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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ELITE BEHIND THE UNREST OF 1893-94 OF ASSAM: A RETROSPECTIVE DISCOURSE

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#### Abstract

It is a controversial issue with regard to the role of the elite sections in the unrest of 1893-94 of Assam. Some even say that the concept of elite was at an embryonic stage at that time. Despite having differences among the researchers and the scholars, most of them agree with that the elite took the leading role in moving the movement towards right direction. Albeit, the elites were varied with nature and character and also with their interest; notwithstanding that, some sections took the leading role in the unrest of 1893-94. It is an honest strives to address something about their role in the unrest through this paper.

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#### Introduction:-

Redundant to state that the subaltern class i.e. the peasants of Colonial Assam resorted to the path of violence against the Colonial Government against their repressive economic exploitation and appropriation in the form of unabated rate of land revenue after the great upheaval of 1857. Unrest at Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat of erstwhile Kamrup and Darrang bear the clear testimony to that. These upheavals were the popular resistance against the East-India Company's regime and they finally, assumed the mass character. Notwithstanding that, the role of the elite alias the middle classes in that 1893-94's upheavals are still questionable. Surprisingly, the middle class of Assam neither supported nor participated in the upheavals of 1893-94 spontaneously and in other words, openly. But some sections of them stretched-out their helping hands to the whites. Most of them found less time to think of the distress and agonies of the poor peasants. They wore colorful spectacles and saw all things what their spectacles reflected. Wealth and prosperity flourished their lives and guessed same prosperity in the lives of their poor peasants also. They even never felt hesitation to pass-out comments that the peasants of Assam were happy and peaceful under the British. Again some of the middle class truly and sincerely supported the peasants in their uprisings and some others surprisingly maintained neutrality and indifference. Still, there were others who maintained dubious alias double-standard role in the uprisings. But all sections, no doubt, had their self vested interest. Abolition of khat system lowered the prestige and standard of living of the higher classes. They had to work hand to hand with those who had previously been their subordinates. The khats which they once held rent free were now assessed. Abolition of slavery in 1843 made their position ordinary ryots alike. They had to lose their former privileges and had to sell or mortgage their belongings to meet the rising demand of the government. They held the government responsible for their pitiable condition and therefore, extended support to the peasants in their revolts against the administration. The middle class alias the elite who were kicked-out of the employment by the British, they also joined in the revolts against the British. Moreover, the government encouraged tea cultivation and formulated certain favorable rules in favor of the European planters. The local planters expressed their disdain and concern against these rules as such rules were against their interest. So, they also gave their whole hearted support to the peasants.

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When some of the middle classes exploited and harassed the peasants for the interest of their own and government, some even in a rare instance raised their voices for the betterment of the poor peasants.

Madhab Chandra Bordoloi, the Extra-Assistant Commissioner and Sub-Divisional Officer of Barpeta were the prime mover of the governmental oppression in and around Sarthebari, Bajali and Lachima at the time of the peasant movement of 1893-94. He inflicted indescribable atrocities on the peasants of those regions. Rebel peasants were fastened with the ploughs and dragged like animals. Hem Chandra Goswami even presided over the atrocities and torture on the peasants of Boko and Chaygaon.

Bhabani Chandra Bhattacharjee was the tahsildar of Patharughat during the time of the revolt of 1893-94 and was instrumental in organizing governmental offensive against the peasantry in and around his tahsil.

Radhanath Barua held the tahsils of Rangia and Tamulpur and became the symbol of terror to the people in both the tahsils. He earned bad name for the oppressions that he had inflicted on the peasants.

Ganga Gobinda Phukan and Gobinda Bezbarua criticized the revenue hike through 'Assam Association', 'Land and Jungles Rule' and also through 'Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha'. Though they protested it for the interest of the peasants but did not stretch-out their helping hand against the government.

A. D. Phukan was more concerned of the agriculture and peasants of Assam. He submitted memorandum to A. J. M. Mills in 1853 where he detailed the drawbacks of the prevailing system of agriculture and appealed to the government to improve the agriculture system for the amelioration of the peasants of Assam. He expressed his sorrow and concern for not adopting slightest step for improving agricultural prospect by the government. He thought some irrigation and embankment projects for Assam like some of the contemporary states of India and suggested to the government for its implementation but no response evoked from them Phukan stated in his memorandum to Mills on the 24<sup>th</sup> July, 1853 an enhancement of the rates under the present circumstances of the province without any marked improvement in agriculture and commerce, would be overburdened to the people with taxes which they could but ill ..... to bear.

J. N. Barua was also more concerned of the peasants and criticized the long term leases of land and favored the annual lease. The settlement policy of the government to cut down the annual lease facilities was looked upon by him as 'deprivation of their rights'. He did not agree with the repeated assertion of the government about the happiness and improved condition of the peasantry of Assam. He said that the ryots were in no way better off. Kefayat Ullah, a Sadar Munsiff of Guwahati, was more concerned of the benefits of the Assamese cultivators. He even wrote a book entitled 'Krishi Darpan' in 1853 for the cultivators of Assam.

Maniram Dewan was also concerned of some of the evils of Assam. Amongst the evils, he referred to the government was the introduction of government opium, the destruction of indigenous artisans, the neglect of the study of the Satras, appointment of Marwaris and Bengalees as maujadars. Had the government heard of Maniram, probably the revolts of 1861 and 1893-94 could have been averted.

The peasants' issue entered even in the Imperial Legislature also. Dr. R. B. Ghose put as many as eight questions on the 'Assam riots' at the meeting of the Imperial Legislature on the 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1897. But government's reply was far from satisfactory. The repressive measures of the government to suppress the popular movement tarnished their fair name.

There were some middle class who did not view with any favor for the outbreak of the peasant movement. Nidhi Libai Farowel, an Assamese convert to Christianity and a middle class man, spoke ill of the Phulaguri revolt of 1861. In his article captioned 'Nagaya Drohi Lokar Charitra Barnan' published in Orunodai, he ridiculed leaders and peasants who organized and led the movement against the government and said-'these were fools and self seekers'. Gunabhiram Barua instead of criticizing the revenue hike in 1868 supported it. He wrote the happenings at Phulaguri of 1861 in 1875 and said- 'the punishment meted-out to the people was commensurate with their crimes and as per law was justified.

Balinarayan Bora was not at all concerned of the peasants and termed the rayat sabha in his article in 'Mau'- 'if one fox howls, others in the group follow suit.'

In 1886, the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha deplored the introduction of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations for not consulting the people. For the improvement and betterment of the ryots, the sabha favored the long term lease as the short term leases had failed to improve the condition of the ryots. The sabha also favored gradual abolition of poppy cultivation. According to the sabha, if poppy cultivation immediately stopped, then government would increase revenue on other land and its affect would ultimately fall on the peasants.

Press highlighted the grievances of the peasants of Assam before the Indian public. A middle class gentleman from Guwahati wrote a letter entitled 'Distress in Assam' in 'Samachar Darpan' and the letter mentioned that the people had to pay more revenue in Colonial period than the Ahom period.

In 1867, the 'Somprakash' protested against the frequent re-assessment which compelled the ryots to migrate to other areas where revenue was lower making difficult thereby for the maujadars for the collection of revenue.

'Jonaki' the literary journal of 'Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha', Calcutta did not highlight on the contemporary peasant movement of Assam. This was because none of the Assamese middle class had any compassion towards the cause of the peasantry. But, the Bengalee middle class on the contrary, played a laudable role towards the cause of their peasantry. Dinabandhu Mitra's drama 'Nildarpan' (1860) was a better example of it.

The members of the Indian National Congress from Assam took part several sessions and placed their demands but all their efforts ended in smoke. So, they did not take part in the session of 1893-94 and decided to give whole hearted support to the peasants in their revolts of 1893-94.

Almost all the movements from below, leadership was ostensibly provided by the 'elite' element. Probably, some of the higher castes gave up their Sanskrit value and had interacted with the lower classes. This section stretched-out their helping hand to the movements of the lower class. The elites were never out of sympathy with the cultivators and the cultivators in return never doubted their sincerity. The middle class even helped the lower class and the peasants in their upward mobility. They were not jealous of their upward mobility.

The nationalist and imperialist historians defy the role of the peasants in their movements against the British. They rather emphasized to study it through their own eyes and leadership.

Prior to 1857, peasants took the leadership of the resentment against the dominant-classes. But after 1857, the leadership changed and the elite took the leadership of that.

The challenge of British rule produced in the minds of these elite- Indians an urge to free themselves from all shackles of imperialism and for the first time, they learnt the art of mass mobilization for a movement of a new type.

Some sections of the Assamese middle class being influenced by westernization tried to change their societies and gave their helping hands to the peasants in their exploitation against the alien rule. Moreover, the Assamese middle class emanating largely from landlord class and marginally from upper strata of the peasantry made common cause with the peasantry and helped them keeping alive their new born spirit of military.

According to Manorama Sarma, with the emergence of Assamese middle class as a dominant class in Assamese society, the peasantry lost its earlier leadership and began to accept the leadership of Assamese middle class who not only changed the leadership of the peasant movement but also changed the nature of the movement. R. C. Kalita while studied the 19<sup>th</sup> century peasant movements of Assam as well as the socio-economic roots of the Assamese middle class is of the opinion that the middle class of Assam or its members did not take part in or lead the peasant movement at any stage against the British government in Assam. The peasants launched and led their movements against the government without elite and middle class leadership.

Generally, the Brahmins, Mahantas, the Gosains and the Dolois were the landowners in the villages of Assam. They did not plough their land but had got their land ploughed and cultivated by lower class agricultural laborers and tenants. Moreover, they were not at all concerned of the problem of the lower classes. When revenue hike brought anathema in the life of the ordinary peasants, this higher class sections was not at all concerned of that. Revenue hike did not affect them severely as they had the capacity to bear that to some extent. Therefore, peasants themselves

had to fight for their destiny. The first and the basic features of the new elites was that they were indifferent towards their own societies.

The peasants had no any planned and long-termed scheme at their hands. Probably because of this, the elite and the middle class did not come to take up the leadership of their uprisings of 19<sup>th</sup> century. They scared anti-British movement lest they might lost their jobs and sympathy from the government. So, the middle class failed to usher a deep and standing impact on the mass people of Assam.

The middle class did not make common cause with the peasant movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to R. C. Kalita, middle class participation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century peasant movement of Assam is a sheer myth. The Assamese middle class was not so much progressive at that distant date as to lead them to participate in the peasant movement. The emergence of the middle class in Assam was the result of direct government patronage and their interests were also inextricably linked-up with the British administration. The Assamese middle class was a social buttress of the Colonial government right up to 1920. Therefore, the participation and leadership of the middle class in the peasant movement of Assam was historically impossible. According to Kalita, Raji Mels assumed the leadership in 1861 and 1893-94. But according to Sumit Sarkar, the no revenue movement between 1885 and 1905 were characterized by the 'leadership of local notables'. To him, the movement of Assam in 1893-94 was led by the rural elite. The uprising of Maharashtra in 1879 was led by Vasudeo Balvant Padke, an English educated Chitpavan Brahmin who seems to have been influenced by Ranade's lectures on drain of wealth. The three principal leaders of Pabna Agrarian League were the petty landholders Ishan Chandra Roy, the village headman Shambhu Pal and the Muslim Jotedar Khoodi Mollah. The Deccan riots of 1875 were an example of 'a type of rural protest' deriving its leadership and much of its supports from relatively better off sections of the peasantry.

In Maharashtra in 1896-97, 'the Poona Sarbajanik Sabha' which had been recently captured by B. G. Tilak, sent out agents into the countryside to encourage peasants to resist payment of revenue in a period of famine. After the famine of 1899-1900, no revenue combinations allegedly led by rich peasants and money-lenders were reported from Surat, Kheda, Nasik and Ahmedabad.

The better example of emergence of leadership 'from below' is that of Birsa Munda, the son of a share-cropper who received his education from missionaries.

In the Tebhaga movement of Bengal of 1946-47, the leadership was taken by the Communist party and the Kisan Sabha which came either from the urban upper middle class or from the well-to-do rural families.

The revolts of the peasants of Mewar were organized by Sitaram Das, a Sadhu in 1913 and Maniklal Verma and Vijay Singh Pathik from 1916 onwards. In Marwar, no revenue movement was led by Jai Narayan Vyas. The Bhills were organized by Motilal Tejawat, a spice merchant from Udaipur who claimed to be the emissary of Gandhiji. Darbhanga peasant revolt of 1919-20 was led by Swami Vidyanand, the son of a prosperous occupancy tenant who was inspired by Gandhiji's Champaran campaign. Rich peasants, local money-lenders, school teachers and members of urban intelligentsia provided leadership in Champaran besides Gandhiji.

In the indigo revolt of 1859 of Bengal, the organizers came from Zamindari-based intellectuals, money-lenders, and substantial peasants, headmen of villages, Calcutta-educated attorneys, journalists and missionaries. The Patidars, Brahmins and intelligentsia took the leadership of the peasant movement of Bordoli and Kheda of Gujarat.

Regarding the role of the elite and the middle class in the peasant movements of Assam of 1893-94, though different and divergent views have been expressed, but one thing is clear that the movements took more or less right turns as and while a few elite or some middle class people started to come forward to provide its leadership albeit the concept of either elite or middle class was at an embryonic stage at that time. Though some movements met defeat because of inapt handling or parochial interest of the leaders, notwithstanding that, their leadership provided new dimensions in those movements to some extent.

**Glossary:**

Mauzadar	: a revenue collector on a commission basis, in charge of area,
Ryot	: an Indian peasant or tenant farmer-,
Rayat sabha	: association of peasant,

Satra : a Vaishnava monastery of Brahmaputra valley,  
 sadar munsiff : main court ,  
 sarbajanik sabha- : universal association,  
 tahsil : an areal unit for land revenue collection,  
 tahsildar : revenue collector of an areal unit

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