

## 1857 and Assam & 1857 Uprising and the Role of North East India

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### Abstract

Sen, in this piece, looks at the happenings revolving around 1857 in North East India and comes to the conclusion that the impact of the resistance movement against the imperial forces manifested itself in sizeable and definitive measures also in the north east with special reference to Assam and North Bengal.

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**Keywords:** Maniram Dewan, 1857 Mutiny, Assam, North East

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### Introduction

Much has been discussed by the historians about the nature and character of the uprising of 1857. The debate still goes on. Although, the Mutiny started in Bengal it soon expanded to Meerut, Delhi, Lucknow, Oudh, Bihar and many other parts of Central-North and North-West India. Though the Mutiny started in Bengal it did not assume the character of a mass upsurge in Bengal itself. The sepoy's of Bengal army were recruited from Western Bihar, present Haryana and Oudh. They spoke Hindustani language and were ignorant of Bengali language. So the language became a great barrier for the Sepoys in establishing relation with the local people of Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of Permanent Settlement greatly benefited the *Zamindars* of the Bengal, so like the *Talukdars* of Oudh, they did not take part in the Uprising.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, newly created Bengali intelligentsia under the British rule saw no hope to fulfil their aspiration in the success of the Mutiny.<sup>3</sup>

In the Northern part of India unlike in Bengal, the upheaval assumed the character of mass uprising against the rule of the company. One fifth of the total population of India participated in the uprising, barring only seven thousand Sepoys. All the sepoy's of the Bengal army revolted against the raj. Talmiz Khaldun has opined that the Mutiny was a peasant war against the indigenous Land-Lordism and foreign imperialism.<sup>4</sup> It should also be noted that other than Bengal army, Bombay and Madras army remained loyal to the Raj. British had introduced *Ryotwari* Settlement in Bombay and Madras

1 Irfan Habib, 1857 "Ar Bidrohi Abhuthan" in *Marxbadi Path*, (Edt.), Biman Bose, Nov. 2006, p. 10.

2 Suprakahsh Ray, *Bharater Krishok Bidroha-O-Ganatantrik Sangram*, Cal-1966, p. 300.

3 Binoy Ghose, "The Bengali Intelligentsia and the Revolt", in P.C. Joshi, ed. *Rebellion 1857*, Calcutta, 1966, p. 117.

4 Irfan Habib, *op cit.* pp. 8-9.

presidency. The *Ryotwari* Settlement was less oppressive than *Mahalwari* Settlement.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, unlike Bengal army there was no higher Caste Sepoys in the Madras army and most of recruits of the Madras army were fishermen who had no prejudice in undertaking sea voyages.<sup>6</sup>

Basudev Chattopadhyay had mentioned that the English historian like Kaye, Malleon, and P.J. Marshall tried to show that the Mutiny was confined to Northern and North Western India. All were silent on the role of North-Eastern India during the upheaval. According to Chattopadhyay, the aim of the English historians was to conceal the National Character of the Mutiny. In his speech Chattopadhyay mentioned that the people of North Bengal and North Eastern India had played a heroic role.<sup>7</sup> The sepoys of East Bengal, Farajis and Wahabis were really active in Bengal. Concerning the intensity and expansion of the mutiny, the British secret report says that "...hardly a single district under the government of Bengal has escaped either actual danger or serious apprehension of danger."<sup>8</sup> On 5th December 1857 the sepoys of Jalpaiguri cantonment rose in revolt. As the revolt gained momentum the neighbouring hill country Bhutan sent two hundred Bhutia soldiers to help the rebellious sepoys of Jalpaiguri.<sup>9</sup> The sole motive of Bhutan was to drive out the company from Western Duars. The participation of Bhutan gave a new dimension to the uprising of North Bengal. In North Bengal, Malda was one of the main centres of the Wahabi and Faraji movement. Although Malda district remained unaffected during the uprising, Chaman Singh was accused for anti British activity.<sup>10</sup> The Faraji and rebellious sepoys before proceeding towards Rangpur and Dinajpur had killed fourteen Zamindars of Rajsahi District.<sup>11</sup> In Dinajpur they looted the treasury of Dinajpur Raj.<sup>12</sup>

The people of Assam had played a heroic role during the days of 1857 uprising. Like other parts of India, deposed feudal nobles and aristocracy under the leadership of Maniram Dutta Barua joined the uprising. In 1838, Purandar Singh the protectorate King of Assam was deposed, his territory was taken over by the British, and Assam was declared a non-regulated province of British India.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the British annexation there was no land tax in Assam, instead only the plough tax was collected. For the maintenance of the King, his officers and the priests there were privileged

5 Irfan Habib, *op cit.* p. 58.

6 Premangsu Kumar Bandopadhyay, *Tulsipata Gangaler Sapath, Barrackpurer Pratham Sipahi Bidroha*, Kolkata, 2006, p. 31.

7 Basudev Chattopadhyay, delivered welcome address on this issue in the National seminar on 'Issues in unbalanced Regional Development' on 21st and 22nd Sept, 2007 organised by A.B.N Seal College, Coochbehar.

8 Manju Chattopadhyay, *Petition to Agitation, Bengal 1857-85, 1985*, Calcutta, p. 23.

9 Suprakash, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

10 Sashi Bhusan Choudhury, *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies, 1857-59*, Calcutta, 1957, p. 203.

11 Amaresh Mishra, "Sipahi Bidroha, Bangio Praticriar Patabhumi" in *Digangan*, p. 96.

12 Mehrub Ali, *Dinajpurer Itihas Samagra*, Vol, IV, Dinajpur, 2002, p. 123.

13 Amalendu, Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, Calcutta, 1991, p. 221

farms cultivated by the militiamen and slaves. From the year 1840, the company had introduced cash collection revenue system. The Company introduced an area specific land tax payable in cash by individual landholders. In 1843, the institution of slavery was abolished.<sup>14</sup> The abolition of Slavery had weakened the position of the old aristocracy, nobles, Brahmins and Mohantos who used to cultivate the Devottar, Brahmottar land by the Slaves. In Kamrup slave holders held a protest demonstration and submitted memorandum to the authority for seeking permission for retaining the slavery system.<sup>15</sup> Practically, the aim of British agrarian policy in Assam was to impose heavy tax on the peasants for flushing them out in the labour market for the interest of the British owned Tea Estates.<sup>16</sup> It is to be mentioned here that up to 1859 all the labourers of the Assam Tea Gardens were local peasants and their number were not exceeding ten thousand.<sup>17</sup> They were mostly Kachhar people of Darrang district<sup>18</sup> When the news of 1857 uprising reached in Assam, the deposed King, nobility, peasants and tea garden workers became restive and a section of them joined with the rebellious Sepoys.<sup>19</sup>

On 18th November, 34 infantry of Chittagong barrack revolted and looted the treasury and Chittagong armoury. Thereafter the rebellious army proceeded towards Manipur through Comilla and Tripura<sup>20</sup> Manipur was then an independent Kingdom.<sup>21</sup> It is believed that various hill tribes of Tripura had helped the rebellious sepoy to cross the country.<sup>22</sup> The Company apprehended that some members of the royal family might have joined with the sepoy to occupy the throne of Manipur from Chandra Kirti Singh. So the company arrested three Manipuri princes.<sup>23</sup> It was also suspected that Jaintia Raja Debendra Singh had established relation with the Sepoys.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately on

14 Amalendu, Guha, "Rights and social classes in Medieval Assam" in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 3rd Sept., 1966, 230-235.

15 Jenkins to the Secretary to the Government at Fort William 22nd July 1833, Foreign Proceedings, 11 February 1835 No 90 (NAI).

16 Amalendu Guha, op. cit, p. 234.

17 *Ibid*, p. 163.

18 Assam, org. p. 4.

19 Shyamalendu Chakraborty, "Sipahi Bidroher Derso bachhar: Prekhatpat Barrack Upathaka" in *Digangan Baimela Bishes Sankhya*, New Delhi, 2006, p. 127.

20 Birendra Chandra Chakraborty, op. cit, p. 16.

21 Sashi Bhusan Choudhury, "1857-O-Tripura" in *Korak Sarad Sankhya*, 1413, B.S, p. 338.

22 Shyamalendu Chakraborty, op. cit, p-129. In 1851 Chandra Kirti Sing ascended the throne of Monipur, since then many attempts were made by the members of the royal family to head a rebellion. B.C. Allen and others, *Gazetters of Bengal and North East India*, New Delhi, 2005, p. 165.

23 Ratan Lal Chakraborty, *Sipahi Juddha and Bangladesh*, Dacca, 1984, p. 63. It may be remembered that shyllet was one of the main centre of suffism. Muslim Maulavis had great influence on the defferent tribes of Barrack Valley - *Digangan Baimela Bishes Sankhya*, 2006, p. 89.

24 The Englishman and Military Chronicle, dated 14th January, 1858, mentioned, '...the whole of our men were at once exposed to the heavy of the Mutineers who were completely sheltered by the aforesaid Jungle, the latter called loudly to our men (the greater portion of whom are Hindusthanee) not to fire upon their two brothers, that the English would make the Musalman eat Pig and the Hindoos eat beaf" but the answer from our men was a

the 19th December 1857 the rebellious sepoys were defeated at the battle of Karimpur. The rebellious Hindusthani Sepoys requested the company's Hindusthani Sepoys to join with them.<sup>25</sup>

During the period of upheaval the old deposed aristocracy did not remain a silent spectator. The abolition of Slavery had weakened the position of the old aristocracy, nobles, Brahamins and Mohantos who used to cultivate the Devottar, Brahmottar and Dharmottar land by their bonded labour. In Kamrup slave holders held a protest demonstration and submitted memorandum to the authority seeking permission to keep in possession of their slaves.<sup>26</sup> Main object of agrarian policy of the Raj was to tax the peasantry heavily in order to flush them out in the labour market for the tea planters and as well as to augment land revenue. Between 1826 and 1853 the land revenue rates were enhanced on several times.<sup>27</sup> Thus the process of de-peasantisation started. The assessment was being so high the ryots had no other alternative than to work for the European planters upto 1859 all the labourers of the tea gardens were local. Their number was not exceeding ten thousand.<sup>28</sup> It was during the upheaval of 1857 the old landed aristocracy and as well as the peasant and labourers of the tea gardens became restive and a section of them joined hand with the rebellious Sepoys.

Maniram Dewan, the ex-minister of the Ahom State played a leading role during the upheaval period in Assam. Maniram Dewan had very thin relation with the Bengal Renaissance. His aim was to introduce modern Reforms within feudal structure of the Ahom state<sup>29</sup> He used to send limited subscription to *Samachar Darpan*. Maniram had also given modest donation for printing more than one Assamese publication.<sup>30</sup> When Ahom was annexed by the British Maniram Dewan became anti-British.<sup>31</sup> Maniram in his memorandum submitted to Mill had rightly mentioned some of the weak points of the company. He pointed out that the abolition of old custom, establishment of their Courts and imposition of unjust taxation had made the life of the people of Assam miserable. Maniram strongly demanded the prohibition of opium which had become the scourge of Assam. Maniram also advocated the introduction of less expensive *Panchayat* system of justice as well as of indigenous village school. He also demanded restoration of Ahom rule under British protection.<sup>32</sup> Maniram also protested against the appointment of Bengalees from Shyllet and Marwaries as Mauzadar, because a

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steady fire, gallantly headed by lieutenant Sherer and Dodd.

25 Amalendu Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj: Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam*, New Delhi, 2006, p. 9.

26 Amalendu Guha, "Medieval and Early colonial Assam", Calcutta, 1991, p. 233.

27 *Ibid*, p. 234.

28 Amalendu Guha, 'Sipahi Bidroher Asamiya Sahid', in *Korak Sarad Sankhya*, 1413 B.S. Calcutta, p. 361.

29 Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, pp. 211-12.

30 Amalendu Guha in *Korak Sarad Sankhya*, B.S. 1413, p. 361.

31 A.J.M. Mills, Reports on the province of Assam; appendix, Calcutta, 1954, p. 66.

32 Amalendu Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*, p. 16.

good number of respectable Assamese were out of employment.<sup>33</sup> Maniram had established two small tea gardens at his own initiative. It may be mentioned here that when European planters got free land for the development of tea gardens Maniram had to develop his gardens without any concession.<sup>34</sup> These and similar unjust practices of the company made Maniram anti-British.

As the news of the uprising reached the Hindusthani Sepoys posted at Dibrugarh and Guwahati by the end of July 1857, they became restive. Some members of the deposed aristocracy and the followers of Chirang Raja Kandarpeshwar Singh established relation with sepoys to restore the old order.<sup>35</sup> Maniram Dewan had established relation with the anti-British *zamindars* of Calcutta. When Maniram was staying at the house of Latubabu, he got the *firmans* of the Nawab of Delhi which was sent to the Jamindars of Bengal. He had sent many letters to his friends of Assam. Maniram asked Kandarpeshwar to revolt with the help of the Sepoys of Dibrugarh and Guwahati. Accordingly Subedar Nur Muhammad, Vikhu Sheikh and other men of Chirang contacted with the Sepoys stationed at Dibrugarh and Guwahati. Maniram was arrested from the home of Latubabu. On 26th Feb. 1858 Maniram and his friend Piyali Barua was hanged to death.<sup>36</sup>

Thus a secret plan was going on under the leadership of the deposed feudal nobles to the revolt against the Raj with the help of the British sepoys stationed at Guwahati and Dibrugarh. Even the plantation labourers under the leadership of Madhuram Koch went on strike during the days of Mutiny. Madhuram Koch was sentenced to seven years imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> The situation was so tense that Board of Directors of the Assam Company reported on 2nd March 1858:

[w]hilst our private servants were cheerfully obedient to our co-operative proceedings with government in the maintenance of order the independent contractors for cultivating our lands, the indigenous inhabitants of the neighbouring villages held off from the performance of their contracts on the plea that they were not to be paid, believing that the Europeans were to be cut up; so far from aiding government in suppressing revolt, they remained utterly passive, many sympathising with the conspiring Rajah and the disaffected Sepoys. Had an outbreak occurred, there can be little doubt that they would have sided with the rebel;<sup>38</sup>

With the news of the plan of uprising, the planters, Marwari traders and many money lenders became so panicky that most of them took shelter in Guwahati. The

33 Amalendu Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

34 Sashi Bhusan Choudhury, *Sipahi Bidroho-O-Gana Biplaber Sangkhipta Itihas 1857-1859*, Calcutta, 1996, p. 138.

35 Mahadev Chakraborty, *Assamer Itihas*. Vol-I, Calcutta, 2007, p. 334.

36 Amalendu Guha, *Sipahi Bidroher Asamiya Sahid in Korak Sarad Sankhya* 1413, B.S. p. 360.

37 H. A Androbus, *A History of Assam Company 1839-1953*, Edinburgh, 1957, p. 196.

38 *Ibid.*

commissioner of Assam, on 29th August 1857, requested Bengal government to send European force to save the province from the impending insurrection.<sup>39</sup> It was due to loyalty of the Gorkha and local tribal sepoys of light infantry that Assam was saved.<sup>40</sup> Even some family members of Chirang Raja secretly disclosed the plan of uprising to the company.<sup>41</sup> The Company arrested Kandarpeshwar and his followers on 7th September, 1857. Many sepoys were court martialled for participating in the Mutiny and about twenty one civilians were tried and punished for treason.<sup>42</sup> Property of two Ahom women named Rupahi and Lumbai Aideo were confiscated.

In conclusion, we can easily say that during the days of upheaval, North East India had played a heroic role to uproot the company's regime. Since the inception of the British rule various tribal groups rose in arms against the raj. Like other parts of India, in Assam, the old deposed aristocracy and nobles had played a leading role in the uprising under the leadership of Maniram Dewan.<sup>43</sup> Maniram's motto was to restore the Ahom Kingdom as a British protectorate State. At the same time Maniram was not averse to accept the progressive reforms introduced by the British. In Assam women also participated in the uprising. The conflict between the Assamese, Bengalees and other immigrants started due to the Company policies. Dissention in the royal families also helped the British to suppress the Mutiny.

39 H.K. Barpuzari, *Assam in the Days of the Company, 1826-1858*, Guwahati, 1963, p. 169.

40 Amalendu Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*, p. 3.

41 Mahadev Chakraborty, *op.cit*, p. 334.

42 Amalendu Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*, p. 3.

43 Mahadev Chakraborty, *op cit*, p. 334.

(Moniram Das was the Dewan of the Assam tea company since 1839. He received Salary ` 200/- per month which was higher than majority of the company's European staff. Moniram also raised coal as contractor and used to supply rations to the company's army. The chairman of the Assam tea company in his annual report of 1841-42 credited him for the opening of new gardens and raising profit of the company. He also had two small tea gardens of his own. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p. 173).