CHAPTER VIII

EPILOGUE

The review of the successive phases of India’s struggle for freedom makes it quite clear that the peasantry of Sibsagar District through the Ryot Sabha in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam had played a historical role in it. The first manifestation of this trend was no doubt the outbreak of 1857 rebellion when a large number of Assamese people came forward to protest against the alien rule. It was followed by the peasant uprisings through the Raij Mel. Large sections of the Assamese people not only stood against the British, but also expressed their voice against the exploitative economic policy introduced by them. It is however, not true that all the attempts were successful, but it is a fact that these efforts could in many ways mould the future course of actions on the question of the anti-imperialist struggle.

It is evident from our discussion in the preceding chapters that the British after occupying the Brahmaputra Valley as per terms of treaty of Yandaboo of 1826, completely broke down the traditional economic system which was based on semi-tribal and semi-feudal society. The British not only introduced a new economic system, but also introduced the Ryotwary system in the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Within a very short period, the British introduced various land revenue settlements in order to encourage their imperialist design. The first and foremost problem of the peasantry of Assam was the payment of land revenue in cash. They were not accustomed to it. Secondly, under the Ahom rulers the economy was not a monetised one. Thirdly, with the establishment of British rule, the monetisation was introduced and all economic transactions were made in cash. Consequently, the condition of the peasantry in Assam began to worsen under the new monetised administration. From our analysis based on evidence, we have shown that, though the British encouraged the migration, no significant change had taken place in the Brahmaputra Valley in the agrarian sector.
One can therefore agree with Manorama Sharma while she pointed out that, "the entire period of 1910-1947, not only cropping pattern, but comprehensively the agrarian sector of Assam shows neither a vast rate of change nor a great extent of change which indicate either increasing agrarian prosperity or accumulation of surplus leading to agrarian polarisation and sharp differentiation". After the survey of various revenue and settlement reports, it is found that the majority of the peasantry of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam were revenue paying peasantry. As a result, we have shown that after 1860, there broke out many peasant uprisings in the Brahmaputra Valley in connection with the land revenue enhancement and the *Raij Mels* had played significant role in organising these peasant uprisings against the colonial British government.

Gradually, we have shown that the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 gave the political consciousness of the Assamese a definite nationalist orientation. During the beginning of the new century, the nature and outlook of the peasantry of the Brahmaputra Valley began to change. They gave up the militant and violent path of agitation and began to adopt a more constitutional path of agitation on the lines of liberal democratic agitations. The *Raij mels* began to lose their grip on the peasantry and its place was taken by the *Ryot Sabhas*. The growth of the latter was largely the result of the spread of English education together with which came ideas of western liberal democracy. We have shown the basic difference between the *Raij Mels* and *Ryot Sabha*. Side by side, we have seen the emergence and the role of other socio-economic organisations like Jorhat *Sarvajanik Sabha* and the *Assam Association* in the early part of the 20th Century. But, we have seen that the emergence of M.K. Gandhi in the all India scene, his methods of non-violent mass resistance and the mobilisation of the peasantry which paved the way of radicalisation of anti-imperialist struggle in India. In the process, several other social groups including middle classes, artisans, working classes and even sections of the landed gentry gradually got involved in it. In the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam also, the emergence of Assam *Chatra Sanmilan* (students' organisation) in 1916 was one of the remarkable development in the radical politics in Assam. With the launching of Non Co-operation Movement by

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the National Congress under the leadership of Gandhi in 1921, a new phase of political consciousness began to emerge in Assam, as in the other parts of India. Here, the students' community as stated not only played a decisive role in launching the Non Co-operation Movement, but also mobilised the peasantry in the no-tax campaign, anti-opium campaigns and so forth. Although, very soon, the Non Co-operation Movement came to an end within a very short span of time, nevertheless a good number of devoted and dedicated workers from the student community began to emerge. These newly emerged dedicated workers organised the rural masses through local agitations. The local agitations centred around issues like abolition of the unpopular grazing tax, reduction of land revenue and so forth. Accordingly, in the thirties of the 20th century, there emerged **Ryot Sabhas** under the active guidance of newly emerged local dedicated workers of the Congress all over the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. We have also discussed the coming up of the Socialist Communist parties and their organisation, some other **Krishak Sabha** also began to emerge in the Valley. Although other left-wing peasant organisations had come into existence, their activities were confined to a limited area. Rather, the **Ryot Sabha** emerged as the only large scale peasant organisation. In fact, as A.C. Bhuyan argues, 'in Assam, neither the Communist nor the Socialists had any dominating influence in the political field as the Congress organisation had a strong hold over the masses'.

While analysing the emergence of the **Ryot Sabha** in Sibsagar District, we have shown that the region basically was under the Ahom rule for nearly six hundred years. The analysis of the demographic profile during the period of our study, reveals that majority of the people out of the total population consisted of the tea-garden labourers. It is a fact that Sibsagar district was basically known for tea industry. After the Yandaboo treaty in 1826, the British not only discovered Tea in Assam, but also developed its growth by leaps and bounds within a very short time. The British government established tea gardens in the major portion of land in this district. After the occupation of Sibsagar district as a result of Yandaboo treaty, for a short period, the last Ahom King Purandar Singh was enthroned by the former over the region. But on the plea that the Ahom administration had failed, the British finally annexed the

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district in 1839. Although, in the initial phase, the advent of the British after the 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 anti-British uprisings had broken out. The first attempt was made by Gadadhar Singha. It was followed by Gomdhar Konwar, Pioli Barphukan and others. The nature of these revolts were restorative and ultimately crushed by the British, but nevertheless, these revolts had great significance in the subsequent history of freedom struggle in Assam. Similarly, in the revolt of 1857, Maniram Dewan, Pioli Baruah, Dutiram Baruah, Madhu Malik, Bahadur Gaonburha and Formud Ali played most heroic role from this district. Although, these persons accused of treason, belonged to diverse social and ethnic groups, but the interesting point is that they were able to unite together with the common objective of driving out the alien intruder and also of reducing the burden of taxation. There was also a new socio-economic awakening as we have discussed since the last part of the 19th century in this district. Consequently, new socio-economic organisations like Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha(1884), Upper Assam Association(1880), Assam Association (1903) began to emerge in this district. We have also analysed that, why peasant uprisings like in the other parts of the Brahmaputra valley through Raij Mel did not take place in this district. In fact, as stated earlier, Sibsagar District was basically known for her tea industry. Another accepted fact is that there was tremendous pressure on land because of the immigrants particularly East Bengal Agriculturists which led to distortions in agrarian relations in the districts of lower Assam, whereas immigration was thin in Sibsagar district for a quite number of decades. But, due to various historical reasons discussed in the earlier chapters, socio-economic organisation like the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha etc. emerged in this district and these organisations opposed the unpopular governmental measures, particularly in context of land revenue through constitutional agitation. Thus, even without a history of very intense peasant unrests, nationalist consciousness began to spread in the area which definitely had an influence on the peasants of the district. Gradually, the launching of Non Co-operation Movement in 1921 generated a real political consciousness in this district as in other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. We have stated in the Chapter IV that it was the students’ community of the valley which played an important part in mobilising the peasantry into the path of socio-economic agitation. In the Sibsagar district also, the local emerging student leaders like Krishna Nath Sarmah, Gangadhar Borkotoky, Kuladhar Chaliha, Rohini Kanta Hatibaruah, Sankar
Chandra Baruah and others mobilised the rural people in such a way that rural people came to the path of Nationalist Movement in an unprecedented manner from the remote places of the district. Within a short time, the Non-Co-operation Movement had come to an end. 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. Meanwhile, the Civil Disobedience Movement began on the issue of 50% reduction of land revenue, besides the other demands. Consequently, various types of rural local meetings were held in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam which appealed to the grass-root level rural masses not to give enhanced tax, not to use foreign cloth and so forth. During this phase, the aforesaid young enthusiastic leaders and Assamese intelligentsia began to mobilise the rural masses through Ryot Sabha in this district. After organising all the local Ryot Sabhas, the first All Assom Ryot Sabha was held in 1933 at Jorhat and Krishna Nath Sarmah was selected as the first General Secretary of the Ryot Sabha. Similarly, the district was credited with holding the second All Assom Ryot Sabha at Dergaon in 1934 under Golaghat area. In fact, we have shown how, in this district, after the emergence of the All Assom Ryot Sabha the socio-economic and political struggle against the British gained ground among the rural masses at grass-root level. It is also seen that the emergence of peasant organisation through Ryot Sabha in this district was not backed by the history of earlier peasant struggles, but rather the emergence of new socio-economic forces which contributed to the growth of enlightened sections which had crucial cultural links with the rural masses. These new forces mainly the educated elite were the main architect in mobilisation of the Ryot Sabha.

Our focus on the nature, functions and organisation of Ryot Sabha, have revealed the nature and demands of the Ryot Sabha at the different levels in which the Ryot Sabha were organised. On the basis of the evidences, we have found the Ryot Sabhas held in the Brahmaputra Valley districts can be divided into four levels i.e. village, thana, district and provincial level. In the village level, it reveals that the major demands of the Ryot Sabhas were the reduction of the land revenues and taxes to 8(eight) annas per rupee. But in the thana, district and provincial level, we see other

*We have discussed in detail in the Chapter VI.
demands relating to general socio-economic welfare as well. Here, the nature of the leadership of the Ryot Sabha becomes significant. In fact, Assamese intelligencia and local congressmen not only led the Ryot Sabhas, but also mobilised the Ryot Sabhas. After analysing the social origin of the leaders of the Ryot Sabha, we have seen that most of the leaders of the Ryot Sabha were lawyer, government clerk, Satradhikar, tea garden employee, doctor, school teachers and the like. Under the dominant leadership of the Assamese intellelgentia, the Ryot Sabha agitated against the opium policy of the government, picketed from mahal to mahal and village to village. Not only that, during the period, a good number of songs were composed and sung in order to inculcate consciousness among ryots against the evil effect of the opium. Similarly, like opium eradication movement, the Ryot Sabha not only appealed to the rural people to boycott foreign goods, but also strongly inspired them to come into the path of agitation. To add to the colour, the contemporary patriotic songs aroused a different temperament. Likewise, the role of Ryot Sabha in the untouchability movement was also significant. However, anti-untouchability movement did not become a mass movement in Assam. But, under the banner of it, a considerable amount of local constructive work was undertaken successfully through the local Ryot Sabhas. We have also shown in our analysis the distinct methods used to organise the Ryot Sabhas. In fact, the speeches of the Presidents and Secretaries in different Ryot Sabhas, mobilisation of women, contemporary patriotic songs, Bihu songs (Assamese festival songs), Bhawana (Assamese theatrical show), newspaper like Asomiya and others gradually contributed and turned the Ryot Sabha to a single broad based Peasant organisation of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. By and large, the Ryot Sabhas helped in the growth of a solid national consciousness about the alien rule among the rural people in the struggle for freedom. In fact, as Benudhar Sharma (one of the leading freedom fighters of Sibsagar district and a well known litterateur of Assam) rightly pointed out, 'when all the Congress Committees were announced as unlawful by the government, in their place, the Ryot Sabhas acted as the mouth piece and organised the rural people in guise of the Congress'.

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5 We have raised this issue in the Chapter VI.
Turning to our study on *Ryot Sabha* and its relation with the nationalist movement in the Sibsagar District, we have shown that the *ryots* of this district got a first-hand experience of Nationalist Movement through Non Co-Operation Movement. In the meantime, the great depression from 1929-30 brought agricultural prices crashing down to half or less of their their normal level which dealt a severe blow to the impoverished peasants burdened with high taxes and rents. In such a situation, the Civil Disobedience Movement was started. The 11 points charter in this Movement included the demand for 50% reduction in land revenue rates. It was during this Civil Disobedience Movement that two important aspects come to light. The first aspect was that various local *Ryot Sabhas* emerged in the Sibsagar district and secondly, simultaneously, their agitational character against high taxes, untouchability, foreign goods and the anti-liquor programmes. Besides, we have shown in our analysis that during the period of this Movement, a large number of local rural youth had emerged through *Ryot Sabha* to lead the movement in the local areas and these local youth were able to develop strong national consciousness among the rural population. We have also shown the active participation of the local *Ryot Sabhas* under the leadership of local leaders in the Quit India Movement in this District. As a consequence, a large number of *ryot* members in the form of *Santibahini, Mritubchini, Muktibahini* came forward under the local leadership of the *Ryot Sabha* into the path of agitation against the British. Police brutality assumed various forms and terrorism was resorted in all its nakedness. But the brave *ryots* of this district remained undaunted under the local leadership. In many places, the police and the government opened fire which resulted the loss of in several lives. There is also testimony to the fact that large number of peasants were arrested in the Sibsagar District and many of them were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment and many faced death sentences as well. For instance, Kushal Konwar, Kamala Miri did not hesitate to sacrifice their lives for the cause of the country, while Sasodhar Malia Baruah, Konram Saikia, Dina Chaliha, Kirty Kakoty and many others were severely injured. In addition to it, the *ryots* of this district were successful in establishing parallel government for a period of time thus asserting peasant nationalism.

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7 We have elaborated in detail in the Chapter VI.
8 We have discussed in the Chapter VII.
to a considerable extent. Such parallel government was established at Charigaon and Hatigarh Mauza of Jorhat. It is quite clear that definitely, the mobilisation of local Ryot Sabhas, its structure and image under the leadership of Assamese intelligenta and local Congressmen were very strong in the rural level in the Sibsagar District. Consequently, the movement culminated in a series of intense struggles and agitations in this district both in the Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements. Herein lies the significance of the Ryot Sabhas in the Nationalist Movement.

Reviewing developments from the perspective of our empirical data, three major questions arise. What was the differentiation of peasantry in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam? What was the nature of the Ryot Sabha? What was the nature of the leadership of Ryot Sabha?

In the light of our findings, it is seen that the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam were under Ryotwary land revenue system. From the survey of various revenue and settlement reports, it is found that the majority of the rural peasantry of this Valley were the revenue paying peasantry. As a result, they came under the category of those having holdings of 10 to less than 30 *bighas of land. From that point of view, we may come to the point that peasantry of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam was basically the middle peasantry following the model of agrarian structure drawn up by D.N. Dhanagare. In fact, Eric R. Wolf held that, 'the middle peasantry refers to a peasant population which has secure access to land of its own and cultivates it with family labour. Where these middle peasant holdings lie within the power domain of a superior, possession of their own resources provides their holders with the minimal tactical freedom required to challenge their overlord. It is also the middle peasant who is relatively the most vulnerable to economic changes wrought by commercialism'. It is in this context that differentiation of the peasants in the form of Rich, Middle and Poor in this Valley is significant and the large majority of peasantry in the Brahmaputra Valley can be seen as coming basically under the category of the middle peasant.

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9 ibid.
The second major finding was about the nature of the *Ryot Sabhas*. Making an assessment of the demands of the *Ryot Sabha* was one of the way of analysing the nature of *Ryot Sabhas*. The analysis in this work, reveals that the *Ryot Sabhas* raised their demands at four levels i.e. village, thana, district and provincial level. The major demand was for the reduction of land revenue and taxes to 8(eight) *annas* per rupee. We have seen during this period that it was due to continuous movement in the grass root level of the *Ryot Sabhas*, the coalition ministry headed by Gopinath Bordoloi was compelled to reduce land revenue from 50% to 33% on smaller holdings and 30% to 20% on bigger estates. These measures came as great relief to the peasantry as this covered large sections of them. Thus, the most pertinent demand of the *All Asom Ryot Sabha* was fulfilled during the tenure of the Bordoloi Ministry. But, they also raised other demands relating to the socio-economic welfare of *ryots* of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. These demands, however, were raised at the level of the thana, district and provincial. Thus, it not only widened the range of the *Ryot Sabhas*’s activities and functions, but also established a link with the nationalist movement. Thus, in trying to understand the nature of the *Ryot Sabhas*, it became necessary to look into the nature of the leadership as well.

The nature of the leadership therefore became the third major finding of the study. So far as the leadership of *Ryot Sabhas* in Assam is concerned, it was the Assamese Middle Class(intellegentsia) which took the leadership in mobilising the *Ryot Sabhas*. Hence, they attempted in all respects to confine the agitation under moderate politics. With the coming of the influx problem, Assamese Middle Class(intellegentia) brought forward the question of Assamese identity. In fact, Assamese educated sections had tried to draw the attention of the rural masses to the issue of the preservation of Assamese identity in the wake of freedom struggle while at the same time keeping alive peasant interests like reduction of enhanced revenue. As a result of the involvement of the Assamese intelligentia, the local *Ryot Sabhas* undertook initiatives in the local constructive and socio-economic programmes like

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11 See Chapter VI.
boycott of various intoxicants like opium, liquor, cigarettes. The programme also included encouragement of spinning and weaving to make the people self-sufficient and also agitated against untouchability to achieve social harmony and brotherhood in the grass-root level. With the dominance of middle class elite over the Ryot Sabhas, the Ryot Sabhas movement was influenced by regionalism. From our study, we can agree with the argument of Manorama Sharma. She argues, “a middle class is usually seen as an urban phenomenon, but in the case of Assam the middle class was not a rootless urban class, but a class which had roots and links with rural sector of the society. That was why, it was able not only to reflect the grievances of peasants, but also to gain the confidence of peasants who did not regard the middle class leaders as aliens in their rural homeland”.\footnote{Manorama Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony, New Delhi, 1990, p.141.} We have also discussed in the course of this work that on the basis of the evidence and data in our hand it is possible to agree with Udayan Misra that:

“Although the British monetized the economy and Assam became a part of the economic structure of British India, Assamese society continued to nourish its strong semi-tribal and semi-feudal roots. While neither the bourgeoisie nor the landlord class evolved during the period of British rule, yet the ground was laid for the emergence of the Assamese Middle class. This class was not alienated from the land and this gave it a strength and confidence which was quite uncharacteristic of this class. Unlike in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where the peasant-landlord relationship has been marked by intense feudal exploitation, the Assamese peasantry, all the struggle and hardships notwithstanding, has been relatively spared from being at the total mercy of the big landlords. The Assamese middle class’s strong cultural links with the peasantry have given the peasant middle class base of Assamese society a distinct character”.\footnote{Udayan Misra, “Peasant consciousness as reflected in the folk literature of Assam: A study of two Assamese Ballads” in Mrinal Miri(ed), Man & Society, Journal of North-East Studies, Vol-II, November, Shillong, 2005, p.98.}

Hence, the middle Class (intelligentia) not only led the Ryot Sabhas, but was
also able to mobilise the *ryots* of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam into the path of social, economic and political agitation against the British government. It is also important to keep in mind here that although the value premises of the middle class leadership definitely affected the *Ryot Sabha*, yet through the kind of mobilisation that was set on foot, a rural leadership at the village levels did emerge and this leadership gave shape to the more radical aspects of the *Ryot Sabha* movement.

It is, therefore clear that, the emergence and role of *Ryot Sabha* and its agitation, nature of activities, demands, leadership and other related factors were similar to that of other middle peasant led movements. In fact, the *Ryot Sabha* under the leadership of Assamese Middle class (Intelligentia) in the wake of freedom struggle took on the character of peaceful, constitutional, liberal-reformist agitational methods in the form of no-rent, no-tax campaign, *satyagraha*, social boycott etc. From that point of view, the *Ryot Sabha*’s movement more or less upheld the model drawn up by D.N. Dhanagare when he studied the peasant movement in India during the period of 1920-50. Indeed, the *Ryot Sabhas* of the Sibsagar District had played their anti-colonial role keeping the continuity in its strategy of mobilising rural people for demands which may not have been purely peasant demands but which helped in sowing the seeds of peasant nationalism in Assam.

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