INTRODUCTION

The study of the history of mass-resistance against the rule of the British has been given much importance in the recent years which has provided wider scope in re-orienting historiography in a new historical perspective i.e. ‘History from below.’ In the present trend of analysis of Indian National Movement, many have made efforts to deal with the role of the peasantry in the National Movement. They have explored various aspects and themes; but the regional variations of the theme have remained marginalized in many cases. For instance, the peasantry of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam who formed a popular organisation called Ryot Sabha which stood for the interest of the peasants in the pre-independence period, have not received the attention that it should have received.

With the expulsion of the Burmese from the soil of Assam, the English East India Company occupied her in the year 1826 as per the terms of the Yandaboo Treaty. However, from 1833 to 1839, for a brief period of seven years, the Sibsagar district where the Ahom rule had a strong presence was given to Purandar Singha, an Ahom prince on tributary basis in 1833. But as he was a defaulter in 1839, he was deposed and Sibsagar was also annexed.

After establishing a firm footing in Assam, the British administration introduced the Ryotwary system in five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam viz; Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur; while Goalpara had come under the

permanent Zamindari settlement as part of Bengal presidency. The land revenue being one of the important sources of income of the colonial state, the worst suffers were the ryots who being forced to live under subsistence conditions were strangled by huge indebtedness. Hence since 1860, Assam witnessed a series of peasant uprisings in different parts of the province in connection with the enhancement of the land revenue and the other taxes. The Phulaguri Dhewa (1861) of Nagaon district, Patharughator Ran of Mongaldoi, ‘Rangia Revolt’ (1893-94) of Kamrup may be mentioned in this context. The Raij Mel, a militant organisation of the peasantry during this period played a very important part in organising these revolts against British imperialism. Under the local guidance and directions of the Raij Mel, the militant ryots fought against the British government very bravely, even though, they often could not withstand the British forces who were equiped with modern weapons. However, despite the fact that the militant struggles of the ryots were suppressed by the British force of arms, these struggles led by the Raij Mel occupied an important place in the history of early peasant movement of Assam.

From the existing studies on peasant movement in Assam we see that from the beginning of the 20th century, the peasant struggle took a new turn. At this time, the nature and outlook of the peasantry seems to have undergone a change. They gave up the militant and violent path of agitation and began to adopt the constitutional path of agitation. As a result, the Ryot Sabha which began to emerge in the rural areas, marked a turning point in the history of peasant organisation in Assam. The Ryot Sabha oriented its policy, to concentrate on local socio-economic and political problems and ultimately it turned into a registered organised body termed as All Asom Ryot Sabha in 1933 almost one decade before the Quit India movement, and became an important organisation particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Since then, it started directing its objectives to uphold the agrarian issues like reduction of the burden of land revenue, along with the raising of other socio-economic demands and rousing a

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6 *ibid.*, pp. 28-36.
7 *ibid.*, p.28.
8 *ibid.*, pp.36-37.
general consciousness against British imperialism.

For the purpose of this study, the area of undivided Sibsagar district (presently three separate districts of Jorhat, Sibsagar and Golaghat) has been taken as the focal point. This was the centre of the Ahom monarchy which ruled for six hundred years in the valley of the Brahmaputra in particular and Assam in general. The historical importance of this region was that the British, as a result of the treaty of Yandaboo as pointed out earlier, had established their power and administration here, indirectly hit the economy of the area which was the centre of age old *paik* system. As a result, there was a general discontentment both among the Ahom nobility and the peasantry as a whole. Although restorative in nature, many anti-British uprisings had occurred.\(^{11}\) For instance, the first of these attempts was made in 1828 under the leadership of Gomdhar Konwar and Dhanjoy Peali Bargohain at Mariani.\(^{12}\) Besides, the martyrs of 1857 from Assam such as Maniram Dewan, Peoli Baruah, Bhahadur Gaonburha, Formud Ali and the like were all of them from this region.\(^{13}\) But most significant aspect of this region was that All *Asom Ryot Sabha* came into existence in 1933 at Jorhat and the first *Pradhan Sampadak* (General Secretary) of this historic peasant organisation, Krishna Nath Sharma also hailed from this region. From the above, it is clear that the main centre of the activities of the *Ryot Sabha* was the Sibsagar district.

A number of works exist today which have tried to conceptualise peasants and peasant movements. Among those who have attempted to define peasantry, the contribution of Teodor Shanin is worth mentioning. Shanin, in his article “Peasant as a Political factor” in T. Shanin (ed.) *Peasants and Peasant Societies* \(^{14}\) points out that “peasantry consist of small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and labour of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and the fulfillment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power. He also

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\(^{11}\) For an understanding of restorative movements, see Kathleen Gough, “Indian Peasant Uprisings”, in A.R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India* Bombay, 1979, pp.96-99.


\(^{13}\) Hemeswar Dihingia, *Assam’s Struggles against British Rule* New Delhi, 1993, pp.112-121.

provides *Differentia Specifica* of the peasantry*. Similarly, Daniel Thorner, in his “Peasant economy as a category in economic history”\(^{15}\) defines, “A peasant family household as a socio-economic unit which grows crops primarily by the physical efforts of the members of the family”. In another aspect, Virginius Xaxa, in his article, “Some Problems in defining Peasants”\(^{16}\) uses T. Shanin’s definition that on the whole, “Peasant house-holds are basic units of production and social living, peasant as a group with considerable structural similarities and even with an established political self-identity can easily be spotted within socio-economic system as diverse as the Asiatic, feudal and even the blossoming capitalism”.

Eric.R. Wolf, a leading exponent of the middle peasant thesis in his article, “On Peasant Rebellions”\(^{17}\) has stressed the fact that both middle peasants and poor constitute a pivotal grouping for peasant uprisings. Similarly, Frantz Fanon in his article, “The Revolutionary Proletariat of our Times”\(^{18}\) has pointed out, “In the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonization and de-colonization are simply a question of relative strength”.

Mao Tse Tung, in his *Selected Works, Vol. I*\(^{19}\) pointed out that peasantry was the staunchest and numerically the largest ally of the Chinese proletariat. It was the strength of the peasantry that brought about the great Chinese revolution. Likewise, Eric R. Wolf in his famous work *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*,\(^{20}\) emphasised the revolutionary potentiality of the peasantry in the third world countries like Mexico, Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam which precipitated the catastrophe.

In the Indian perspective, the work by D.N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in*

\(^{15}\) Daniel Thorner, “Peasant economy as a category in economic history” in T. Shanin(ed.), *ibid.*, p.205.


India 1920-50 \textsuperscript{21} is particularly important for understanding of the growth of the peasant movement in India during the period of British imperialism. He points out in his work that in the “Crucial phase of the Indian freedom movement [in which] Rightists, Revivalist and Political liberal parties as well as the leftist or self styled revolutionary parties, all wooed the peasantry almost simultaneously”. Katheleen Gough’s article “Indian Peasant Struggles”\textsuperscript{22} in A.R. Desai (ed) Peasant Struggles in India presents a detailed study of peasant movements in India. According to her, “five types of peasant revolts had occurred viz., restorative rebellions to drive out the British and restore earlier rulers and social relation, religious movement for the liberation of a region or ethnic group under new forms of government, social banditry, terrorist vengeance with idea of winning collective justice and mass insurrection for the redressed of particular grievances”. Similarly, Uday Mehta’s “Peasant Movement in India”\textsuperscript{23} has classified the Indian peasant movement in three historical phases where he shows the first phase of the peasant movement (1857-1921) was characterised by the sporadic growth of peasant movement in the absence of proper leadership. But in the second phase (1923-1946), he points out that class conscious peasant organisations led by the people who gave priority to peasant problems in the struggle for national liberation, began to emerge. The third phase of the peasant movement he says was due to the fact that the basic problems of the peasantry or toiling masses remained unsolved. Hamaza Alavi, in his prominent article “Peasant and Revolution”\textsuperscript{24} has divided the peasantry into three categories i.e. rich peasantry, middle peasantry and poor peasantry. He raises the issue of the middle peasant thesis of Eric.R.Wolf in studying the peasant movement in India. Likewise, “Indian Peasants’-Struggles’ and Achievements” \textsuperscript{25} an article by N.G. Ranga, presents in it the active participation of peasants in various period of Indian National movement up to independence. This article draws attention to the role of the peasant in the Non Co-operation Movement, Civil Disobedience movement, Quit India Movement and movements launched in various Indian feudal states known as state’s people’s struggles either to establish constitutional government or abolish their feudal relics perpetuated by the British rule in India in its own interest. Another work Agrarian

\textsuperscript{21} D.N. Dhanagare, Peasant Movements in India 1920-50, New Delhi, 1983, p.6.
\textsuperscript{22} Kathleen Gough, “Indian peasant Struggles” in A.R. Desai (ed.), op. cit., p.94.
\textsuperscript{23} Uday Mehta, “Peasant Movement in India” in A.R. Desai (ed.), op. cit., pp.743-750.
\textsuperscript{25} N.G. Ranga, “Indian Peasants’-Struggles and Achievements”, ibid., pp.66-84.
Relations in India, 1793-1947 by Sunil Sen gives a synoptic view of agrarian social structure, commercial agriculture, rural credit and peasant unrest from permanent settlement to the end of the British Raj. Not only this he emphasizes the role of the peasant movement through Kisan Sabha in determining the directions of agrarian reforms.

A recent approach to the history of the national movement has become associated with Ranajit Guha and the "Subaltern Studies". Guha says that in the Indian context the people are horizontally and vertically situated in the class-cast categories; the subalterns do not constitute homogeneous compositions. The term Subaltern means non-elite segments of a society. Thus the subaltern studies explain how the Indian masses ran upon their own clocks, so far as their movements in the colonial era was concerned, but simultaneously studies also admit that the subaltern actions were not capable of getting transfigured into a full-fledged movement for national liberation. However, this perspective provides us with a new dimension of peasant nationalism. Similarly, Sumit Sarkar, in his Modern India: 1885-1947 and Popular Movement & Middle Class Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspective & Problems of a History from Below explain the possibilities of history from below into a particular subaltern framework which cast light on popular initiative in India. A Peasant Uprising in Bengal, 1783 of Narahari Kaviraj, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle Vol. II by Master Hari Singh, Agrarian India Between the World Wars by Rastislav Ulyanovsky, Social Background of Indian Nationalism of A.R. Desai, The Peasant and the Raj by Eric Stokes, The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859, by Karl Marx & Engels, Peasant Movements in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity by Debal K. Singha Roy, Andrienne Cooper's,

30 Narahari Kaviraj, Peasant Uprising in Bengal, 1783, New Delhi, 1972.
32 Rastislav Ulyanovsky, Agrarian India Between the World Wars, Moscow, 1985.
Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggle in Bengal 1930-1950,³⁷ Peasant in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory³⁸ by Mridula Mukherjee, D.N. Dhanagare's Themes and Perspectives in Indian Sociology³⁹ are particularly important in understanding the emergence of peasant movement in India during the British period.

The Bengali works such as Nilkar Bidroha,⁴⁰ of Shomeswar Prasad Choudhury and Krisak Sabhar Itihas⁴¹ of Abdullah Rasul are useful works which provide an idea about peasant movements particularly in the province of Bengal.

It is evident from the above brief survey of literature that in the works of different well known scholars dealing with the peasantry and peasant movements in India, Assam and the Ryot Sabha in particular find practically no place. But they provide us useful insights in order to develop a conceptual framework to understand the peasant struggles particularly in the light of peasant nationalism.

So far as the issue over the Peasant Movement in Assam is concerned, several eminent historians of North-East India have made valuable contributions. But what has been seriously lacking is a detailed analysis of the Ryot Sabha of undivided Sibsagar district. However, in this field of study, the three volumes of the Political History of Assam,⁴² published by Govt. of Assam throw some light on the issue. The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. (IV-V)⁴³ edited by H.K. Barpujari has pointed out the emergence of the Ryot Sabha in the Brahmaputra Valley. Similarly, K.N. Dutta, in his Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam⁴⁴ has touched on Ryot Sabha's activities in a particular region like Darrang, Chariduar, Nagaon and Kamrup, but without proper analysis. Besides he does not discuss about the functions and activities of the Ryot Sabha of undivided Sibsagar district. Amalendu Guha in his Planter Raj to Swaraj

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³⁹ D.N Dhanagare, Themes and Perspectives in Indian Sociology, New Delhi, 1998.
⁴⁰ Shomeswar Prasad Chaudhury, Nilkar Bidroha, Calcutta, 1972.
⁴⁴ K.N. Dutta, Landmarks of the freedom Struggle in Assam, op.cit.
Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947\footnote{Arnalendu Guha, \textit{op. cit.}} has made a very critical study of the issue, but just mentions the emergence of the Ryot Sabha in Assam. Besides he has not distinctly focused on the role of the Ryot Sabha particularly in the district of Sibsagar. On the other hand, Manorama Sharma's work \textit{Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony}\footnote{Manorama Sharma, \textit{op. cit.}} centres round the middle class hegemony of the Assamese society. She has referred to the Ryot Sabha in her work casually while dealing her main issue on middle class hegemony. She has mentioned how the liberal leadership of the middle class controlled the Ryot Sabha. But she has not done an in-depth discussion of the manifold activities of the Ryot Sabha. Likewise although Subhas Chandra Saha's, "Grass-Roots Nationalism: A study of Mass Resistance in the District of Darrang and Nagaon of Assam 1937-47"\footnote{Subhas Ch. Saha, "Grass-Roots Nationalism: A study of Mass Resistance in the District of Darrang and Nagaon of Assam 1937-47", Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, NEHU, Shillong, 1989.} has explored the emergence to the Ryot Sabha in Assam since 1937-47, yet he has not given special attention of the socio-economic activities launched by the Ryot Sabha. Besides, the thesis does not seem to refer particularly to the activities of the Ryot Sabha of undivided Sibsagar district. A work like \textit{Land Problems and Land Reforms in Assam}\footnote{N.C Dutta, \textit{Land Problems and Land Reforms in Assam} New Delhi, 1968.} by N.C. Dutta provides the structural transformation in the land holding structure during the British period. But the overall study still remains too generalised. Similarly, B.B. Hazarika's \textit{Political life in Assam during the 19th Century}\footnote{B.B. Hazarika, \textit{Political life in Assam during the 19th century} Delhi, 1987.} also mentions regarding Ryot Sabhas. But he has not touched on this matter in any great depth.

Information on the Ryot Sabha is also found in several vernacular works such as Bharator Swadhinata Andolanat Asom,\textsuperscript{53} by Sagar Baruah, Bharator Swadhinata Sangramat Asomor Abadan : Sanghat aru Sahajugitar Itihas\textsuperscript{54} by Lakhinath Tamuli, Swadhinata Sangramat Jorhat\textsuperscript{55} edited by Debeswar Doloi and Tileswar Bordoloi and Harijan Bandhu Mama Krishna Nath Sarmah\textsuperscript{56} edited by Tileswar Bordoloi. However these works have not made an in-depth analysis of the Ryot Sabha particularly of the post 1933 period.

The main objective of our study is to trace the role of Ryot Sabha in Assam with special reference to undivided Sibsagar district 1900-1947 in mobilising the peasants into the path of socio-economic agitation leading to the final growth of political consciousness and the emergence of peasant nationalism in Assam. The study also tries to focus on the nature of Ryot Sabha and examines its interface with the Indian National Congress’s organisations in Assam.

The methodology used for the work is an analysis of the Primary and Secodary data available on the Ryot Sabha. The date has been collected from the various official and non-official sources including tapping of information from persons who were associated with the Ryot Sabha. This has been done in the tradition of Oral history.

In the light of this above background and objective, the study is divided into eight chapters beginning with an Introduction which traces the history of the importance of the Ryot Sabha in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam with special reference to the undivided Sibsagar district in the freedom struggle of India. The chapter second tries to conceptualise peasant, peasant movements in Assam in the light of existing concepts of peasant movements and peasant Nationalism. The chapter third goes to elaborate the emerging agrarian social structure in Assam under British rule. The chapter fourth tries to trace the emergence and growth of peasant organisations in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Sagar Baruah, Bharator Swadhidata Andolonat Asom, Bokakhat, 2000.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Lakhinath Tamuly, Bharator Swadhita Sangramat Asomor Abadan : Sanghat aru Sahajugitar Itihas, Jorhat, 1988.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Debeswar Doloi and Tileswar Bordoloi (eds.), Swadhinata Sangramat Jorhat Jorhat, 1995.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Tileswar Bordoloi (ed.), Harijan Bandhu Mama Krishna Nath Sarmah, Jorhat, 1987.
\end{itemize}
Assam between period 1900-1933. The **chapter fifth** wants to look into the emergence of the *Ryot Sabha* in Sibsagar District. The **chapter sixth** tries to undertake an analysis of the nature, functions and organisation of the *Ryot Sabha*. **chapter seventh** tries to examine the relation of the *Ryot Sabhas* of Sibsagar District with the nationalist movement. The Chapter eighth is the **Epilogue** and this Chapter sums up the findings of the previous chapters.