CHAPTER – II

CONCEPTUALISING PEASANTS, PEASANT MOVEMENTS AND PEASANT NATIONALISM

In recent years there has been a flood of detailed studies particularly on peasant movements and nationalism which have both contributed to and acknowledged the theoretical advances of the last decades and more. Both historians and social scientists not only have raised the voice of the unlettered masses, but have also stressed on the study of ‘history from below’ at more sophisticated and micro levels. In many such studies, the peasantry became a focal theme and they began to explore the role of peasantry and their roots in the course of historical developments. In this context, Teodor Shanin has pointed out:

“This systematic study of peasantry originated in central and Eastern Europe; not surprisingly, because in those societies a rapidly ‘westernizing’ intelligentsia was faced by a larger peasantry – the poorest, most backward and numerically the largest section of their nations. The issue of the peasantry become closely entangled with, and impelled forward by, the ideologies of modernization and by the rediscovery of national self by people suppressed by the Russian, Austrian, German and Turkish Empires. Subsequently, the political leaders, social scientists and scores of amateur ethnographers turned their attention to the peasant”.

Historically, according to Debal K. Singha Roy,

"Peasants have had paradoxical social identities. In social science literature they have been depicted on one hand as reactionary, conservative, awkward, homologous, incomplete part-society and dependent; on the other as revolutionary, progressive, self-conscious, heterogeneous and self-sufficient social categories with the potential for autonomous action".\(^2\)

In the light of the above discourses, this chapter intends to conceptualise peasants, understanding of peasant movements and peasant nationalism on the basis of studies propounded by several social scientists and historians from time to time. This is being done in order to develop a framework of analysis within which the Ryot Sabha as a peasant organisation in Assam can be historically assessed.

Teodor Shanin, one of the leading scholars on peasant studies, defines the peasantry as "small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and labour of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power".\(^3\) He has also focused several important criteria to delimit peasant societies. According to him, "The peasant family farm as the basic unit of multi-dimensional social organization, land as the main means of livelihood; social self sufficiency, coupled with some type of grass-root democracy, specific traditional cultured and the underdog position – the domination of the peasantry by outsiders".\(^4\) Andrew Pearse, attempts to define the peasant, "as belonging to communities the majority of whose member families live by agricultural production on lands to which they have access rights".\(^5\) Similarly, John S. Soul and


\(^4\) ibid., pp.14-15. It is to be noted that T. Shanin has studied differentia Specifica of the peasantry in the wider range viz... The relationship to land, the family farm, the fundamental importance of occupation, the village structure and pre-industrial social entity. But, here only, these are summarised in order to have an conceptual framework of the peasantry.

\(^5\) Andrew Pearse, "Metropolis and Peasant: The Expansion of the Urban Industrial Complex and the Changing Rural Structure," in ibid., p.69.
Roger Woods try to conceptualise the peasantry, “as those whose ultimate security and subsistence lies in their having certain rights in land and in the labour of family members on the land, but who are involved, through rights and obligations, in a wider economic system which includes the participation of non-peasants”.

Daniel Thorner defines a peasant family household as “a socio-economic unit which grows crops primarily by the physical efforts of the members of the family. The principal activity of the peasant households is the cultivation of their own lands, strips or allotments”. Regarding the conceptualisation of the peasantry, Eric R. Wolf says, “The peasantry is the subsistence producers who produce for their own consumption”. According to him, “(a) A peasant’s work is more often done along on his own land, (b) The tyranny of work weighs heavily upon peasants, (c) Control of the land enables him, more often than not, to retreat into subsistence production, (d) Ties of extended kinship and mutual aid within the community may cushion the shocks of dislocation, (e) The interests of peasants’, especially among poor peasants, often cross-cut class alignment and (f) Past exclusion of the peasant from participation in decision-making beyond the bamboo hedge of his village deprives him all too often of the knowledge needed to articulate his interest with appropriate forms of action”. Raymond Firth defines peasantry as “a system of small producers, with a simple technology and equipment, often relying primarily for their subsistence on what they themselves produce”. According to G. M. Foster, “Peasants are communities which, historically speaking, have grown up in a symbiotic, spatial-temporal relationship with the more complex components of their greater society i.e. the pre-industrial market and administrative city”.

From the views of different scholars quoted above it is evident that despite the minor variations in their perceptions, by and large most agree that conceptually, peasants are related with agricultural production and they produce subsistence for their own. The other common feature that can be seen in the above discussion is that the

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9 *ibid.*
10 Sutti Ortiz, “Reflection on the concept of 'Peasant culture' and 'Peasant Cognitive System'” in *ibid.*, p. 322. Ortiz refers to the definition of peasantry provided by Raymond Firth in his article.
11 *ibid.*
peasants are marginal and stratified groups. It is also revealed from the above that the very existence of the peasant as a specific social entity is contingent on the presence of family farm as the basic unit of economy and society as pointed out by Virginius Xaxa.\textsuperscript{12}

On the other hand, social Anthropologists have argued that peasant societies are different from tribes. In this context, A. Beteille defines the tribe as below:

"Like peasants, tribes represent a human group at a certain stage in social evolution. They reflect certain characteristics which are then delineated as society. Thus, it is stated that tribe is a society, the members of which have a common government and share a common territory or linguistic boundary or culture. In other words, tribe is a society with a clear political, linguistic and somewhat vaguely defined cultural boundary".\textsuperscript{13}

He also states "Tribal society may be restricted to what are called segmentary systems. Segmentary systems are not only small in scale but represent a definite structural type which is quite different from the more complex social system in which the peasantry and gentry co-exist".\textsuperscript{14} Expanding the difference between tribe and peasant Beteille further suggests that, "the mode of livelihood need not be central in the definition of tribe. The livelihood pattern of the tribe could be that of food-gatherers, hunters, pastoral group or may even be engaged in agriculture either shifting or settled. What is crucial is the segmental characteristics of living in autonomous, closed uniform, informal and cohesive and self-sufficient societies".\textsuperscript{15}

In contrast to peasants, tribe as perceived above peasants are viewed as part–society with part–culture i.e. segment in a town-centred economy and society. "The so-called peasant societies are at times very complex and highly stratified. They frequently include groups, classes and categories that can not in any acceptable sense be

\textsuperscript{12} Virginius Xaxa, "Some problems in defining peasant" in M.N Kama (ed), Peasant and Peasant Protests in India, New Delhi, 1989, p.30.
\textsuperscript{13} Quoted in ibid, p.22.
\textsuperscript{14} ibid., p.23.
\textsuperscript{15} ibid., p.23.
regarded as peasants". 

Again, in terms of location and occupational boundaries, peasants are considered to be residents of rural areas and cultivate land. But, the question that arises here is about the status of the segments of rural populations which have near landless status, who live in the countryside, but eke out a subsistence as wage labourers or are engaged in a variety of non-agricultural activities. Many Scholars have held the view that such group can also be considered as segments of the peasant because the processes of segmentation of peasant society has been accentuated with the “processes of occupational diversification, technological innovation, penetration of the global market economy, demographic transition, environmental degradation, new state policies on agriculture and rural re-construction, politicization and mobilization of the rural poor for various collective actions, the rapid spread of physical and mass communication networks in the rural areas and so on”. 

This culturally specific, economically marginalized and socially isolated, existence of the peasantry has been identified by many scholars as being the important causes for peasants’ political passivity and backward consciousness. In this context, Karl Marx highlighted the backwardness of the peasant societies. By making a historical analysis of the process of ‘primitive accumulation’, he underlines “the disappearance of serfdom and the emergence of a free peasantry in the late 14th century Europe”. He, however, laid emphasis on the gradual dissolution of the peasantry in the wake of the emergence of new economic and political forces in the 15th century and thereafter. The following observation of Marx on the peasantry of France during the rise of Bonaparte is a very opt quoted view about the peasantry:

“Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of the bringing them into mutual intercourse ...... A smallholding, a peasant and his family; alongside them another smallholding, another peasant and another family. A few score of these make up a village and a few score of villages make up a department. In this way the

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16 Quoted in Debal K. Singha Roy, op. cit., p.16.
17 Quoted in ibid., p.16.
18 ibid., pp.16-17.
19 ibid., p.18.
20 ibid., p.18.
great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes”. 21

During the February revolution of 1848, Marx analysed the various social upheavals in France and that “led him to treat the peasantry as a secondary social class essentially outside the class system of capitalist society. The French peasantry did not support the working class at the time of 1848 revolution”. 22 According to Marx, “the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class”. 23

Although, Marx criticised the peasantry in the French revolution in 1848 as those who did not support the working class, yet the peasants were important because “with growing capitalist penetration of the French countryside, the peasant proprietors were being steadily expropriated and pushed into the ranks of the rural proletariat”. 24 Thus, Marxist observation is that the peasantry as an apolitical non-class entity, complex, multiple; nevertheless, they could be a very useful ally of the industrial working class. 25 Engels also drew the attention to the peasantry. According to him, “although internal stratification and differentiations were seen within the peasant society and he better articulated his position on the role of newly-emerging agrarian classes in the attainment of revolutionary objectives”. 26 To Engels, “the farm labourers’ rather than ‘tenant-farmers’ or ‘peasant-proprietors’ were the most natural ally of the urban-industrial proletariat”. 27

Thus, it is evident from the above that Marx and Engels developed their analysis in terms of ‘economic exploitation’, and ‘class struggle’. Peasantry, in their writings was adverse and backward. Yet it is revealed that with the development of the capitalist system, the peasantry may play the decisive revolutionary role under the leadership of

24 D.N. Dhanagare, op. cit., p.2.
26 D.N.Dhanagare, op.cit., p.2.
27 Quoted in ibid., p.2.
the working class. Hence, Marx rightly pointed out "They (peasantry) can’t represent themselves, they must be represented".  

Subsequently, the classical Marxian formulation of the peasantry was modified by V.I. Lenin. He emphasized the differentiated character of the peasantry in the late 19th and early 20th century in Russia. To him, "the peasants were differentiated not only the unequal patterns of land holding and income, but also by their contact with the market". Hence, Lenin finds varied degree of revolutionary potentiality among these stratified peasantry. According to him,

"The peasantry in Russia starved under the landowners and capitalists. Throughout the long centuries of our history, the peasant never had an opportunity to work for himself; he starved while handling over food grains to the capitalists, for the cities and for exports.......”.

Hence, the idea of a worker-peasant alliance put forwarded by Karl Marx, Lenin transformed into reality in the course of the October Revolution and socialist construction. Lenin wrote, “A necessary condition for the victory of the socialist revolution......... is the close alliance of the working and exploited peasantry with working class- the proletariat - in all the advanced countries”. The success of October Revolution in Russia in 1917 with the active participation and decisive contribution of the peasantry exposed the revolutionary potentiality of the peasants.

With a new dimension of historical explanation, Mao-Tse-Tung drew the attention of the peasantry to their vital role in the Chinese revolution of 1949. Mao was convinced that the Chinese revolution would not succeed without the active support of the peasants. He aired his views in an article ‘Analysis of the classes in the Chinese revolution’.

References:
31 Yuri Sdobnikov (translated), Karl Marx, A Biography, Moscow, 1973, p.655.
society'  which he wrote in March 1926. He began to advocate a vigorous organisation
of the peasantry and a radical land policy-confiscation of land and its distribution among
landless peasants. His experience as head of the peasant movement training institute
and his Thirty Two Days' tour of rural areas to investigate the condition of the peasants
led him to publish his famous report on the peasant movement in Hunan. In the Hunan
report, Mao emphasized repeatedly that both the leadership and main force of the
movement came from the poor peasantry. In fact, when he used the term ‘poor peasant’
in his Hunan report, he redefines it in such a way as to include some middle peasant.
Accordingly, he included under the term ‘poor peasants’ not only the peasantry di­
rectly exploited by the landlords, but also a section of the independent small holders,
the middle peasants.

However, the success of Mao and the Chinese Communist Parties in bringing
about a revolutionary mobilization of the peasantry lay in their understanding of the
respective role of the middle peasants and poor peasants. Hence, after the peasants
associations were established, initially under the middle peasant leadership, the Com­
munist Party cadres encouraged poor peasants to press their demands, both through
their representatives in the peasant associations as well as collectively through dem­
onstrations. Similarly, the creation of the Red Army was a decisive factor in the new
situation. This Red Army did not arise spontaneously out of the peasant movement.
But intimate relations with the peasantry gave it its distinct character which trans­
formed the agrarians upheaval in China into a proletariat revolution.

Frantz Fanon, while studying the peasantry of Algeria pointed out that peasants
in colonial countries have played a revolutionary role in bringing about change in the
socio-political order of the society. According to him, “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 dis­

33 ibid, p.23.
34 ibid, pp.31-33.
35 ibid, p.291, also see, Xiaorong Han, Chinese Discourses on the Peasant, 1900-1949, New Work, 2005,
 pp.7-16.
cover 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”.

Thus, it is evident from the above that collective organisation of the peasantry
had resulted in the dynamic and revolutionary role of peasant in Russia, China and
other third World countries. It also exposed the revolutionary potentiality of the peasan-
try if they were organised to emerge as historical social focus.

Of course, although the peasantry played a decisive role in the aforesaid move-
ments stated above, nevertheless, “some social scientists and historians became more
and more inclined to use ‘class’ model in studying agrarian societies and agrarian move-
ments, and they began to discover the ‘middle peasants’ as the most volatile, revolu-
tionary and dynamic force in the rural social order”.37

Eric R. Wolf, an advocate of the middle peasantry thesis, held that the ‘poor
peasant’ or the landless labourer who depends on landlord for the largest part of his
livelihood, or the totality of it, has no tactical power.38 Poor peasants and landless
laborers, therefore, are unlikely to pursue the course of rebellion.39 Wolf emphasized
that ‘middle peasantry’ “possesses sufficient internal leverage to enter into sustained
rebellion”.40 He stressed that the middle peasantry refers to a “peasant population which
has secure access to land of its own and cultivates it with family labor. 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”.41 It is also the middle peasant who is relatively the most
vulnerable to economic changes wrought by commercialism.42 Hence, according to
Wolf, “it is the middle peasants and poor but ‘free’ peasants that create not only condi-

36 Frantz Fanon, “The Revolutionary Proletariat of our Times”, in T. Shanin (ed), op cit., p.372. For details, see,
Frantz Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, Harmondsworth, 1967, pp.47-101.
37 D.N. Dhanagare, op cit., p.9.
39 Eric R. Wolf, ibid in Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, p.290.
40 ibid., pp. 290-291.
41 ibid., P.291.
42 ibid., p.291.
tions conducive to revolution, but also constitute the pivotal groupings for peasant uprisings". 43

Hamaza Alavi on the other hand has posed another question which has profound theoretical and tactical importance. Alavi has also stressed the problem of viewing the role of various categories of rural classes, particularly the relative role of the middle peasantry, the poor peasantry and the agricultural labour, and raised some fundamental questions with regard to peasant movements in Russia, China and India on the basis of preview on classification of peasantry discussed earlier. According to him,

“The essential distinguishing feature is that the land is owned by landlords who do not undertake cultivation on their own account. Their land is cultivated by landless tenants, mostly sharecroppers who are classed as ‘poor peasants’. The second sector is that of the independent smallholders who own no more land than they cultivate themselves and enough of it to make them self-sufficient. They do not exploit the labor or others; nor is their labor exploited by others. They are the ‘middle peasants’. The third sector is that of the capitalist farmers, also described as rich farmers, who own substantial amounts of land and whose farming is primarily based on the exploitation of wage labor, although they may participate in farm themselves”.

However, Alavi made a critical analysis of the role of peasantry in the Russian and Chinese revolutions in his writings; but in the context of India, his observation was quite different. According to him, “In India, inter-imperialist rivalry had long ended with the supremacy of the British. No warlords or private armies roamed the Indian countryside. The rising nationalist movement, with its modest constitutional aims, did

43 ibid., p.292. Wolf’s assertion are two interrelated claims, “First, that middle peasant not only lead, initiate or direct but also have revolutionary potential; therefore, there are the principal Participants in peasant struggles or revolts; and second, that peasant rebellions and uprisings can be more effective when launched jointly by the middle and certain type of poor peasants i.e. some kind of an alliance is a pre-condition for an effective or sustained rebellion” (D.N. Dhanagare, Peasant Movements in India 1920-50, op.cit., p.11).
not seek to arm itself as Sun-Yat-Sen’s Kuomintang had done. Until the 1920s the nationalist movement stood isolated from the potent forces of the peasantry, although there had been much peasant unrest and occasional uprisings. His writing mentioned above focused on the issue of the coming of Gandhi into the political scene and the mobilisation of the peasantry for the National Congress. Alavi too pointed out that “Gandhi’s accent on the peasantry in his political language did, however, lead many middle class intellectuals to ‘go to the people’, very much in the spirit of Russian populism”. He also cited the remark of Nehru, “He (Gandhi) sent us to the villages and the countryside hummed with the activity of innumerable messengers of a new gospel of action. The peasant was shaken up and he began to emerge from his quiescent shell. The effect on us was different, but equally far reaching, for we saw for the first time, as it were, the village …….. we learnt”. Alavi too high-lighted the organisation of agricultural labourers and formation of Kisan Sabha under the leadership of the Communists.

Teodor Shanin points out that “in history the peasantry many times had acted politically as a class-like social entity”. “Their common interests have driven the peasants into political conflicts also with large capitalist land-owners, with various groups of towns men and with the modern state”. In a modern society, the character of peasants as a social entity determines the patterns of the peasants’ political actions and influence. Shanin identified the three main types of actions: “Independent class action (as formulated in the Marxian class analysis), guided political action (in which the peasantry is moved by an external unifying power elite) and fully autonomous and amorphous political action in the form of ‘local riots’ and passive resistance of the peasants”.

Here, D.N. Dhanagare is of the opinion that “Shanin neither glorifies nor undermines the revolutionary potentialities of the peasantry in general; tacitly though, he stressed that a leadership drawn from the urban intelligentsia-mainly of rural origin and with a powerful-middle range cadre- had directed the rank and file in China”.

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46 ibid. p.697.
49 ibid.
50 ibid. pp.256-58.
51 D.N. Dhanagare, op cit., pp.9-10.
From this point of view, although Shanin distinctly did not study or mention the middle peasantry, nevertheless, it can be accepted from his writings that Shanin's approach too was nearer to 'Middle peasantry'.

D.N. Dhanagare develops an analytical approach that helped in understanding the evolutions of the peasant struggles in India as a socio-political phenomenon in his thesis. He not only studies, but also examines some of the important issues raised by various thinkers with regard to the role of various classes particularly the role of rich farmers and middle peasantry as the crucial axis of peasant struggles. Obviously, Dhanagare followed the model of middle peasantry thesis propounded by Eric R. Wolf in studying the Indian peasant movement. However, according to him, "the social composition of these agrarian classes in terms of specific status groups like castes, religious, ethnic groups etc., is far too complex in different regions of India to reduce into any simplistic formulae". Therefore, so far as the Indian National Movement was concerned, he rightly pointed out that in the crucial phase of the Indian freedom Movement in which Rightist, Revivalist and Politically Liberal Reformist parties as well as the Leftist, or self-styled revolutionary parties, all wooed the peasantry almost simultaneously. In other words, Dhanagare further explains that the strength of the national movement became stronger with the involvement of new classes particularly, the workers, peasants and radical nationalist middle classes after Gandhi arrived on the scene in 1915. He states that it was only Gandhi who first saw the problem of Indian Nationalism and social reconstruction in a non-elitist perspective and realised that no anti-imperialist struggle could possibly succeed in India without the involvement of millions of village folk and peasants whom the Congress had hitherto ignored. In this context, Dhanagare clearly states that the whole range of peasant movement and uprising in India took on the character of peaceful and constitutional agitation as 'no-tax' campaign, 'satyagraha', 'social boycott' etc., initiated by Gandhi. Dhanagare also outlines the emergence of the Kisan Sabha, class-based peasant parties or

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52 ibid, pp.17-18.
53 ibid, p.6.
54 ibid, p.47.
organizations in local and regional basis in India. During the period of 1920-1950, according to Dhanagare, "the term 'Peasant Movement' and 'Agrarian Movement' as blanket terms refer to all kinds of collective attempts of different strata of the peasantry either to change the system which, they felt, was exploitative, or to seek redress for particular grievances without necessarily aiming at overthrowing the system. The two terms used interchangeably thus refer to all kinds of resistance movements, violent or non-violent, organized or spasmodic, pre-political or political".55

It is evident from the above analysis that Eric R. Wolf, Hamaza Alavi and Teodor Shanin have not only examined the problem of viewing the role of various categories of rural classes, but also stressed particularly on the role of the 'middle peasantry'. It is also testified from their analysis that the role of 'Middle Peasantry' is the most indispensable and significant factor for the peasant movements and revolutions. It is pertinent to mention here that Eric R. Wolf's survey of the 20th century peasant wars in six countries – Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba-indicates that the fusion between the intellectuals and the peasants occurred in all six cases.56 However, the idea of middle peasantry thesis developed by Alavi and Eric R. Wolf was applied by D.N. Dhanagare in the context of study of the role of peasantry in India during the period of 1920-50. All these studies, provide significant insights in any attempts to develop a conceptual framework to understand the peasant movements in India particularly in the light peasant nationalism.

In Indian perspective, the concept and manifestation of peasant movement and Nationalism emerged and developed under the colonial rule and economy. With the coming of the British in India and the introduction of new agrarian and Industrial policy, the stratification process accelerated rapidly.57 The introduction of land settlements viz., Zamindary, Mahalwari and Ryotwary system, finally brought the settlement of proprietary rights of various groups of feudal landlords, on the basis of private land ownership.58 The result was the homogeneity of Indian society (in respect of self

55 ibid, p.19.
56 Eric R. Wolf, Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, op cit., p.289.
sufficient village economy) started to be strangled and consequently led to the formation of heterogeneous classified society. The land revenue system introduced by the British thus proved to be one of the main factors which led to the impoverishment and indebtedness of the agricultural population. In this context, Bipan Chandra and others remark that, “Whatever the name of the system, it was the peasant cultivators who suffered. They were forced to pay very high rents and for all practical purposes functioned as tenant-at-will. They were compelled to pay many illegal dues and cesses and were often required to perform forced labour or beggar”. Similar view is also expressed by Rostislav Ulyanovsky. He opines that the entire history of British colonial rule in India was one of robbery of the peasantry, epidemics and chronic famines. Consequently, throughout the 19th century, India witnessed numerous peasant uprisings all over. The Wahabi Farazi Rebels of Bengal in 1831, Santal uprisings of 1855-56, Indigo revolt of 1859-60, Deccan riots of 1875, Moplah revolt of Malabar in 1871-96, Munda uprisings led by Birsha Bhagawan of 1895-1900 may be mentioned in this context. However, these uprisings though started initially against the feudal landlord’s exploitation; soon turned against the Colonial British government. Similar peasant movements had also occurred in places in Assam viz., Phulaguri, Patharughat, Phulaguri, Patharughat,

59 “India had been conquered formerly many times. But these conquests had led to a change in political regimes only. So far as the basic economic structure of India was concerned, these conquest did not affect it. With the self-sufficient village based on communal possession of land, unity of village industry and agriculture, the village as the unit of revenue assessment and finally village production almost exclusively for village use, this economic structure of pre-British India triumphantly survived, in its main outlines, for centuries all foreign invasions, military convulsions……… All these events, however spectacular and cataclysmic, affected only the social, political or religio-ideological superstructure of Indian society but not its economic base. The self-sufficient village, in which practically the entire population lived, successfully survived the most violent political storms and military holocausts” (A.R. Desai, op. cit., p.32). From the above, the concept homogeneity can be developed. On the other hand, the British through their new-economic policy annihilated the self-sufficient village communities and economic misery. The former destructed through the capital transformation of the Indian economy. As a result, control over land was passing into the hands of non-agriculturists that included landlords, money-lenders, traders and landed gentry. Land had become a commodity and a land market rapidly grew up throughout this country. The image of the village changed as a result of land transfer (A.R. Desai, ibid., p.44, Sunil Sen, op. cit., p.6). That is why, it may be denoted as the heterogeneous classified society.

60 Bipan Chandra and Others, Freedom Struggle, New Delhi, 1972, p.17.
Rangia, Lachima under the auspices of the Raij-Mel. Subsequently, with the rise of national struggle under the leadership of national parties, all these movements, led by the mass organization merged into a broad base united mass movement against the imperialist rule. A.R. Desai has rightly pointed out,

"The nationalist movement grew and gathered strength as new classes, offsprings of the new economic structure and living under the same state regime, finding their free and full development thwarted under the extant social and political conditions, increasingly organized themselves on a national scale and started various movements to remove the obstacles impeding their growth".

Thus, in the context of studying peasant movements in India in the 19th and 20th centuries it is not only relevant to understand that peasants are not a homogeneous group, but also necessary to examine these movements against the backdrop of both colonial rule and the Nationalist movement. Combining both these aspects D.N. Dharagare had tried to establish the point that the middle peasant thesis of Hamaza Alavi and Eric R Wolf was the most relevant needed for analysis of peasant movements in India. In order to test this model for a historical analysis of the Ryot Sabha in Assam, it is necessary to understand the emergence, rise and development of peasant nationalism in Assam. The history of the Ryot Sabha and peasant movements in Assam also needs to be understood in the light of the works of scholars dealing with various categories of peasant struggles in different parts of the country launched by various sections of the agrarian population through different-periods of British rule from various perspectives. Regarding the question of peasantry, Kathleen Gough raises certain characteristics of Indian peasant struggles. While defining the scope of her study, she asked three questions... 

63 For details, see amongst others, K.N. Dutta, Landmarks of the freedom Struggle in Assam, Guwahati, 1998; A. Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj; Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, New Delhi, 1977; Manorama Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle class Hegemery, New Delhi, 1990. These books have reflected about the peasant Movements in Assam in wider range during the period of 1861-1900.

64 A.R. Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, op. cit., pp.432-433.
(2) were the class struggles against those who exacted surplus from peasants and (3) did they undertake armed struggle on their own or were they provoked by some external forces in the course of their career". She challenges those scholars who underestimate the scope and significant of Indian peasant uprisings. She also focused her attention on criticizing the opinion of Barrington Moore, Jr. who attributed the alleged weakness of Indian peasant movements to the caste system with its hierarchical divisions among villagers and to the strength of bourgeois leadership against the landlords and the British and the pacifying influence of Gandhi on the peasantry. With a refreshing study of 77 peasants revolts in different part of India, she endeavours to classify peasant revolts during the British period into five types of actions in terms of goals, ideology and methods of organization. According to her, restorative rebellion was related to drive out the British and restore earlier rulers and social relations. In this context, she writes, "between 1765 and 1857 a large proportion of revolts were led by Hindu or Muslims petty rulers, former revenue agents under Mughuls, tribal chiefs in hill regions and local landed military officers in South India". "They were supported by masses of peasants and sometimes by former soldiers. The revolts were either against the conquest itself or imposition of heavy revenues on existing nobles. The goals of these revolts were complete annihilation or expulsion of British and reversion to the previous government and agrarian relation. Similarly, religious movements of the peasantry, according to her, were related to the liberation of a region or ethnic group under new forms of government. Gough also explains that, social banditry is also a form of peasant protest. In the Indian context, social bandits formed only a small proportion of the large numbers of peasants, tribesman, disinherited landlords and disbanded soldiers who turned to a part-time or full-time banditry in the 18th and 19th centuries when they were deprived of their livelihood, evicted from their homelands, or squeezed in their tribal territories. The terrorist vengeance with the ideas of

66 ibid., p.86.
67 ibid., p.96.
68 ibid., p.96.
69 ibid., p.104.
winning collective justice and mass insurrections for the redressal of particular grievance were other elements of peasant movement studies by Kathleen Gough. She also points out that peasant movements led by Communists differed in many respects from peasant struggles, which fought under the leadership of Communist parties and groups and how they started and stopped according to national or even international changes in party line.

Uday Mehta’s article is a valuable addition to the scholarship on the development and articulation of peasant movement in colonial and post colonial India. He argued that historically the peasant movement can be broadly grouped into three distinct phases viz., the initial phase (1857-1921), the second phase (1923-1946) and post independence phase. He states that the first phase was characterized by sporadic growth of peasant movements in the absence of proper leadership, the second was marked by emergence of the class conscious peasant organization and the third era witnessed the uninterrupted continuity of the agrarian movements due to the failure of the ruling party to resolve any of the basic problem of the toiling masses in rural India. Similarly, the articles “Indian Peasants’ Struggles and Achievements” by Ranga is important. What is important about his article is that Ranga as an active participant of peasant movements during various stages of the Indian National Movement till the independence, provides a very useful account of peasant movements which took place in India. Ranga not only focused on, “the prominent role of peasant struggle in Non Co-Operation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement and the movement launched in various Indian feudal states known as State’s People’s Struggles, either to establish constitutional governments or abolish their feudal relics perpetuated by British rule in India in its own interest, but he also advocated that peasant revolutionaries were able to construct the whole edifice of separate panchayats for political, administrative and judicial purposes and make them all work efficiently and in harmony”. Not only that, the article emphasizes the importance of peaceful

71N.G. Ranga “Indian Peasants’ Struggles and Achievements”, in ibid., p.66.
72ibid., p.83.
struggles, satyagrahas, marches, conferences, meeting, processions, demonstrations, various educational and training programmes in contributing to the growth of peasant movements.

From the above arguments, it is therefore evident that the studies of the peasant struggle of pre-independent India throw considerable light on the nature and character of the Indian peasantry. There are still others historians and sociologists who have studied and contributed to the Indian peasant historiography. In a series of articles, L. Natarajan for instance, focused on the capacities and techniques of struggles used by the tribal people and the brutal methods used by the rulers to suppress them ruthlessly. He outlined in his articles the Santhal insurrection, the Bengal Indigo cultivators strike, the peasant uprising in Pabna and Bogra, the Maratha uprising and Mophla revolts as true peasant backed movements. The withdrawal of the Non Co-operation Movement by Mahatma Gandhi after Chauri-Chaura incident, created tremendous discontent among the intelligentsia, as well among sections of the peasants and the working class, leading to the emergence of various political currents and modes of struggles. In this context Sukhabir Choudhary has rightly observed, “from now onwards, representatives of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie realized the necessity of approaching the peasantry, agitating among them, taking up specific issues for struggles, either to redress their grievances, build up an organization training cadre to represent the various sections of the peasantry”. Likewise, the outlook of Binay Bhushan Chaudhury regarding the peasant movement particularly in Bengal and Bihar during the period 1919-39 is important. He begins with a criticism of the entire scholarly tradition which underestimates and ignores the extent of peasant movement in India, by pointing out how peasant movement have been a constant feature throughout British rule from its inception. According to him, “the Nationalist movement led by Congress had in its early phase an elaborate agrarian programme, but, could not provide an appropriate philosophy for a broad based peasant movement. Some congressmen occasionally

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73 See, L. Natarajan, “The Santhal Insurgence 1855-56”; “Indigo cultivators Strike 1860”; “Maratha Uprising 1875”; in A.R. Desai (ed), _op.cit_ and also see, Conrad Wood, _The Moplah Rebellion and its Genesis_, New Delhi, 1987. It is interesting to note that the Moplah Rebellion of 1921-22 was primarily a peasant movement particularly of the Muslim community known as the Moplah or Moppillas.


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took part in peasant struggles and accidentally involved in the peasant movement". Interestingly, Chaudhury states in his articles about the emergence of *Kisan Sabha* particularly in Bihar and Bengal under the influence of left wing ideologies. In the same way, Sunil Sen too provided a new prospective to peasant studies. His study of rent-paying tenants, share croppers and agricultural labourers who revolted against the outmoded feudal structure, gives stagewise description of the peasant struggles. Sen has attempted a more comprehensive understanding of the various phase of peasant unrest of colonial India by analysing various primary materials with the help of the tools of historical materialism. To him, "the emergence of the Indian *Kisan Sabha* in 1936 marked the beginning of a new phase in the peasant movement and this *Sabha* adopted maximum and minimum programmes and did not fail to emphasize the need of an anti-imperialist revolution. In the maximum programme there was the demand for abolition of *Zamindary* and vesting of land in the tillers. The minimum demands included moratorium on debts, abolition of land revenue and rent from uneconomic holdings, reduction of revenue and rent, licensing of moneylenders, minimum wages for agricultural workers, fair price for sugarcane and commercial crops and irrigation facilities. Narahari Kaviraj who made a Marxist critique of the peasant uprising in Bengal in 1783, holds that the peasant uprising delivered the heaviest blow in India which were anti-colonial and anti-feudal in characters.

Expanding on the parameters of popular initiative, Sumit Sarkar provides a new insight into popular initiative and middle class response in the pre-Gandhian and Gandhian phases of modern Indian nationalism. Sarkar sketches the richly documented events in order to throw light on the Gandhian politics of the peasants. He explains, "irrespective of the precise social composition of the movement in a particular area, the general thrust, ideology and style of Gandhian nationalism was geared objectively to the interest of landholding intermediate-caste peasant proprietors or tenants, and not in the subordinate stratum of tribal or low caste agricultural labourers.

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sharecroppers and poorest peasants. Harijan upliftment, however sincere, was confined in the main to humanitarian work and symbolic concessions like temple entry or use of wells. 79 On the other hand, Sarkar also critically observed that “the leftists, of course, did not share Gandhi’s inhibitions about the class war. But the peasants movement led by them could not entirely escape the ambiguities imposed by regional differences, very complex agrarian relations, and above all, the unusually sharp caste-rooted distinction between landholding peasants and landless characteristic of the Indian rural scene”. 80 In this aspect, he outlined that, “Kisan Sabhas of the 1930s and early ’40s with their anti-big Zaminder thrust and focus on issues like reduction in revenue, canal rates and debts and remunerative prices were primary organizations of peasants with some, at times considerable, land, and not of agricultural labourers. 81 However, he noticed the spontaneous action of peasantry of Eastern U.P. and Bihar in August, 1942 where they marched in their thousands to police stations, fired with the belief that white rule had collapsed. In the same way, the extensive sharecropping and sharecroppers’ struggles in Bengal during 1930-50 is found in the scholarly work of Adrienne Cooper. 82 She closely examined the unprecedented role of sharecroppers in wider political and peasant struggles as well as struggles raising their own specific demands. To her, the formation of Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (B.P.K.S.) provided an organised political forum for peasant protest, and potential vehicle for sharecroppers’ discontent. 83 Mridula Mukherjee has recently made important contribution to the peasant historiography. She attempts to make an intervention in the theoretical debates regarding the role of peasants in revolutionary transformations in the modern world. It does so from the vantage-point of the Indian anti-colonial national revolution—a revolution based on a strategy of non-violent action in which the central role was assigned to peasants. 84 In other words, “her book subjects to critical scrutiny a wide range of theoretical models used for analyzing peasant consciousness and behaviour. Similarly, it is particularly critical of the framework offered by Subaltern

79 ibid., p.66.
80 ibid., p.68.
81 ibid., p.68.
83 ibid., p.114.
84 Mridula Mukherjee, Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory, New Delhi, 2004. p.19
Studies, which it subjects to a thorough and elaborate critique". 85 She too argued, “the concrete political practice of Indian peasants, which it documents in details, does not match Subaltern theory, especially the notions of autonomous consciousness, Subaltern/elite antagonism, privileging of violent resistance as essentially Subaltern, etc. While appreciating many of its profound insights, it also questions certain elements of the Marxist understanding of the peasantry, especially with reference to the relationship between class and nation". 86

Another scholar who was moved by the Naxalite upsurge to re-examine the history of peasant resistance in 19th century India was Ranajit Guha. His Subaltern Studies have brought about a major shift in recent years in the historiography of Indian National Movement. Categorically speaking, elitist historiography was to represent Indian Nationalism as primarily an idealist venture in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom. 87 But it is rightly observed that Subaltern Studies in India means an Indian history of peasant struggle as a kind of history which picks up the peculiar mode of perceiving and conceiving a social phenomenon, their peculiar life style, their way of dealing with socio-economic and political questions. 88 David Hardiman, while analysing the importance of the Subaltern Studies clearly states, “Ranajit Guha has tackled the problem of classification of peasant movements in a more sophisticated manner and advanced two main arguments to the peasant uprisings in the 19th century India. These, he examined under a number of heads such as ‘negation’, ‘ambiguity’, ‘solidarity’, ‘transmission’ and ‘territoriality’. The other argument was that peasant consciousness was revealed most clearly in revolt”. 89

It is revealed that since in the Indian context, the people are horizontally and vertically situated in the class-caste categories, the Subalterns do not constitute a homogenous composition. In fact, Guha’s main objectives in studying insurrections of

85 ibid., p.19.
86 ibid., p.19.
89 David Hardiman(ed), Peasant Resistance in India 1854-1914, Bombay, 1993, p.6. Also see, for detail, Ranajit Guha(ed), Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, New Delhi, 1983.
the colonial period is to show how patterns of subordination and insubordination have run on parallel tracks throughout the colonial history of India, and how affirmation of domination or resistance or insurgency and counter-insurgency have reinforced each other. However, the theoretical roots of the Subaltern Studies developed by Ranajit Guha, are enlarged by Shahid Amin, Gyan Pandey, Partha Chatterjee, David Arnold, Dipesh Chakraborty, Sumit Sarkar and others.

It is evident from the above analysis that peasant movement and peasant Nationalism in India were thus articulated and developed through different stages. The nature of the movement at the grass-roots level was militant, anti-imperialist and anti-feudal. In contrast to it, the movements at the national level was surprisingly moderate. It was neither anti-feudal nor anti-capitalist. The national leadership particularly the dominant section of it, adopted the strategy of 'pressures-compromise – pressure'.

Thus, Ryot Sabha in Assam, as we have shown in our introduction, was the most important popular peasant based organisation including all categories of peasantry that had emerged in the pre-independence period particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. Noteworthy that, the penetration of the British and their new economic policy not only seriously hit the Assamese agrarian peasantry, but also created strong resentment, as elsewhere in India. As a result, we have indicated earlier that since 1860s, there occurred many peasant uprisings in the Brahmaputra valley in connections with the enhancement of land revenue in the places of Phulaguri at Nagaon, Mangaldoi, Lasima and Rangia. The Raij-Mel, a militant organisation of the peasantry during this period, played a very important part in organising those aforesaid revolts against the Colonial British Government. But, with the beginning of the 20th century, peasant struggle took a new turn. At this time, the nature and outlook of the peasantry of the Brahmaputra valley underwent a great change. According to many Scholars, they gave

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91 See Ranajit Guha(ed), *Subaltern Studies, Vol-1-IX*, New Delhi, 1992-1994. In these books, "the practitioners of the Subaltern model have developed the studies that the mobilization in the domain of elite politics is achieved vertically, in that of Subaltern politics, is achieved horizontally. Besides, they have started an important debate on the precise linkage between the peasantry and the Indian National Congress and Gandhi in particular" (D.N. Dhanagare, *Themes and Perspectives in Indian Sociology*, op.cit., pp.130-132).
up the militant and violent path of agitation and began to adopt what can be termed as a constitutional path of agitation based on ideas of liberal democracy. The *Raij-mels* began to lose their grip over the peasantry and its place was occupied by the *Ryot Sabha*, a popular organisation of the peasantry of the Brahmaputra Valley in particular and Assam in general. The available works on the Nationalist Movement in Assam show that the *Ryot Sabha* not only played remarkable role in the movements of Civil disobedience and Quit India Movement for the political emancipation, but also boasted socio-economic as well as constructive activities in the grass-root levels during the period of our study. The model of D.N. Dhanagare can be tested for our analysis of *Ryot Sabha* because Dhanagare developed ‘Middle Peasantry’ thesis in all its aspect not only in the context of peasant uprisings and rebellion, but also in that of the whole range of peasant movements in India which took on the character of peaceful and constitutional agitation such as, no-rent, no-tax campaign, Satyagraha, social boycott etc. Dhanagare not only raises certain key questions in this thesis, but also analyses these questions in order to get his answer. Among them, “The relation between the traditional social structure and land control and the evolution of agrarian relations in the region where a peasant movement develops, commercialization of agriculture and its social consequences in the terms of the changes in the composition of agrarian classes and the political behaviour, the role of ideology, and nature of organization and leadership of peasant movements”.

The above questions raised by D.N. Dhanagare seem also to be very pertinent in the context of the *Ryot Sabha* in Assam, and the ‘Middle Peasantry’ thesis developed by him in the larger context of India could be a useful starting point for undertaking a study of the agitation, nature of activities, demands and leadership aspects of the *Ryot Sabha*. For any analysis of the nature of peasant differentiation in a

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93 Manorama Sharma, *op. cit.*; M.N. Karna, *Agrarian Structure and Land Reforms in Assam*, New Delhi, 2004. These Scholars in their writings have tried to focus the historical background of the emergence of the *Ryot Sabhas* in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.


society an examination of the agrarian social structure is a must. The study of the Ryot Sabha in Assam therefore begins with an examination of the agrarian social structure in Assam under British rule.