CHAPTER - V
EMERGENCE OF THE **RYOT SABHA** IN SIBSAGAR DISTRICT

As discussed earlier the colonial government radically transformed the socio-economic structure of the Assamese rural society. In course of the introduction of a new agrarian system, the peasantry was the worst sufferer. Excessive land revenue demands, indebtedness, destruction of handicrafts, low production of food grains—all combined together pushed the peasantry into extreme misery. Driven by the misery and suffering in the 19th century, the peasants rose in revolt against the British government many times, as we have discussed in the earlier chapters. Since the early part of the 20th century, the peasantry of Assam were organised and brought under the fold of the national movement and with their participation, the freedom struggle in Assam acquired a new dimension of mass mobilisation. According to S.D. Goswami, “The material condition based on inequality: stagnation and exploitation actually paved the ground for the emergence of a conscious peasantry who with the progress of time, became less militant and more moderate in their struggle against the rulers”.1 Goswami further states that, “this change was often attributed to the influence exercised by the local congressmen who played a vital role in the emergence of the Ryot Sabhas in Assam. Consequently, the Ryot Sabhas not only reflected the strong foundations of socio-economic-political consciousness of the peasantry, but also helped to channel the grievances of the people and the mainstream of Indian National Movement”.2 In this context, it will be of interest to study the emergence of the Ryot Sabha in the Sibsagar District, which had the most actively organised Ryot Sabhas.

2 *ibid*.
The Sibsagar district lies between 25°16'N and 95°22'E, with an area of 4,996 square miles. It is bounded on the east by Lakhimpur, on the north by the Brahmaputra and Subansiri which divides it from Lakhimpur and Darrang; on the west by Nagaon and on the South by the hills of Nagaland. The mighty river Brahmaputra flows through the northern portion of the district. The principal tributaries of the Brahmaputra the Burhi Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, Jhanji, Kakadunga and Dhansiri, flow in this district from east to west. After the establishment of British rule, the district was placed under the Ryotwary settlement. It is in the context of the reaction to British rule that the Ryot Sabha institution came to emerge in Sibsagar District. However to understand the full significance of this institution its emergence has to be placed against the background of the agrarian structure that existed in the pre-British period and the repercussions to the introduction of British agrarian policies.

Prior to the advent of the British, it is recorded that the entire Sibsagar District was more or less unified under the Ahom rule for six hundred years. The 'Ahoms', an off-shoot of the Tai or the great Shan stock of South-East Asia, from the time of their migration in 1228 under the sole leadership of Sukapha, penetrated the district through the Patkai range. Subsequently, "they were able to set up a principality of their own in the South east corner of the present district. In course of their early existence, they reduced to submission the Morans, Barahis and the Nagas". In the later phase, "they were able to subdue the Chutias and also drove the Kacharis off the Valley of the Dhansiri to Maibong in the North Cachar hills". In the 16th century, the Ahoms had to confront the rising power of the Koches in Koch Behar. But the most formidable enemy which subsequently challenged the supremacy of the Ahoms in the west were the Mughals. The latter annexed the eastern division of the Koch kingdom, commonly known as Koch-Hazo in 1613 and drove its ruler Balinarayan to seek refuge at the Ahom court.

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1 B.C. Allen, E.A. Gait, CGH Allen & H.F. Howard (eds), Gazetteer of Bengal and N. E. India, New Delhi, 1993, p. 572.
2 H.K. Barpujari, Assam in the days of the Company, Shillong, 1996, p.3.
3 ibid.
4 ibid.
5 ibid.
6 ibid.
7 ibid.
8 ibid.
“When the Ahom monarch gave shelter and later installed the fugitive prince as the ruler of Darrang, hostilities followed with the Mughals which continued with occasional break till the close of the 17th century”. 9 “The Mughals under Nawab Mir Jumla advanced in 1662 as far as Gargaon, the capital city of the Ahom kingdom and compelled its ruler Jayadhawaj Singha to cede Kamrup or Western Assam to the Mughal dominion”. 10 King Gadhadhar Singha (1681-96), finally expelled the Mughals in 1682 and extended the boundary of Ahom Kingdom. Western Assam 'Changed Hands' several times, when salient features of the fiscal administration of the Mughals took deep root in its soil. 11 It is an admitted fact that the Ahom monarch Rudra Singha, organised a greater confederacy to expell the Mughal from Eastern India; but it failed due to the sudden death of the King. But, from the latter of part of the 18th century, the Ahom rulers encountered series of uprisings and revolt of the Moamarias that seriously weakened the very foundation of the Ahom kingdom. The Moamaria uprisings were followed by Burmese invasion that led the breakdown of the mighty Ahom kingdom. 13 Later, as a result of the treaty of Yandaboo of 1826, the region was occupied by the imperialist British. It must be mentioned here that the first and last capital city of the Ahom were respectively Charaideo and Jorhat, which became the centre of a vibrate cultural life in Assam and the present area of study is located in this erstwhile centre of Ahom rule.

The Ahoms not only established a strong centralised polity, but they also achieved unprecedented improvement in the field of agriculture, infrastructural developments, artisan industries, internal and external trade and also in the social and cultural life of the people during the period of their rule. So far as the Ahom polity was concerned, it was basically of a semi-tribal, semi-feudal character; but most important socio-economic contribution of the Ahoms was the introduction of the paik System. The

9 ibid.  
10 ibid.  
11 ibid.  
13 Homeswar Dihingia, Assam’s Struggles against British rule (1826-1863), New Delhi, 1993, p.15.  
word *paik*, a well known term in medieval history, denotes a peasant in Assam of the Ahoms days.\(^{16}\) It was during the rule of the king Pratap Singha (1603-1642) under the auspices of Momai Tamuly Barbaruah that the villages were resettled new ones constructed on the basis of the *paik* or *khel* system which was the backbone of the socio-political organisation of medieval Assam.\(^{17}\) Regarding the importance of the introduction of the *paik* system R. Buragohain states,

> "Ecologically, upper Assam was an undulating alluvium plain, full of thick jungles and marshes with heavy rainfall during the monsoons. To make it suitable for wet rice cultivation, the land reclamation was the first task. The task was by no means easy. Each tract had to be cleared up plot by plot which involved the use of enormous labour force. It was simply not possible to do on an individual scale and hence large scale social organisations on whole communal basis had to be set up. This in turn, gave rise to the organisation of the *paik/khel* systems, out of which an agri-based society was emerging and this provided the basic foundations of the Ahom society, poity and economy."\(^{18}\)

Thus, it is evident that the *paik* system laid the foundation of a new socio-economic structure in the rural society particularly in the upper Assam. Although, the Ahom system of government was characterised as quasi-feudal by Amalendu Guha,\(^ {19}\) yet the peasantry had neither experienced abundance nor distressing starvation. As H.L. Gupta rightly states,

> "The Ahoms gave Assam a well organised administration, checked the advance of the Islamic hoardes deeper into Assam and earned a good name.


In course of few centuries, they became fully indianized, influencing the society and culture of the Brahmaputra Valley and being influenced by them. This socio-cultural brushing coupled with an effective government gave a brighter glow to Assam after a dim period of a couple of centuries.”

It is difficult to ascertain the growth and changes in population during the period of Ahom rule (1288-1826) due to the lack of proper official records of the Kingdom. Though no accurate statistics are available, Amalendu Guha estimates that the population of Assam during the reign of Rudra Singh (1696-1714) was around 30,20,000. But there was a large-scale depopulation during the civil wars and the Burmese invasions. The Burmese had been a terror to the people, as is seen from the following account available in a local folk composition called *Barphukanar Git*:

“The bloodcurdling atrocities of the Burmese, which passed into the common parlance of the Assamese as *Manar Upadrav*, the very mention of which frightened many a child to sleep, constitutes the gravest national catastrophe to which the peace-loving and simple inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley have been subjected since the dawn of recorded history”.

Besides, no less than 30 thousand Assamese had been taken away as slaves. To escape the brutalities of the Burmese, thousand of people left their homes and took shelter in the neighbouring hills. In this context, H.K. Barpujari states, “it is impossible to estimate the number of persons who fled, were killed or were deported to Burma”. In the words of M. Cosy who surveyed the area after a few years, “though some centuries ago richly cultivated…….. Is now throughout six-eights or seven-eights of its extent covered with jungle of gigantic reeds, traversed only by the wild elephant or the buffalo,

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23 *ibid*.
24 H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the days of Company*, op cit., p.11.
where human foot step is unknown and the atmosphere even to the native themselves is pregnant with febrile maisma and death".  

However, in 1841, Robinson estimated that the population of Sibsagar was 200,000 lac. But this census was probably not very accurate. In 1872, the first census of the whole province of Assam was taken. According to this, the population of Sibsagar district was 317,799 in 1872, 392,545 in 1881, 480,659 in 1891 and 597,696 in 1901. The figures show that there was an enormous increase of population to the extent of 88% which took place in the twenty nine years. It was partly due to this fact that Sibsagar, unlike lower and central Assam, was healthy and hence there was natural increase of the indigenous population. But the increase was more due to the importation of a large number of the tea garden labourers. The district was divided into three parts Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat. The Sadar head quarter of the district was at Jorhat. The growth of population of Sibsagar district is shown in the following table:

Table: 5.1

Percentage of increase of Population in the Sibsagar District(1881-1931)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>4.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>6.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>6.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>9.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>9.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>9.92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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25 *ibid.*
26 B.C. Allen & others, *Gazetteer of Bengal and NE India, op cit.*, p. 575.
The average rate of increase in population during 1881-1901 and 1911-1931 were 3.89% and 8.18% per decade respectively. The above figures clearly show the trend of variation in which \( \frac{1}{4} \) of the total population had been born in 1901 outside the frontier of Assam. Besides, a great part of the increase was due to the labourers who were imported in large numbers to work in the tea gardens situated in the district. Likewise, about one half of the population came from Chota-Nagpur. There were a few Nepalis too who migrated to this district. An interesting feature about the increase in population was the coming of the Marwaris who later on succeeded in monopolising the whole of the trade. As far as inter-district migration was concerned, Sibsagar sent settlers to the waste lands of Lakhimpur and Darrang, in return, received labourers from Kamrup and Goalpara. The following table gives an idea of break up of the population according to the Census report of 1901:

**Table :5.2**

**Break up of the Population in the Sibsagar District**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Name of the Race</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>5,97,969</td>
<td>Nagpuri</td>
<td>2,226</td>
<td>0.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marwaris</td>
<td>1916</td>
<td>0.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hindustani</td>
<td>1,777</td>
<td>0.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eastern Hindi</td>
<td>38,693</td>
<td>6.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>354,984</td>
<td>59.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>115,288</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oriva</td>
<td>3,682</td>
<td>0.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>10,335</td>
<td>1.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Khandi</td>
<td>1,126</td>
<td>0.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Telegu</td>
<td>1005</td>
<td>0.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Tea Garden</td>
<td>65,715</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Migrants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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The Gazetteers note that in Sibsagar district as many as 50 different languages were spoken.31 "Nearly 85% people spoke Assamese. Broadly speaking, the population of Sibsagar can be divided into four categories namely... indigenous, plains tribal, Tea and ex-teagarden labourers and others. The indigenous population comprises the Kalitas, Kayasthas, Banias, Ahoms, Chutias, Koches, Brahmins, Kaibartas, Katonis, Morans, Muslims, Nath, Suts, where as the tribal population comprises the Deoris, Kacharis, Miris, Sonowals etc".32 The other people comprise the Bengali, Marwaris, Nepalis, Punjabis, Sikhs etc.33

The district was entirely rural and no less than 91% of the population as recorded by B.C. Allen lived in the villages.34 The principal crops of this district were rice, mustard pulse and tea. As the district is basically dependent on agriculture like other districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, the majority people of the rural sector in this district were the revenue paying peasantry and 40.9% rural people hold 10 to less than 30 bighas of land.35 Of course, it may be pointed out that of all district, Sibsagar has the highest tea acreage which form about 27% of the total tea area in the State.36

When the British entered Assam, the annexation of Sibsagar district in particular and Assam in general was not the result of direct conquest. The British did not conquer the land in the strict sense of the term. The Ahom state had begun to disintegrate on account of internal dissension of the country which presented a field for Burmese aggression. "The welter of chaos and anarchy into which the country was plunged facilitated the British conquest. The Burmese came at the instance of Badan Chandra Borphukan as an ally".37 But, after the defeat of the Burmese at the hands of British, Assam was handed over to the company by the treaty of Yandaboo of February, 1826.
In fact, after the dark spell of the Civil wars and Burmese occupation, which shattered the social structure of the Assamese people, there seemed to be a welcome relief at the coming of British rule, which brought with it a large degree of peace and stability.\textsuperscript{38} This was all the more so in the case of the peasantry who could once again return to their fields and raise their crops. Thus, the initial reaction to British rule on the part of the peasantry was quite positive.

But, within a very short span of time, British radically started new revenue policies which eventually turned to a changed situation in the economic history of the land. Meanwhile, David Scott was appointed as Governor General’s agent in NE frontier. Captain White being appointed in 1828 to assist David Scott in lower Assam and Captain Newville in 1828 was appointed to have charge of upper Assam. David Scott recommended that lower Assam should be annexed because it yielded an annual revenue of over three lac of rupees. The annexation of upper Assam which had been ravaged by the Moamaria revolt and Burmese forces, was considered to be uneconomic because it yielded scarcely a lac of rupees as annual revenue.\textsuperscript{39} After much deliberation, however, the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur were placed under the administration of Raja Purandar Singha who executed a treaty No LXIII dated 2.3.1833 binding himself to administer the country as a protected Prince on condition of paying a tribute of Rs. 50,000/- annually to the British government.\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{Raja} ‘who’ according to Mackenzie was believed to be morally and otherwise the most eligible representative of the royal stock was known to have fallen deeply into arrears with his tribute.\textsuperscript{41} It was but natural under the condition of his territories, Purandar would not be able to keep his obligations. “The peasantry of upper Assam region was in no state to contribute effectively to the King’s coffers and the king also knew well that further taxation would result in a situation where the people would finally revolt”.\textsuperscript{42} As a result, “on the plea
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Home political No 129, 1838.
\item \textsuperscript{41} \textit{ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Udayan Misra, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 57-60.
\end{itemize}
that the Ahom administration had failed, the British finally annexed upper Assam in 1838. The peasantry which had more or less welcomed the advent of the British, because it had resulted in some return to normality and rule of law, were soon to discover the inner machinations of the British.43

Although in the initial phase, the advent of the British after Burmese incursions was a welcome phenomenon, but the people did not take them as mere sojourners and expressions of unrest were shown by the discontented Ahom nobility. Consequently, several pre-mature attempts were made to restore the loss of political freedom. The first attempt to revive the Ahom authority was made by Gadadhar Singha, a kinsman of ex Raja Jageswar Singh. Another Ahom Prince Gomdhar Konwar, assumed the insignia of royalty, styled himself as Swargodeo and resisted the revenue officers and plundered several houses.44 But Gomdhar Konwar and his followers were defeated by Lt. Rutherford on October, 29, 1828. The principal associates of Gomdhar were Kandura Deka Phukon, Dharmadhor, Dhononjai Buragohain and his son Haranath. After the surrender of Gomdhar, he and his followers were tried at Jorhat by David Scott.45

In 1830, another standard of revolt was raised under the leadership of Pioli Barphukan in collaboration with dignitaries of the Ahom rule. In this venture, not only the veteran ex-nobles joined, but also the Khasis, the Singphos and Khamtis respectively under the leadership of Tirot Singh and Wackum Khoonjun too responded with large scale contribution of armed forces.46 Although this joint venture attempted a strong attack on the British, but defeat of Pioli Barphukan and Jiaram Dulia Baruah in the hands of the British had a disastrous effect on the whole campaign. Consequently, both of them were tried and sentenced to death by hanging which was carried out at Sibsagar in August, 1830.47

43 ibid.
45 Home Political, op. cit.
46 Anuradha Dutta, op. cit., pp. 6-7. It is an admitted fact that although the Nagas responded to this Call, but under whose leadership, the Nagas came forward, the available evidences do not indicate.
47 ibid.
Thus, it is evident from the above that aforesaid revolts were crushed by the British authority. Although the very nature of these revolt were restorative, yet these revolts had great significance in the subsequent history of freedom struggle of Assam. The leaders of these revolts who fought against the foreign rulers left behind them a burning lesson of patriotism and sacrifice which later inspired the freedom movement.

In the meantime, the revolt of 1857 broke out in different parts of India. Assam, particularly Sibsagar district was also not left untouched. Led primarily by the pro-feudal, upper-class elements, the attempted revolt in the province was aimed at restoring the Ahom scion, Kandarpeswar Singha, to the throne. Maniram, the rich powerful and highly intelligent Dewan of the Company, was the person who co-ordinated the moves aimed at starting an armed uprising against the British. Here he was assisted by a section of people belonging to the different ethnic groups as also by some of his friends in Bengal. It was Maniram in 1853 who submitted a memorial to Sir A. J. M. Mills, Judge of the Sadar Court, Calcutta to enquire into and report on the administration of the Province. In the memorial, Maniram not only prayed for restoration of the monarchy and the lost privileges, but also pointed out the evil effects of the new system particularly in the matter of taxation. But, Mill's comments were adverse and Maniram Dewan was described by him “as a clever, but untrustworthy and intriguing person”. In fact, it was Maniram Dewan who had helped the British during the early years of the consolidation of their rule in Assam. Subsequently, the British rewarded him by appointing him Sheristadar-Tahsilder of the company in the Upper Assam. It is an admitted fact that the name of Maniram Dewan was closely associated with the growth of tea industry in Assam.

However, having failed to convince Mills, Maniram went to Calcutta in the early phase of 1857 and submitted a memorial to the Governor General. But here also, the

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48 Udayan Misra, op. cit., pp. 63-64.
49 Ibid., p. 64.
50 Anuradha Dutta, op. cit., p.16.
51 Udayan Misra, op. cit., p. 64.
government did not satisfy local sentiments and the failure made a profound impression on the minds of Dewan.52 “Meanwhile it was in Calcutta that he came to know about the revolt of the Sepoy in Kanpur, Meerut and Lucknow. Being inspired by the then Indian political atmosphere, Maniram Dewan decided to start an armed insurrection in Assam to overthrow the British. Hence, from Calcutta, he sent secret letters to Kandarpeswar Singha and others”.53 But, unfortunately the plot was detected before it could materialize. Maniram Dewan was arrested at Calcutta and later was brought for trial to Jorhat. In the trial, he was found guilty and was hanged at Jorhat with Pioli Baruah.54 The other associates like Dutiram Baruah, Madhu Malik, Bahadur Gaonburha and Formud Ali were given sentences or transportation or imprisonment.55

Thus, the revolt of 1857 ended the attempt to dislodge the British from power of Assam. Although the persons accused of treason belonged to diverse social and ethnic groups, yet they were able to unite together with the common objective of driving out the alien intruder and also of reducing the burden of taxation.56 It is also evident that, ‘Maniram and Peoli were turned into symbols of Assamese nationalist aspirations and their deaths commemorated as days of national remembrance. It was part of glorification of the past, which constitutes the rise and consolidation of nationalism’.57

The idea of nationality and patriotism on an all India basis and political consciousness, leading to struggle for freedom or urge towards political advancement of the people, can’t be traced before the British period.58 The rebellion of 1857 was a turning point in the history of Indian Nationalism and after this epoch making event Indian Nationalism began acquiring flesh and blood giving rise to widespread popular movements through a number of associations climaxing in the foundation of the Indian National Congress. As R.P. Dutt has rightly stated,

52 ibid., p. 64.
53 Anuradha Dutta, op. cit., p. 16.
54 ibid., pp.17-18.
56 Amalendu Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, op.cit., p. 4.
57 Cited by Udayan Misra, op.cit., p. 69.
"The Indian National movement arose from social conditions, from the conditions of imperialism and its system of exploitation, and from the social and economic forces generated with Indian society under the conditions of that exploitation".59

With the rest of India, the consolidation of British rule since post 1857 period, opened up new avenues of socio-economic change in Assam which resulted in the growth of English education together with which came ideas of western liberal democracy. As Manorama Sharma has rightly pointed out, "the new economic system which the British introduced into Assam brought in its wake a whole range of changes in the socio-economic life of Assam. With the development of British administration a set of new forces also began to develop and these forces began to play a very vital role in the shaping of the socio-economic developments in the history of Assam".60 She also draws our attention to the fact that the socio-economic changes which the British rule brought about saw the emergence of new forces which at the end of 19th century crystallised to form what we can call the nascent Assamese middle class.61 In course of time, this newly emerged enlightened middle class played a significant role in the history of Assam. That is why, we may test Manorama Sharma's argument on new socio-economic aspects as the background of the emergence of peasant organisation in our analysis in the Sibsagar District.

We have discussed in the previous chapter(Chapter III) that after 1860, the peasants of Lower and central Assam were involved in a series of struggle against the colonial exploitation in their own capacity in connection with the enhancement of land revenue. In this context, the Raij-mel, played a very important part in organising these peasant uprisings against the British government.62 The interesting question here is 'why peasant uprisings like in the other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley through Raij-

59 R.P. Dutt, India To-day, Calcutta, 1997, p. 303.
60 Manorama Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony, New Delhi, 1990, p.38.
61 ibid., p.103.
mels did not take place in this district’? In fact, in the Sibsagar district, the spontaneous militant peasant uprisings through Raij-mels were absolutely absent. It is a fact that Sibsagar was basically known for tea cultivation. After the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the colonial government not only discovered tea in Assam, but also developed it by leaps and bounds within a very short time and by the end of the 19th century most of the wasteland grants for this purpose had been taken up. The following table gives an indication of the nature of development of the tea industries in the Sibsagar district.  

Table: 5.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Numbers of Gardens</th>
<th>Area in Acres</th>
<th>Area under Plant held by Europeans</th>
<th>Plant (Acres) held by Natives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18,642</td>
<td>3,149</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>137,829</td>
<td>39,772</td>
<td>663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48,775</td>
<td>11,805</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>244,653</td>
<td>76,890</td>
<td>2,427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>192,419</td>
<td>67,227</td>
<td>1,463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although, the introduction of tea industry and its development, the main motive of the colonial government was maximization of profits, yet its socio-economic aspect cannot be overlooked. In this context, Rajen Saikia states, “Importance of tea in the socio-economic life of Assam has yet to be studied thoroughly. An in-depth study would have revealed the social, economic and political consequences of tea cultivation from the British days till the present day. We have the story of tea in general accounts of some tea companies, some tea planters family and study of some aspects of tea industry. They together help us to form some broad ideas”.  

However, Keya Dasgupta rightly states, “between 1900-01 and 1914-15, one has the advantage of analysing trade statistics regionally, for upper and lower Assam. The two exemplify distinct regional

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characteristics in their respective economic spheres. The first could be characterized by the pre-dominance of tea in the economy, while the second by the dominance of the traditional agricultural sector and cottage industries with the relative insignificance of tea". From the argument of Keya Dasgupta, we can summarise that the majority of the people out of the total population consisted of the tea-gardent labours in the Sibsagar District, whereas in lower Assam, majority of the total population fall under the agricultural sector. This can be said to be one of the probable reasons in Sibsagar district, unlike Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon that spontaneous peasant movement was not reflected. Another accepted fact is that there was tremendous pressure on land because of the East Bengal Agriculturists immigrant which led to distortions in agrarian relations in the districts of lower Assam, whereas immigration was thin in this district for a quite number of decades. In this context, H.K. Barpujari argued that, "the plantation labour lived away from the habitation of the Assamese and are engaged in a profession not of interest of the indigenous people".

But, it did not mean that the peasantry of Sibsagar district did not agitate. Rather, the newly emerged educated sections who were closely associated with the socio-political activities of the time and who were also integrally connected with the rural peasantry at large. They not only raised issues in the interest of the ryots, but also constitutionally protested the unpopular governmental measures, particularly land revenue administration. With this aim in view, Jaganath Barooah founded the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha in 1884. It is to be noted that in the second annual session of this organisation held at Jorhat in 1886, about 10,000 ryots assembled in the annual session and demanded the reduction of land revenue. Another powerful organisation was upper

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67 Home Political, No 35, 1838, op.cit. Jaganath Barooah (1851-1907), son of a govt. servant who had started a tea estate, matriculated in 1868, graduated from Presidency College in 1872, Calcutta, owned several tea gardens in due course, Rai-Bahadur, Vice President and later President, Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha, See, Amalendu Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, Appendix-5, op.cit., p. 341. While, Barooah was a student of Presidency College at Calcutta, he was deeply involved in the political and social life of the Country’s most vibrating metropolis which was then the Capital of India and epi-centre of the new awakening in the Country.(J.B. Bhattacharjee, “Regional Organisations and National Awakening” in Arun Bhuyan(ed), Nationalist Upsurge in Assam, op.cit., p. 96). Jaganath Barooah was the first Graduate of Upper Assam. It is an admitted fact that the second College of North East India which was established in 1930 at Jorhat is after the name of this enlightened Assamese. For details, see, Jatindra Nath Goswami, Jagannath Barooah, Jorhat, 1976.
68 Home Political file, op. cit.
Assam Association which played a leading role in mobilising the peasantry of this region. Radhanath Changkakati, Secretary, the Upper Assam Association with the *ryots* of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur strongly protested against any enhancement of the taxes or any fresh imposition of new taxes by the government.  

Similarly, a section of the peasantry at Sibsagar also came forward to protest against the government high land revenue policy under the leadership of Gangagobinda Phukon.  

The most powerful organisation that was founded and led particularly from Sibsagar District was the Assam Association in 1903. This Association launched a strong agitation during 1903-20 against the imposition of Grazing tax, Buffalo Tax and the like. The protest was not confined only to a particular area and limited group of people, but on the contrary, had generated massive support of large number of *ryots* in different parts of the province. Of course, the growth of literacy also played a significant role in the Sibsagar district in comparison to other districts of the Brahmaputra Valley is shown in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Literate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>5.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>4.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>4.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>4.48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from *Census of 1891*, p. 145.

It is from the above table we may come to the point that percentage of newly emerged educated sections was quite higher than the other districts of the Brahmaputra Valley and they played significant role in organising the above mentioned social institutions in the Sibsagar District.

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72 Calculated from *Census of Assam, 1891*, p. 145.
Thus, although in the Sibsagar district no militant peasant struggles on the lines of the *Raij Mel* had taken place; yet, the institutions and organisations mentioned above, many of which originated in this district, played a vital role in their early stage by providing organised platforms for the spread of modern political consciousness and emergence of strong passive grass-roots level democratic peasant organisation like *Ryot Sabhas*.

In the meantime, the launching of the Non Co-Operation movement under the leadership of Gandhi generated a real political consciousness throughout the country. We have stated in the previous chapter (Chapter IV) that it was the student community of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam which played an important part in mobilising the peasantry into the path of socio-economic agitation in the Non Co-Operation Movement in 1921. Likewise, under the leadership of young nationalists, powerful and countrywide Non Co-operation movement acquired a new character in the rural places of the Sibsagar District around the towns of Jorhat, Golaghat and Sibsagar. Needless to say, Gandhi’s visit to these region gave additional impetus. At Jorhat, the student nationalists like Gangadhar Borkotoki, Rohini Kanta Hatibaruah, Sarbeswar Borchetia, Lila Borah, Sasodhar Molia Baruah, Krishna Nath Sarmah, Kuladhar Chaliha, Pitambor Dev Goswami and others mobilised the people of rural sector in such a way that people unprecedently came forward from the places like Charigaon, Teok, Hansara, Tamulisiga, Nakachari, Pirakota, Borhulla, Titabor, Nagabat and the like.\(^73\) It was due to their attempt that the anti-opium boycott programme, no-tax campaign, became popular slogans and practices. As from Jorhat, so also from the areas around Sibsagar town, a large number of local young nationalists like Kanak Chandra Chetia of Mahmora, Kamala Baruah of Bokota, Indreswar Chutia, Dimbeswar Bhuyan of Kalugaon, Golap Chandra Handique Baruah, Indra Gogoi, Ramkanta Baruah, Danneswar Gogoi and Benudhar Baruah of Galeki, Haranath Chetia, Pitambor Gogoi of Disangmukh, Kamala Kanta Baruah, Trahiram Bairagi of Konwarapur and others got involved in carrying out propaganda work in the villages.\(^74\)

\(^73\) *Asomiya*, 22 April, 1922, also see, Benudhar Sharma, *Congressor Kasiali Rodot*, Guwahati, 1960, pp.13-21.

\(^74\) *Asomiya*, 22 April, 6th August, 1922.
shops were carried on with vigour and enthusiasm. Similar mass appeal was generated at Dhekial, Dergaon, Furbating, Badulipara, Sarupathar, Borpathar, Bengenakhuwa and Maukhuwa in greater Golaghat. The emerging nationalists like Gangaram Bornedhi, Bogai Dutta Hazarika, Gangaram Borthakur, Gunidra Baruah, Moheswar Baruah, Sankar Chandra Baruah, Rajendra Baruah and others infused the national sentiments in the minds of the rural people. An official communique stated this about the Sibsagar District:

“What is surprising is that this idea (no-tax campaign) has permeated the whole district so completely reaching even the remotest villages and to old residents of Assam, it is distressing to find a peaceful and friendly people turning against government and Europeans.”

Thus, the peasants of Sibsagar district got its first taste of the nationalist movement without a history of very intense peasant unrests like other districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. In fact, nationalist consciousness began to spread in the area which definitely had an influence on the peasants of the district.

If the emergence of peasantry in Assam as elsewhere of India, can be said to have made a qualitative leap forward in the Non Co-Operation movement period, then in the post Non Co-Operation period, it reached its most mature phase leading to the strong peasant organisations as discussed in the last chapter. But the far-reaching impact was that it began to nurture new ideas, new issues, new demands and the like. Apart from it, this new atmosphere created a new generation of young political workers who fanned out to villages. Besides, the historic Bardoli Satyagraha led by Vallabhbhai Patel and others in 1920-29 was a step towards the upliftment of the peasant's long demands like the reduction of the land revenue. Meanwhile, Civil Disobedience

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Movement began on 26, January, 1930. The 11 points charter of demands that Gandhi had raised the 50% land revenue reduction caught the imagination of the people of Assam. Along with the remission of land revenue, distribution of agricultural loans, abolition of cart tax and the like were another demands of the local agitators. Consequently, various types of rural local meetings held in different part of Assam, appealed to the grass-root level rural population not to give enhanced tax, not to use foreign cloths and the like and this provided the momentum to the peasantry to remain anti-British.

So far as the mass contact was concerned, it was the Ryot Sabhas through which the Congress strengthened its grass-roots link. Since 1930s, a number of Ryot Sabhas had emerged all over the Brahmaputra Valley. By 1931-32, with much enthusiasm and interest, local Ryot Sabha conferences were held in most part of the Brahmaputra Valley. In April, 1931, a Sabha, well known as Naduar Ryot Sabha was held at Biswanath in Darrang district which was attended by several hundreds of ryots including many women and Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, a revolutionary freedom fighter and a well-known litterateur of Assam presided over this Ryot Sabha. The Chayaduar Ryot Sabha was held at Gamri on 13-14 June in 1931 under the presidemship of Pitambor Dev Goswami, Satradhikar of Garmur Satra, Mujuli. Similarly, Ryot Sabhas were organised in Bihaguri, North Mangaldai, Biswanath, Sotia and others in the Darrang district were most prominent. In the district of Kamrup, the Nalbari Ryot Sabha, Sarukhetri Ryot Sabha, Kalag Ryot Sabha, Belsor Ryot sabha and the like emerged in the grass-root level. The Ryot Sabhas in the districts of Darrang and Kamrup emerged against the background of the Raijmels that existed in the 19th century. It is an admitted fact that during the peasant uprisings of the 19th century Brahmaputra Valley, the existence of Raijmels and its role in context of the reduction of revenue were most intense character in those districts.

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79 Home political, *ibid.*
80 ibid.
81 Home Political File No 245, *Fortnight report for Assam for the half of the May*, 1931(Confidential), NMML, New Delhi. The importance of Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla has been discussed in details in the Chapter-VI.
82 ibid. Details will be presented in Chapter VI.
83 ibid., The Social root of the leaders of the Ryot Sabhas are being discussed in the Chapter-VI.
84 Home Political file No 361, *op. cit.*
In Sibsagar District also, it was after 1930s, when the colonial government banned the Congress and resorted to heavy repression, a number of *Ryot Sabhas* sprang up spontaneously. In fact, *Ryot Sabhas* in Sibsagar District were very effective in mobilising the rural people to redressing their grievances basically through agitation, protest and picketing. Besides, a large number of Assamese intelligentia and devoted enthusiastic leaders like Krishna Nath Sarmah, Debeswar Sarmah, Mohan Chandra Mahanta, Sarbeswar Borchetia, Kuladhar Chaliha, Sarbeswar Bordoloi, Sonaram Chutia and many others who actively contributed for the growth of the *Ryot Sabhas* and familiarised the *ryots* of Sibsagar district with the potent idea of their national unity.

Accordingly, in Sibsagar area, Namtidol *Ryot Sabha* emerged in January, 1933 and Hara Kumar Baruah presided over the *Sabha*. 85 Similar *Ryot Sabha* was organised at Moran Mauza under the presidency of Purnakanta Buragohain. 86 Dinanath Sharma presided the Simaluguri *Ryot Sabha*. 87 Silakuti *Ryot Sabha* was held under the auspices of Horesh Chandra Rajkhowa. 88 The Amguri *Ryot Sabha* was organised and conducted by Pitambar Dev Goswami where more than one thousand villagers participated in the *Sabha*. 89 Purnakanta Buragohain presided over the *Khawang Ryot Sabha*. 90 The organisation of Moura Bazar *Ryot Sabha* was also prominent 91 and this *Sabha* was presided by Pitambar Hazarika of Sibsagar. In the same way, the Gharphalia *Ryot Sabha* 92 was held and Benukanta Phukan presided over it. Another *Ryot Sabha* was formed at Charing Saloguri, 93 in which Mohan Chandra Mahanta presided over the *Sabha*. In this context, Benudhar Sharma has rightly pointed out that the organisation of Charing Salaguri *Ryot Sabha* created such an atmosphere in the rural areas that it led to the emergence of new promising local leaders like Bughdal Saikia, Sankardhar Mahanta, Deben Nath, Mohan Chandra Baruah and others. 94 The Rangabam *Ryot Sabha* was held

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85 *ibid.*, *Asomiya*, 6th January, 1933.  
86 *ibid.*  
87 *ibid., Asomiya*, 27, January, 1933.  
88 *Asomiya*, 17, February, 1933.  
89 *Asomiya*, 17, February, 1933.  
90 *Asomiya*, 10, March, 1933.  
91 *Asomiya*, 21, December 1934.  
92 *Asomiya*, 10, January, 1933.  
under the presidency of Padmanath Borthakur. The Sapekhati Ryot Sabha was presided over by Krishna Nath Sarmah. Likewise, Beliaghat Ryot Sabha of Dikhowmukh in 1931 was presided over by Tiyagbir Hem Baruah. The Jhanji Jamuguri Chapari Ryot Sabha in 1930 was presided by Nilamoni Phukon.

In the Jorhat area also, a number of Ryot Sabhas had emerged. The Charigaon Ryot Sabha was held under the presidency of Pitambar Dev Goswami and more than 500 ryots attended it. Two other Ryot Sabhas were organised at Karanga Baruah gaon, southern part of Jorhat and Mohan Chandra Mahanta presided over these two Ryot Sabhas. Likewise, at Majuli, Bapuram Goswami, Kameswar Tamuly, Chandradhar Tamuly, Radhanath Hazarika and others organised the Ryot Sabhas in the places of Gyangaon, Katoni, Saporoi, Kamar gaon and Kumarbari. Lilaram Baruah and Sasodhar Molia Baruah were the presidents of Ryot Sabhas held at Teok, Chaukhat, Hulungapara and Gakhirkhuwa Mauza. Another important Ryot Sabha was at Bor-Hejari under the presidency of Lilasen Gohain Rajkumar, while the Meleng Ryot Sabha holds a special significance because it was presided over by a woman Chitralekha Bharali. The Pakamua Ryot Sabha which was held in 1936 under the presidency of Debeswar Sharma and Sarbeswar Bordoloi was the secretary of this Sabha. The fourth Annual session of the district Ryot Sabha was held at Puthinoi Dalang under Teok police station on 4th April, 1937 under the presidency of Padmadhar Chaliha. The organisers of this Ryot Sabha were Hari Narayan Baruah of Jorhat, Moheswar Barkakoty of Pirakota, Podmeswar Goswami of Chaukhat, Sarbeswar Borcheta of Tilikiam and Gunaram Sharma of Jamuguri. Similarly, a Ryot Sabha was convened at Nangaltugaon near Borhulla under Titabor police station under the presidency of Debeswar

95 Home Political 137, op. cit.
96 Asomiya, 10, January, 1933, op. cit.
99 Asomiya, 27, January, 1933.
101 Asomiya, 10 February, 1933, Our interview with freedom fighter, Indreswar Bhuyan of Garamur Satra, Majuli, on 28/3/2005, see Appendix-H.
102 Asomiya, 24 February, 1933, Home political No.137, op. cit.
103 ibid.
104 Home Political file, 137, op. cit.
105 ibid.
106 Assam Police Abstracts Intelligence Report, 21.4.37.
About 600 people from neighboring Villages attended the Sabha.

A noteworthy organisation of Ryot Sabhas emerged in Golaghat area also. Accordingly, meetings of the ryot Sabha of Athagaon and Kacharihat Mauza were held at Bokiyal Na-pukhuri under Golaghat police station and Mohan Chandra Mahanta presided over the Sabhas. More than 300 ryots from twenty villages attended the Sabha. Kuladhar Chaliha presided over the Ryot Sabha held at Khumtai, Dhekial, Morangi and Rahadhala Phukhuri. The Sarupathar Ryot Sabha emerged with the active organisation of Kushal Konwar who later on became the martyr in the Quit India Movement. Young men like Ganashym Saikia, Nagen Chutia played a significant role in the successful organisation of the Sarupather Ryot Sabha. Kushal Konwar was the secretary of this Ryot Sabha. It is an admitted fact that through Sarupathar Ryot Sabha, Kushal Konwar began his political career. Similarly, Mahura Mukha Ryot Sabha was presided over by Kamala Miri. The Misamora Ryot Sabha was presided over by Dimbeswar Neog. The details are given above because the socio-economic root of the leaders of the Ryot Sabhas are being discussed in the next Chapter.

Indeed, these Ryot Sabhas were successful in mobilising the rural population against colonial government exploitation and thus gradually a ground was prepared for organising Provincial Ryot Sabha co-ordinating the activities of the various Ryot Sabhas scattered all over the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Accordingly, All Asom Ryot Sabha was formed in 1933 at Tilikiam near Jorhat and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi presided over this All Asom Ryot Sabha. In this Sabha, more than two or three hundred local ryot Sabhas attended and Krishna Nath Sarmah was selected as the Pradhan Sampadak (General Secretary). The second session of the All Asom Ryot Sabha was held at Dergaon in 1934 in which several thousand ryots and Congress...
workers attended. Dr. Hare Krishna Das presided over the second All Asom Ryot Sabha. It is to be noted here that 15 delegates from Assam including two journalists representing Asomiya and Prativa attended in the All India Kisan Congress conference held in Lucknow in 1936 in which Sarbeshwar Borchetia and Jagat Bhattacharjee were the delegates from Ryot Sabhas of Assam.

To sum up, it is apparent that organisation of Ryot Sabhas in Sibsagar district in particular and the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in general played a significant role in mobilising peasants exclusively against the agrarian policy and the agrarian exploitation along with other socio-economic injustice conducted by the Colonial Government. In fact, it is seen that the emergence of peasant organisation through Ryot Sabhas in this district was not backed by the peasant struggle, but rather the emergence of new socio-economic forces which contributed to the growth of enlightened sections that were crucial cultural links with the rural sector. These new forces mainly the educated elites were the main architect of the Ryot Sabhas. From that point of view, one can agree with the argument of Manorama Sharma was that the emergence of Ryot Sabina, a new kind of peasant organisation in the Sibsagar District was the result of the impact of new socio-economic developments. Thus, with the emergence of the All Asom Ryot Sabha, the popular Assamese proverbial saying Raijei Raja (The ryots themselves are the sovereign) assumed a new meaning and became a popular slogan among the rural population of the region.

Hence, we have seen that the emergence of the Ryot Sabha in the Sibsagar District was a historical phenomenon in the wake of the freedom struggle and was able to mobilise ryots from villages down to the mauzas against the socio-economic injustice introduced by the colonial government. So, it will be an interesting aspect to look into the nature, functions and organisation of the Ryot Sabha which we shall examine in the next chapter.

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117 Home Political 137, op. cit.
118 Asomiya, 2nd May, 1936.