UNIT 13: PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS UPRISINGS IN COLONIAL ASSAM

Unit Structure

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13.1 Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- **Explain** the socio-economic conditions of peasants and workers in colonial Assam and the impact of British policies on their lives.
- **Identify** the major causes of peasant and working-class uprisings in colonial Assam, including economic exploitation, land policies, and poor labour conditions.
- **Describe** the important peasant movements and labour strikes that emerged in Assam during the colonial period.
- **Analyze** the role of peasant and worker organizations, trade unions, and nationalist influences in shaping resistance movements.
- **Evaluate** the significance of peasant and working-class uprisings in the development of political consciousness, labour rights, and the anti-colonial struggle in Assam.

13.2 Introduction

Colonial rule brought profound changes to the agrarian and industrial structure of Assam, significantly affecting the lives of peasants and workers. The British administration introduced new land revenue systems, expanded commercial agriculture, and developed plantation industries such as tea, oil, and coal primarily to serve imperial economic interests. These policies disrupted traditional economic practices and subjected peasants and workers to various forms of exploitation.

Peasants faced increasing land revenue demands, indebtedness, land alienation, and the growing influence of landlords, moneylenders, and colonial officials. At the same time, workers employed in tea plantations, oil fields, coal mines, and transport sectors endured low wages, long working hours, poor living conditions, and the denial of basic labour rights. The colonial economy thus created widespread social and economic inequalities that generated resentment among the oppressed classes.

In response to these exploitative conditions, peasants and workers in Assam gradually organized themselves and launched various forms of resistance. Peasant protests emerged against excessive taxation, unfair land policies, and the encroachment upon traditional rights over land and resources. Similarly, industrial workers in tea gardens, oil fields, and other sectors organized strikes and demonstrations demanding better wages, improved working conditions, and recognition of their rights. Influenced by the growth of trade unionism, socialist ideas, and the Indian national movement, these struggles became increasingly organized during the twentieth century. Although many of these movements were local in character, they reflected broader patterns of resistance against colonial exploitation and contributed to the development of political consciousness among the masses.

The peasant and working-class uprisings in colonial Assam were not merely economic struggles; they were also expressions of resistance against colonial domination and social injustice. These movements challenged the foundations of the colonial economy, exposed the hardships faced by ordinary people, and strengthened the spirit of collective action. They played a significant role in the emergence of organized labour and peasant organizations in Assam and became an integral part of the wider freedom struggle in India. The study of these uprisings provides valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions of colonial Assam and highlights the contributions of peasants and workers to the region's history of resistance and social change.

13.3 PEASANT AND TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM

After the Revolt of 1857 the British Government of India tried in all possible ways to increase its revenue income. In Assam, agriculture being the main source of revenue, the burden of tax obviously fell on the peasants. Official records show that during the post-1857 period the British government increased the revenue demand by 3 to 4 times the original amount. The harmful effects of the excessive demand increased further due to the rigid manner of its collection. Moreover, the British government, in order to increase its income, imposed income-tax on the people of Assam in 1861. Introduction of various duties viz., stamp duty excise duty, tax for cutting timber etc. practically impoverished the peasantry beyond description. All this caused serious resentment among the general people, particularly the peasantry of Assam which led them to rise against the British government. As for the tribals, their discontent varied from region to region, but this constituted one of the main causes of discontent among the people in the plains. Again, in the hill region of Jaintia the people very duty, etc. by the British. But most of the hill tribes revolted due to political causes, namely, los much resented the imposition of house-tax, stamp s of their freedom. We

can now begin a brief discussion by taking up some important peasant and tribal movements which broke out in Assam during British rule.

- **PHULGURI UPRISING**

The Phulguri Uprising which is also known as 'Phulguri Dhawa' in Assamese was the first agrarian revolt in Assam after 1857. Phulguri is a place in present Nagaon district. Most of the people of this area belong to Lalung and Kachari tribes. As the people of Phulguri were mostly opium-eaters, the consumption of opium was higher there compared to other places. High price of opium fixed by the British government caused much resentment among the people of Phulguri. The ban imposed by the British government on private cultivation of opium also caused much dissatisfaction among the people of Phulguri. Besides, a rumour spread that the British government would soon impose duties on all their sources of income such as cultivation of betel leaf (pan) and cultivation of fruits in the garden.

Let us Know

In Assam Raij Mels were actually village Panchayats or people's assembly where members of a village use to discuss matters of common interest, particularly social and take a decision.

Due to the above mentioned causes an uprising broke out which initially took the form of protest through *Raij Mels*. One day on 17 October, 1861 when people from district villages assembled in a mel the British police forcibly tried to disperse the villagemen. The incident enraged the native people so much that they jumped upon the police party who tried to disperse them. In this encounter many policemen were injured and Mr. Singer, the Assistant Commissioner of police of Nagaon district was beaten to death. However, an additional police force captured the rebels and their leaders were severally punished either with the death sentence or life imprisonment.

Though the Phulguri uprising was a failure its significance cannot be underrated. It was the first popular rebellion of the peasantry of Assam against the British colonial rule. For the first time the middle class intelligentsia came out in support of the Phulguri rebels. Not only that, it also served an inspiration to other villagemen and tribals. This is evident from the fact that within the next few years the peasants of the districts of Darrang and Kamrup broke out in rebellion against the exploitation of the British.

- **RANGIA AND LACHIMA REVOLT**

The people of Rangia, in the district of Kamrup following the footsteps of the Phulguri peasants very soon lodged their protests, organizing *Raij Mels.* The cause of their protest was a hundred percent increase in the land revenue. The Rangia revolt began on 24th December 1893 when the people of Rangia ransacked the Rangia market. Moreover, people staged a demonstration on 10th January, 1894 in which they raised the slogan of not paying the increased revenue. On the same day McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, imposed a ban on holding any *Mel* All the important leaders of the revolt were soon arrested by the police and the revolt lost its edge.

The Lachima Revolt was also held due to the same reasons as that of Rangia. The only difference was that the rebels of Lachima took recourse to violence. They assaulted the revenue –collectors who were the agents of the British government. The incident took place in Kalpa, near Lachima, in the district of Kamrup on 21st January 1894. The revenue collectors were so severely beaten by the villagers that one of them died. The infuriated British police immediately arrested as many as seventy- five villagers. But the agitated villagers soon freed the arrested persons from the custody of the police. This led to a major police crackdown on the village. Unable to sustain the torture the rebels ultimately had to give in and the revolt came to an end.

- **PATHARUGHAT UPRISING**

Like Phulguri Dhawa the rebellion of Patharughat is also commonly known among Assamese as Patharughatar Ran i.e. the battle of Patharughat. Patharughat is a place in the Darrang district where a revolt broke out in 1894. Here also the grievances of the people were against the enhancement of the rates of revenue. Raij-Mels were held in which not only a protest was lodged against the increased in the rates of land-revenue but a warning was also issued to the villagers to the effect that no one should pay the increased revenue to the government. On 28th January, 1894 when a police party went to the village to attach the property of a peasant cultivator, who was a defaulter, they were surrounded by a mob. Soon after the incident the rebels of Patharughat marched towards the police camp leading the police to open fire. Many of the villagers died and were injured. It led to the complete suppression of the rebels of Patharughat by the British.

- **REVOLT IN JAINTIA**

The tribal people of Jaintia burst out in rebellion when the British government imposed house tax and stamp duty. In fact, the tribal people were not accustomed to any such tax in the past. Therefore, they felt they lost their freedom to the British. So they raised their voice through a rebellion which lasted from 1860 to 1863. It was not before 1863 that the British government could restore law order suppressing the hill people.

Before the outbreak of this revolt the Khasi tribes in present Meghalaya also revolted against the British. The Khasi leader U. Teerut Singh, the Raja of Nongkhalo led this rebellion against the British. The background of the revolt was the construction of a road across the Khasi hills joining the two valleys of the Brahmaputra and Surma. Though Teerut Singh in the beginning approved the idea of the road, suddenly he became suspicious of British intensions. The Khasis got the impression that after the completion of the road the British would levy tax from them. So, under leadership of Teerut Singh they attacked the British officials posted there and killed them. The conflict between the Khasis and British continued for almost four years and ended with the surrender of Teerut Singh in 1834.

- **THE NAGAS, GAROS AND LUSHAIS**

The Tribal people of Naga, Garo and Lushai hills were discontented upon the British not because of imposition of any tax but for the curtailment of certain rights being enjoyed by them for long time past. In fact these turbulent hill tribes were freedom loving people and could not tolerate any interference in their socio-economic

life. But their frequent raids in the neighbouring areas which were under British possession made the government worry. To get rid of their attacks and raids the British government became offensive towards them and in 1866 captured the hill tract of the Angami Nagas. The other Naga tribes also surrendered in course of time. In 1869 the Garo hills region was captured. Finally in 1898 the Lushai hills came under British rule.

13.4 Oil Company Strike in Colonial Assam

The Oil Company Strike in colonial Assam, particularly the historic Digboi Oil Workers' Strike of 1939, occupies an important place in the history of labour movements in India. The discovery of oil at Digboi in Upper Assam in the late nineteenth century led to the establishment of the Assam Oil Company, a British-owned enterprise that controlled oil extraction and refining in the region. The Digboi Refinery, established in 1901, became one of the earliest oil refineries in Asia and employed a large number of workers drawn from Assam as well as from different parts of India. Although the oil industry generated enormous profits for the company and contributed significantly to the colonial economy, the condition of the workers remained extremely poor. They were subjected to low wages, long working hours, inadequate housing facilities, poor sanitation, insufficient medical care, and unsafe working conditions. Moreover, a clear racial hierarchy existed within the company, where European employees enjoyed better salaries, housing, and privileges, while Indian workers were treated as inferior and denied equal opportunities. Such discrimination and exploitation created widespread dissatisfaction among the workers and gradually led to the growth of labour consciousness in the oilfields of Assam.

The emergence of trade union activities in India during the 1920s and 1930s influenced workers in Assam as well. Inspired by labour movements in other parts of the country and encouraged by nationalist leaders, the oil workers of Digboi began organizing themselves to demand better treatment and recognition of their rights. The growing political awareness among workers coincided with the rise of the Indian national movement against British rule. As a result, labour grievances became increasingly linked with the broader struggle against colonial exploitation. By the late 1930s, workers at Digboi had become more united and vocal in their demands for higher wages, improved working conditions, job security, welfare facilities, and recognition of trade unions. The failure of the Assam Oil Company to address these demands eventually led to a major confrontation between the workers and the management.

In 1939, the oil workers of Digboi launched a large-scale strike against the Assam Oil Company. The strike was one of the most organized labour protests in colonial Assam and attracted considerable attention throughout the province. The workers demanded fair wages, reduction of working hours, better housing and medical facilities, equal treatment irrespective of race, and recognition of their union. Labour leaders such as Sardar Amar Singh Marwah played a crucial role in mobilizing workers and providing leadership to the movement. The strike reflected not only economic grievances but also a growing sense of dignity and self-respect among the workers, who sought to challenge the discriminatory practices of the colonial industrial system.

Nationalist leaders and political activists extended support to the workers, viewing their struggle as part of the wider fight against British imperialism.

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 added a new dimension to the conflict. Since oil was a strategic resource essential for the British war effort, the colonial government regarded any disruption of oil production as a serious threat. Consequently, the authorities responded harshly to the strike. Police forces were deployed in the oilfields, public meetings were restricted, and several labour leaders and activists were arrested. The colonial administration worked closely with the company management to suppress the movement and restore production. Despite the courage and determination displayed by the workers, the combined pressure of government repression and company resistance weakened the strike. Many workers faced intimidation, dismissal, and economic hardship, forcing them to return to work without achieving all their immediate demands.

Although the Digboi Oil Workers' Strike did not secure complete victory, it had far-reaching consequences for the labour movement in Assam. The strike strengthened the spirit of trade unionism and encouraged workers in other industries, such as tea plantations, coal mines, railways, and transport services, to organize themselves and demand better conditions. It demonstrated the capacity of industrial workers in Assam to unite and challenge colonial authority. The movement also contributed to the growth of political consciousness among workers and highlighted the close connection between labour rights and the struggle for national independence. The strike exposed the exploitative nature of colonial industrial policies and drew public attention to the hardships faced by industrial labourers. In the years that followed, labour organizations became stronger, and demands for social justice, fair wages, and workers' welfare gained greater legitimacy.

Thus, the Oil Company Strike of 1939 was a landmark event in the history of colonial Assam. It symbolized the growing resistance of the working class against economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and colonial oppression. Though suppressed by the British authorities, the strike played a significant role in shaping the labour movement in Assam and contributed to the broader struggle for freedom and social justice in India. Its legacy continues to be remembered as an important chapter in the history of workers' resistance and collective action in colonial Assam.

13.5 Tea Garden Labour Strike in Colonial Assam

The tea industry, which developed rapidly in Assam after the discovery of the region's suitability for tea cultivation in the 1830s, became one of the most profitable sectors of the colonial economy. To meet the growing demand for labour, British tea planters recruited thousands of workers from different parts of India, particularly from present-day Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal. These workers, commonly known as tea garden labourers, were brought to Assam under oppressive recruitment systems that often involved deception, coercion, and exploitation. Once employed, they lived and worked under extremely harsh conditions. Labourers received very low wages, worked long hours in difficult weather conditions, and faced poor housing, inadequate medical facilities, high mortality rates, and strict disciplinary

measures. The colonial plantation system treated labourers as a cheap and controlled workforce, restricting their freedom of movement and denying them basic rights.

The exploitative nature of the plantation system generated widespread discontent among tea garden workers from the very beginning. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, labourers frequently protested against poor wages, excessive workloads, physical punishment, and the restrictions imposed by colonial labour laws. One of the most notorious regulations was the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, which criminalized desertion from plantations and allowed employers to punish workers who attempted to leave before completing their contracts. Such laws effectively bound workers to the estates and strengthened the power of tea planters. As awareness of rights gradually increased and nationalist ideas spread across Assam, labourers became more willing to challenge plantation authorities and demand better treatment.

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed several incidents of labour unrest in Assam's tea gardens. Workers organized protests, refused to work, and occasionally attempted mass migrations from plantations. One of the most significant episodes occurred in 1921 when thousands of tea garden labourers sought to leave the plantations and return to their native places, inspired by the growing atmosphere of the Non-Cooperation Movement led by the Indian National Congress. Many workers believed that the nationalist movement would help end their suffering and secure their freedom from exploitation. As labourers attempted to travel towards railway stations and river ports, colonial authorities intervened to stop them. The situation became particularly tragic at Chandpur, where many labourers faced severe hardships, repression, and violence while trying to return home. The incident exposed the oppressive nature of the plantation system and attracted national attention.

Labour unrest intensified during the 1930s and 1940s as trade union activities expanded throughout India. Political leaders, social reformers, and labour organizers began to focus on the conditions of tea garden workers in Assam. Influenced by socialist ideas and the broader nationalist movement, workers increasingly organized strikes and demonstrations demanding higher wages, better working conditions, housing facilities, medical care, and recognition of labour rights. The growth of organizations such as the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha provided workers with a platform to articulate their grievances and mobilize collective action. Strikes became more frequent as workers challenged both the tea planters and the colonial administration that supported them.

The colonial government and tea plantation owners generally responded to labour protests with repression. Police were deployed to suppress strikes, labour leaders were arrested, and workers were often threatened with dismissal or eviction from plantation quarters. Despite these obstacles, the strikes played a crucial role in fostering class consciousness and collective identity among tea garden labourers. The workers began to recognize their common interests and the importance of organization in confronting exploitation. Their struggles also highlighted the close relationship between economic oppression and colonial rule, linking labour movements with the broader demand for Indian independence.

The significance of the tea garden labour strikes extended beyond immediate economic demands. These movements challenged the foundations of the colonial plantation economy and exposed the inhuman conditions under which tea workers lived and worked. They contributed to the development of trade unionism in Assam and encouraged workers in other sectors to organize for their rights. The strikes also brought the problems of tea garden labourers into the national political discourse, compelling both colonial authorities and later independent governments to pay greater attention to labour welfare. Although many demands remained unmet during the colonial period, the struggles of tea garden workers laid the foundation for later improvements in wages, working conditions, housing, healthcare, and labour legislation.

In conclusion, the tea garden labour strikes in colonial Assam represented a sustained struggle against exploitation, injustice, and colonial domination. The workers' resistance demonstrated remarkable courage and solidarity in the face of harsh repression and economic hardship. These movements not only improved labour consciousness among plantation workers but also became an integral part of the larger history of labour rights and the freedom movement in India. The tea garden labour strikes remain a powerful symbol of the determination of Assam's working class to secure dignity, justice, and better living conditions.

Check Your Progress

Q.1: When did the Phulaguri Uprising take place?

Q.2:In which district did the Patharughat Uprising occur?

Q.3:What was the Raij Mel?

Q.4:Where was the Digboi Oil Workers' Strike organized?

Q.5:Which industry employed the majority of plantation workers in colonial Assam?

Q.6:Against whom were the peasant uprisings in Rangiya, Lachima, and Rani directed?

13.6 Let Us Sum Up

After going through this unit, you have learnt-

- The peasant and working-class uprisings in colonial Assam were significant expressions of resistance against the exploitative policies of British rule. Colonial interventions in land administration, revenue collection, and the development of plantation and extractive industries brought profound changes to the socio-economic structure of Assam. Peasants suffered from heavy taxation, indebtedness, land alienation, and the loss of traditional rights, while workers in tea

gardens, oil fields, coal mines, and other industries endured low wages, poor working conditions, and limited labour rights.

- In response to these hardships, peasants and workers organized various forms of protest and collective action. Peasant movements challenged oppressive land and revenue policies, whereas labour strikes in tea plantations and oil industries demanded better wages, improved working conditions, and recognition of workers' rights. The growth of trade unionism, the influence of nationalist ideas, and the emergence of labour leadership strengthened these movements and linked them to the broader struggle against colonial domination.
- Although many of these uprisings faced repression from the colonial authorities, they played an important role in raising political awareness among the masses and fostering a spirit of unity and resistance. These struggles contributed to the development of organized peasant and labour movements in Assam and helped lay the foundation for future social and economic reforms. Thus, the peasant and working-class uprisings in colonial Assam represent an important chapter in the history of popular resistance, social justice, and India's freedom movement.

13.7 Further Reading

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13.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

Answer 1: 1861

Answer 2: Darrang district

Answer 3: A traditional people's assembly or gathering

Answer 4: Digboi

Answer 5: The tea industry

Answer 6: British colonial authorities and their revenue policies.

13.9 Model Questions

A) Very Short Questions

Q.1: What were the major causes of peasant uprisings in colonial Assam?

Q.2: How did British land revenue policies affect the peasantry of Assam?

Q.3: Discuss the working conditions of tea garden labourers in colonial Assam.

Q.4: What were the main demands of the Digboi Oil Workers' Strike of 1939?

B) Short Questions

Q.1:Explain the role and significance of the Raij Mel movement in Assam.

Q.2:Why is the Phulaguri Uprising of 1861 regarded as an important peasant protest?

Q.2:What factors led to the peasant uprisings in Rangiya, Lachima, and Rani?

Q.4:Describe the major demands of the Digboi Oil Company Workers during the strike of 1939.

Q.5:How did the colonial government respond to the Oil Company Workers' Strike in Assam?

Q.6:What were the working and living conditions of tea garden labourers in colonial Assam?

C) Long Questions

Q.1:the causes and consequences of the Patharughat Uprising of 1894.

Q.2:Examine the causes of tea garden labour strikes in Assam during the colonial period.

Q.3:Assess the significance of peasant and labour uprisings in the growth of political consciousness in colonial Assam.

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