolk, engaged was the rearing of a kind of silk-worm on castor-seed plant leaves and drawing silk threads from their cocoons. The silk thread, known as *endi* (pronounced as eri with a hard r), is then woven by them in their hand-loom to produce warm wrappers which have had always a very good market not only in Assam but also outside. Besides this *endi* product the Boro women also woven various types of cotton cloths on their hand-loom both for their own use as well as for the market (*Roy: Ibid: 20*).

Besides the above mentioned activities, the plain tribes also engaged in border trade activities during the ancient and the medieval periods. Having migrated from the Sino-Tibetan border regions through the numerous mountains passes the Bodos and other tribes settling in the northern foot-hill regions of Bengal and Assam maintained trade links with the bordering hill tribes on the north and through them the Tibetans and the Chinese traders. Several trade routes through these passes existed throughout the ages between Tibet and the north-eastern part of India (*Roy: op.cit: 21*). The places in the foot-hills through which these passes opened up to the Indian plains were and are still known as *Kachari Dooar* meaning door or gate-way opening to the Kacharis. Several such Dooars existed on the northern foot-hills of Jalpaiguri in North Bengal and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darang and Sanitpur districts of Assam. The most famous trade route was the Lhasa-Tawang-Udalguri route which saw a considerable volume of barter trade between the Tawang Hill tribes and the Bodo tribes of Udalguri region. This trade link however did not end at Lhasa and extended much beyond right into the interior of Tibet and China (*Roy: Ibid: 21-22*). The Bhooteas (a collective name applied to all the tribes residing in the Bhootan hills and the western Arunachal Pradesh hills) used to come down during the winter season regularly through this route to Udalguri and through a few other similar passes to other bordering markets in Kamrup and Kokrajhar districts. Barter trade used to take place between these hill traders and the Assam plain traders, mainly Bodos. Of all these border markets Udalguri was by far the biggest market and used to be known as the Bhootea Mela (*Roy: Ibid: 22*). Thus, the Bodos had maintained a trading relationship even with the Tibet and China and probably they were benefited to some extent out of these trading activities with distant lands.

BRITISH RAJ AND ECONOMIC DISRUPTION OF THE PLAIN TRIBALS

It may be noted that in spite of the high fertility of the soil, coupled with irrigated cultivation, abundant natural resources and little amount of foreign trade, the overall extent of Bodo and other tribals economy of the Assam plains was not more than the above of subsistence level. Under the impact of the British regime the entire peasant economy of Assam including those of the tribal people broke down beyond recovery. A very complex economic situation had developed in the societies of Brahmaputra valley of Assam with the taking over of power by the British imperialists. The pre-colonial society in Brahmaputra valley was semi-feudal and semi-tribal in nature hence a mixture of more than one classical mode of production prevailed. The economy was largely self-sustaining in those days. Colonial penetration in Brahmaputra valley and British administration thereof linked it with the capitalist world economy.

Much of the 19th century was a time of economic degradation, displacement and land alienation for the tribals, especially the Bodo people. This may also perhaps be seen as a corollary to the loss of political power of the Bodos. The ruling class and aristocracy dissolved into the un-classed sections of the people of Assam valley. The common Bodos continued their age old practice of shifting cultivation. But here also they had to face economic hardships. The new land revenue system required payment of taxes in cash of which they had very little amount. As monetary system replaced the old barter system the Bodo traders could not cope with the requirement of capital in minutest transactions. This requirement was made by a section of hardworking and people with business acumen traders from Barpeta. By the end of the 19th century the total volume of the border trade in Udalguri area practically went out of the grip of the Bodos. This resulted in the total peasantization of the Bodos of lower Assam. In Goalpara, a section of the Bodo who became zamindars oppressed their fellow Bodos (*Hira Moni Deka: 2014: 21-22*).

After the advent of colonial rule, the tribal peasants and non-tribal population of this area came in contact with a new type of commercial economy, politico-legal system, western culture and ideals. In other words, the feudal tribal economy was not, in varying degrees, absorbed into the commodity economy based on monetary transactions. The characteristics of which were to generate surplus and marketing the amounts of agricultural produce; disappearance of hereditary tenancies or tenants hereditary rights on land; introduction of new land revenue system; a kind of marketing of labour through contractual, competitive, and often short-term tenancies; and polarization of classes. Land was transformed into commodity, the money became capital. Thus, the

barter-oriented, money short economy was being replaced by the monetized commodity economy. Money became capital (M.C. Paul: 1989: 64-65).

The age old rural economy of Assam was seriously affected due to the introduction of money economy by the British regime. The land settlement system was free from all monetary transaction during the Ahom period. The British government made their first revenue assessment in 1843 and then after every few years kept on enhancing the rate of land revenue in successive assessments. This not only put the poor peasants, unaccustomed to such monetary payments, into a lot of hardship, but also made the system doubly oppressive because of an acute scarcity of coins, which had always to be obtained from Calcutta by the government from their mint by means of primitive modes of transport. Excessive exactions made by the corrupt revenue collectors like Choudhury and Mouzadars further aggravated the situation (Roy: *Ibid*: 27). In the given transitional situation of deficient currency supply and extremely limited facilities for marketing farm products, this policy caused hardship and resentment, for, peasants failed to secure enough cash to pay the land tax. In the interiormost areas, even around 1850, peasants had to walk long distances for two to three days to get their goods converted into cash. Such a situation naturally tended to inhibit any expansion of agricultural acreage (A. Guha: 2016: 7). In most of the cases, the peasants had to suffer from fraudulent practices in dealing with the brokers and traders while selling their produces and they usually hardly received proper due of their commodities. The conditions of the tribals reached to such a stage that they became scared of possessing more lands in the new system for fear of paying more revenues and most of them even joined in military services as well as in the tea gardens as labourers just to avoid paying high land revenues (A. Guha; *Ibid*: 7-8).

A new land tenure system was also introduced in Assam by the colonial rulers. There was no hereditary ownership of land excepting the donated ones up till the end of the Ahom rule and land was treated as common property of the villagers where they also had the common rights over forest, minerals etc. But the colonial government conferred a permanent, heritable, transferable, and saleable right to different classes of owners of land, through The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 (D. K. Gangopadhyay : 1990: 136).

The new land tenure system initiated by the British rulers adversely affected the tribal people as they were deprived of their age old rights such as the common ownership of land, forests, minerals etc. The situation became more dangerous when it initiated the system of granting lands to the tea planting class under the Wasteland Grants Rules, 1838 (Gangopadhyay. *Ibid*.:137). This was followed by subsequent rules known as the Old Assam Rules, 1854, Fee Simple Grant Rules, 1862 Revised Fee Simple Rules, 1874, New Lease Rules, 1876, and The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886. Under these Rules large areas of land were granted to the tea planting class at favourable terms and at nominal prices. In 1872, the tea planters in Assam took a total of 3,71,990 acres under 318 estates. In 1878, the number of estates increased to 850 covering an area of 5,87,409 acres and then to 980 estates in 1928 covering an area of 16,29,524 acres (Gangopadhyay. *Ibid*.:137-138). With the beginning of inflow of government sponsored immigration to the valley mainly from the present day Bangladesh or the then East Bengal, the land issue became more dangerous for the indigenous peasantry of Assam in general and the tribal people in general.

The introduction of tea plantation in Assam by the colonial rule led to the massive migration of tribal labourers from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. They imported trained and educated Hindu Bengali manpower to fill up the service sectors. In addition, many more Bengalis came to Assam as lawyers, teachers, private doctors, shopkeepers, jewelers, tailors and so on. Besides Bengalis, Napolis also came to Assam initially as construction workers, tea estate, sugarcane plantations, mining labourers and as part of the colonial army (Sarajit K. Chatterjee: 2010: 545). In the absence of an indigenous business caste or class, the migrant Marwaris, the dominant trading class in Northern India, filled up the vacuum in business, trade and banking. Apart from Sylhet, Assam was naturally rich though thinly populated province. The colonial rulers therefore openly encouraged massive migration of various groups into Assam in order to augment their land revenue by bringing more and more land under cultivation and habitation. The Bengali Muslims from the then East Bengal were encouraged to migrate in the areas where vast tracts of cultivable land remained unutilized (Chatterjee: *Ibid* :). In 1942, Government of India directed the Assam Government to launch an intensive Grow more food campaign by utilizing all available land to provide adequate food to the allied troops stationed in Assam (Roy: *Ibid*: 32). Taking advantage of the direction the Saadullah Government of Assam arranged massive immigration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal to Assam and settled them mainly in the Boro inhabited lower Assam districts.

The process of depeasantisation was also started with the introduction of tea plantation industry. The poor oppressed peasants were squeezed to pay the enhanced land taxes, failure of which forced them to seek wage earning jobs in the plantation industry or flee to interior places. This had virtually made the agriculture stagnant, as every enhancement of new assessment of tax compelled the poor either to live peasantry or to work in the tea plantations. There also emerged a serious imbalance between the fast growing modern sector comprising the plantations, cash crops, coal mines, oil fields and the associated infrastructure, and on the other, the near stagnant traditional agricultural sector (Guha: *Ibid*: 32) which was suffering from substantial capital investment. The self-sufficient economy turned into a surplus generating economy was linked with the operation of World Market System. So the fluctuation in the international prices of jute and tea could impoverish the local peasants and tea plantation labourers respectively. For example, the post-war economic depression had adversely affected the tea industry in the 20's. This was solved by resorting to great reductions and wholesale dismissals of tea plantation labourers without bothering about their plight (A.C. Bhuyan: 1978: 26).

But it is to be noted that the growth of tea industry did not lead to an equivalent generation of income and diffusion of gains amongst the indigenous population. To expand the economic frontier of tea-plantation many tribal tracts were encroached upon which resulted in the alienation of land from the tribal peasants. The British mercantile capitalist had to import labour from other parts of the country because the indigenous peasants were reluctant to work as wage labourers as it was not a part of their tradition. That is why, the tea planters had to import labourers from other regions of India (M. C. Paul: *Ibid*: 67). Besides, the new technology of wet

and dry land farming to generate surplus agricultural production made colonialists to bring the land-hungry agricultural peasants from the then East Bengal. This inflow of peasants was continued decade after decade. They were encouraged because the indigenous peasants did not know the wet land cultivation and the jute cultivation as well. These immigrants put tremendous pressure on tribal land. They tempted the local poor tribals by offering exorbitant prices and compelled them to part with their land. This alienated and evicted the tribals from their own lands. Moreover, with the operation of market forces and development of transport and communication, there came the middlemen. They performed a variety of functions as middlemen in administrative matters, as money-lenders, as traders who controlled production of food grains through the system of advance credit. All these gradually transformed the social, cultural, demographic, economic and political landscape of Assam. They could identify that their rights and privileges are being taken away which they enjoyed in the traditional social structure (M.C. Paul: *Ibid*: 68).

CONCLUSION

Thus, the colonial situation propelled massive migration into Assam, which, in the process, had brought an enormous change in the ethnic composition of population as well as in the economy of the British Assam. The land-abundant valley became land-scarce. The labour shortage economy turned into a labour surplus one. The relatively ethnic homogeneity of the society was replaced by ethnic heterogeneity. The British annexation of Brahmaputra valley brought about many changes in the socio-economic and political life of the people of Assam. They introduced conflict of interests between the local tribals and semi-feudal rulers, on the one hand and the new mercantile bourgeoisie, on the other. A novel system of governance based on rule of law, a bourgeois legal framework and an administration composed of hierarchy of officers and administrators was established and expanded (M.C. Paul: 1992: 360). Along with land tenure system a new mode of production relation was also evolved. For the first time land was purchased like commodity and thrown open to the market for sale in this pre-capitalist economy which was undergoing a process of peasantisation (Paul: 1992: *Ibid*). The colonial system of administration and management instead of solving the tribal's problem of survival had made their survival at stake. They did not take this oppressive system for granted. During the colonial rule series of killings, uprisings, insurrections were surfaced when the tribals suffered incursions and loss of land, swindling, bankruptcy and deprivation of their livelihood (Paul: 1992: *Ibid*: 61). For example, in Nowgong district of Assam, the tribal ryots of Phulaguri village stood against the decision of imposing taxes on their houses, gardens and pan (betel-leaf) and eventually attacked and killed Lt. Singer in 18 September, 1861 who came to control the mob numbering around three thousands armed with clubs (lathies) gathered to protest the decision (H. K. Barpujari :1999: 89-93). Thus, the new form of economy unfolded new complexities with serious socio-economic and political ramifications into the medieval society of the valley which ultimately led to discontentment, dissatisfaction and unrest among the tribals against the colonial rule and the seeds of destruction, chaos, confusion and unrest sown by them continued even after the independence.

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