UNIT 10: REVOLT OF 1857 AND ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- describe the Revolt of 1857 in Assam,
- analyze the role of Maniram Dewan in the revolt of 1857.
- discuss the consequences of the revolt of 1857.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have discussed the coming of the British to Assam and the opposition made by the people of Assam, especially the Ahom nobility towards the British rulers of Assam. The British, by defeating the Burmese, made themselves the master of Assam and established their own administrative set up in disregard to the aspiration of the Assamese people.

Now in this unit we are going to discuss the impact of the Revolt of 1857 in Assam which shook the very foundation of the British rule in India

10.3 REVOLT OF 1857

From 1757 onwards, the expansionist policies of the British East India Company created resentment among the Indian people. The policy of conquest, economic exploitation and administrative changes had adversely affected all sections of people. All these policies of the British compelled the Indians to rise in revolt against the British in many parts of India. Finally, the popular discontent against the British rule found expression in the Revolt of 1857. As in other parts of India, the people of Assam also joined the revolt. Unfortunately, the revolt failed to achieve its aim, but it sowed the seeds of the freedom struggle, for which it is often termed as the First War of Indian Independence.

10.3.1 CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO THE REVOLT OF 1857 IN ASSAM

It was neither a sudden event nor was it confined to some particular areas. It was started by the sepoys of a British regiment, but all sections of people including the peasants, labourers, artisans, tribals, aristocrats and soldiers participated in this movement. Many Indian states also played a significant role in it. As in other parts of India, the people of Assam also had grievances against the British. The people of Assam had initially looked upon the Britishers as saviours but later on their attitude was changed towards them leading to the outbreak of rebellion in this region. The effects of the British rule in Assam are discussed below

After the Treaty of Yandaboo (24 February, 1826), the nobility of Assam who had lost their former power were greatly dissatisfied with foreign rule. They started their rebellion under the leadership of Dhananjoy Peoli Phukan and Gomdhar Konwar, etc. It was a symbol of aspirations of the Assamese for independence.

The then British Commissioner David Scott was in favour of the restoration of the Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam because the revenues collected from Upper Assam would not be enough for the maintenance of

British administration. Secondly, the restoration would satisfy the Ahoms, particularly the Ahom nobility.

Paiks- Male servants for rendering services.

The Central Government was not convinced by the arguments of Scott and so the question of the final settlement regarding Upper Assam was deferred. Lord William Bentinck who succeeded Lord Amherst as the Governor-General in 1828 took a realistic view of the whole situation. The administrative confusion and the hostile attitude of the Ahom nobility prompted Bentinck to take a definite decision on the question of Upper Assam without any further delay. On April 24, 1833 Purandar Singha was formally installed as a ruler of Upper Assam. But on the pretext of misgovernance, Upper Assam was brought under the direct control of the Company in 1838. Since then the people of Upper Assam had been dissatisfied with the rule of Company. By the treaty of 1826, the British had appointed Bar Senapati, the Chief of the Morans of Matak to provide a contingent of three hundred *paiks* in lieu of tribute. A new treaty was imposed on his successor Maju Gohain on the condition of paying an annual tribute of 10,000 rupees. This treaty was not liked by the Moran tribe on religious grounds. The British Government annexed the state of Matak in November, 1839. The British followed an expansionist policy and annexed the different states of the North-Eastern region one after another without any regard for the feelings of the people of Assam. This greatly increased the resentment of the people of Assam against the British rule.

The new government was solely concerned with the collection of taxes but did not pay heed to the miserable economic condition of the ryots. Their condition deteriorated as the extortion of the government went on increasing. The British had failed to fulfill the promises they made to the people of Assam before the first Anglo-Burmese war. It was the aristocracy, which first reacted to this new situation with their abortive attempt. Each new administrative measure introduced by the British was a serious blow to the old aristocracy. The abolition of slavery in 1843 by the British Government created resentment as it eroded the power and privileges of

the old aristocracy in Assam. Protests against the government decision were made by the members of the ruling class everywhere. Captain Neufville's policy of employing men from Bengal in place of the local aristocracy further aggravated the situation.

Moreover, the British economic policies greatly irritated the people of Assam. The British started tea plantations in Assam. The British imposed the policy of "waste land regulation" a tactic of depriving the local people of the benefits of setting up Tea plantations. The British Government also managed to complete the formation of the imperialist capital by transferring the whole Tea industry to the British Tea planters through its clever regulations. They imported cheap labour force from Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Telengana. These imported cheap labourers were known as Coolie. They were viewed with suspicion by the local people of Assam. More than that, the elite section of the Assamese society was greatly dissatisfied with the British policy of opium cultivation. They pleaded with the government for the stoppage of the supply of opium to the people and for the eradication of the habit.

The British social and religious reforms created suspicion among the orthodox people of Assam. The activities of the government officials and Christian missionaries created fear among the Hindus and Muslims that their religion was in danger. British attitude of racial discrimination was also resented by the Assamese people.

Therefore, the old aristocracy and gentry could hardly reconcile themselves to the new British rule. Some of them became desperate and felt that their salvation lay only in the restoration of the old regime. Chandrakanta, the ex-Raja, after making several attempts to regain his possessions, died with a heavy heart in early 1838 at an early age of 43. Purandar, who was also removed from his position, made several representations urging upon his restoration till he breathed his last in October 1846. His only son and successor Kameswar also died a few years later, when his son Kandarpeswar was a mere boy of eleven. It was at this stage that Maniram Dutta Barbhandar Baruah, popularly known as Maniram

Dewan, hitherto one of the most loyal and trusted officers of the Company, assumed a new role as the leader of the war of liberation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. When was the Treaty of Yandaboo concluded?

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2. Who was the last Ahom ruler?

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10.3.2 ROLE OF MANIRAM DEWAN

The rising of 1857 A.D. did not leave Assam untouched. Maniram was a true representative of the rising middle class in Assam. Maniram had first served the British as the *Tehsildar* of Upper Assam. During the reign of Purandar Singha in Upper Assam Maniram had served as the *Sheristadar* in the Revenue department. Maniram was unhappy when Purandar Singha was deposed in 1838 and the territories of Upper Assam were annexed to the British dominion.

With the deposition of Purandar Singha, Maniram joined the *Assam Tea Company* at Nazira as its *Dewan*. However, he was also dissatisfied with the planters. He started two gardens of his own at Jorhat. But he was deprived of the benefit of getting waste lands at concessional rates like the European planters.



LET US KNOW

Maniram Barbhandari Barua was popularly known as Maniram 'Dewan' because he had served as the 'Dewan' of the Assam Tea Company.

Gradually, Maniram realised that there was no future for him and his countrymen under the British rule. Then he took up the cause of the Charing Raja Kandarpeswar Singha. Maniram became the friend, philosopher and guide of Kandarpeswar Singha. He inspired him a lot to try and get back his territories. In the meantime, A.J. Moffat Mills visited Assam in 1853. Kandarpeswar Singha submitted a representation claiming his right to hold Upper Assam on a tributary basis under the Company Government at the instance of Maniram Dewan.

Mills had also received many petitions from the hard pressed nobility of Upper Assam. Maniram also submitted two memorandums. One was related to the restoration of Ahom monarchy, while the other was related to administrative reforms. But Mills simply turned down these petitions. Maniram Dewan lost his faith on the local authorities in Assam and decided to represent the case directly before the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir John Campbell. With this aim he arrived at Calcutta (present Kolkata) in April, 1856.

Intelligentsia-

People in a society who are well educated and are interested in literature, culture, politics, etc.

In Calcutta, Maniram used to stay in the house of two famous Bengali merchants (Ashutosh Dev and Pramoth Nath Dev). There he came into contact with many leading *intelligentsia* of Bengal. He met Raja Gurudas, Nilmoni Mitra, Kunja Behari Mallik and Rajendra Dutta. Thus, in Calcutta, Maniram received the intellectual inspiration needed before plunging into a new course of action.

In the meantime, the Revolt of 1857 broke out at Meerut, Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpur. Bahadur Shah II, the Mughal ruler, was proclaimed as the Emperor of Hindustan at Delhi by the rebels. Maniram calculated the possibility of organising a similar insurrection in Assam for overthrowing the British Raj. Maniram wanted to take full advantage of the situation and provoked the young prince Kandarpeswar Singha, the erstwhile nobility and the gentry including certain *Satradhikars* to take up arms against the British.

Satradhikar-

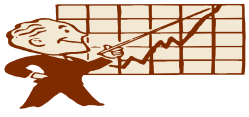
The head of the Satra, a religious institution of Assam.

At that time, there were two regiments in Assam, the *First Assam Light Infantry* stationed at Dibrugarh under the command of Major Hannay and the *Second Light Infantry* stationed at Guwahati under Major Richardson. Most of the sepoys of the First Assam Light Infantry stationed at Dibrugarh were from Western Bihar. These sepoys were sure to come forward to drive away the foreigners. In preparing the ground for an insurrection, Maniram was greatly helped by Madhu Mallick (a Bengali *Mukteer*) and many others like Urbidhar Barua, Mayaram Barbara, Chitrasen Barbara, Kamala Charingia Barua, Mahidhar Sarma Mukteer, Luki Senchowa Barua, Ugrasen Marangikhowa Gohain, Deoram Dihingia Barua, Dhutiram Barua, Peoli Barua, Bahadur Gaonburha, Sheikh Formud Ali, Madhuram Koch, etc.

Mukteer-

An agent.

However, till August 1857, the sepoys of Assam remained passive, but restless. It was because the associates of Maniram in Assam were waiting for his signal to mobilise against the foreigners. But before Maniram could come to Assam to take the lead, a few of his secret letters were intercepted by the Principal Assistant of Sibsagar, Captain Charles Holroyed with the help of Haranath Parvatia Barua, the Police Daroga (Inspector) of Sibsagar and a most trust-worthy person of the Europeans in Assam.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

3. In which year did Maniram Dewan submit his petition to Mill?

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4. Where did Maniram use to stay in Calcutta?

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5. Name the two Regiments in Assam.

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6. Where was Maniram Dewan arrested?

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At the instance of Holroyed, Captain Lowther came to Jorhat with a contingent of troops and arrested the Saring Raja Kandarpeswar Singha on September 7, 1857 and he was sent to the Alipur Jail for detention. Maniram was arrested in Calcutta, detained for a few weeks in the Alipur Jail and then brought to Assam for trial. Along with Maniram many of his associates were also arrested.

10.3.3TRIAL OF REVOLUTIONARIES

Captain Holroyed was appointed Special Commissioner to try the conspiracy cases. Maniram Dewan and Peoli Baruah were found guilty of treason and were sentenced to death. At Jorhat on 26th February, 1858 both of them were publicly hanged. Madhu Mallick, Trinayan, Kamala Barua, Dhutiram Barua, the Marangikhowa Gohain, Mayaram Nazir were all tried on charges of complicity in the plot and received sentences of transportation for life. Bahadur Gaonburah and Shaikh Farmus Ali were also sent to Andaman for encouraging the Muslims of Jorhat to join the conspiracy. Their property was confiscated. Many sepoys were also punished for their involvement in the plot.

Some sepoys of the Dibrugarh regiment were sentenced to transportation for life. Some had to suffer long imprisonment, while a large number, including the sepoys of Golaghat were discharged from duties. Rupahi Aideo and Lumboi Aideo, two Assamese ladies implicated in the plot suffered the loss of their property and their “Mouzas”. In consideration of tender age, Kandarpeswar Singha was not brought for trial. He was detained at Burdwan till 1860, after which he was allowed to settle at Guwahati as a Pensioner, where he died in 1880.

10. 4 FAILURE OF THE REVOLT

The Revolt of 1857 was a great and courageous effort by some Indian patriots to overthrow the foreign rule. But ultimately, the British succeeded in suppressing the revolt. The revolt had failed and the reasons for its failure are as follows:

- Inspite of the political and organisational skill of Maniram and his associates, they failed in their aim as the number of the rebels was very less and they were isolated from the rest of India.
- Unlike in other parts of India, in Assam the nobility did not cooperate with the rebels. Only a few of them supported the move of Maniram Dewan.
- All sections of the people did not support the revolt. The course of events in Assam aroused no hopes amongst the leading classes and the gentry in Assam.
- No doubt, Maniram Dewan took the lead, but his leadership was not comparable to that of Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai, Nana Sahib, etc. Moreover, the British leaders were far superior to the Indian leaders.
- At the root of their failure was their inability to establish contacts with their counterparts in Central India and to mobilise the armed forces, including the disbanded soldiers of Purandar Singha.
- There was a section of people holding offices under the government, who were concerned mainly with maintaining their positions, whereas the rest were largely passive. Thus, it was Haranath Parvatia Barua, a Daroga serving the British Government, who was mainly responsible for bringing about the arrest of the leaders.
- Assam had no good roads and other means of communication and transport. The rebels could not easily communicate with the people of the region.

Raij Mel-

An assembly of the common people.

Though the people in general did not take part in the rebellion, as such, yet their discontentment with the British rule found expression in other uprisings and labour strikes. The general ferment among the people is also