UNIT 13: RISE OF ASSAMESE NATIONALIM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- Discussthe causes for the rise of Assamese Nationalism in the Colonial period.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

Dear learners, you have learnt about the repercussion of the Revolt of 1857 in Assam and the agrarian uprisings that occurred in different parts of Assam in protest against the oppressive policies of the British Government. This protest movement against the foreign rule made the people of Assam politically conscious and subsequently helped in the rise of Assamese nationalism.

In this unit we will discuss the factors which led to the rise of nationalism in Assam. With the rise of Assamese nationalism, the people of Assam became nationally conscious and actively participated in the Indian National Movement.

13.3 CAUSES FOR THERISE OF ASSAMESE NATIONALISM

The establishment of British rule brought about far reaching political, economic and social changes in Assam. The East India Company's rule came to an end in 1858. After the end of the Company's rule, Queen Victoria of England by a proclamation on 1 November, 1858 directly assumed the responsibility of the Indian administration. The British Government introduced changes in every sphere of administration. In course of time it resulted in an increasing feeling of being exploited by the colonial government.

Dangarias-

The officials of the Ahom rulers of Assam.

This feeling combined with various other social forces resulted in the rise of political awareness or consciousness in the region which in turn led to the rise of Assamese nationalism. We are now going to discuss some of the key factors for the rise of Assamese nationalism.

- **Dissatisfaction of the Nobility**

Amolahs-

Officials.

The Assamese *Dangarias* and the members of nobility were highly dissatisfied under the British rule. The British Government destroyed the traditional status quo in which the nobility had their vested interests. They were deprived of the benefits and munificence of the Ahom rule. They were subjected to taxation which reduced their status to that of a commoner. Imposition of a foreign language in the form of Bengali sidelined the Dangarias in the new administrative set up. A large section of the nobility and a still greater section of their dependents were virtually thrown out of employment. This feeling of deprivation was further accelerated by the influx of *Amolahs* from Bengal and for the first time it created a sense of common purpose amongst the Assamese nobility.

- **Money Economy and Revenue Maximisation**

The introduction of money economy brought about an immediate economic effect. The British Government replaced the earlier system of taxation

payable through service, with cash payments. At that time money was not much in circulation. The Assamese cultivators were adversely affected as the introduction of money economy placed them under severe strain. The cultivators had accumulated not much capital and it was extremely difficult for them to get cash. Often they had to sell a major part of their produce simply to meet their land revenue demands which constantly kept on increasing. With every assessment, the condition of the cultivators deteriorated.

To increase revenue the British systematically enhanced the land revenue. But correspondingly, there was no effort on the part of government to help the cultivators in increasing the productivity of their land. Moreover, no attempt was made to deal with the recurring floods. Certain additional taxes were required to be paid by the people of Assam like the grazing tax (levied as cattle fee), taxes on river ghats, taxes on markets, taxes on fisheries, etc. All these taxes caused tremendous discontentment among the people and united them against their common enemy, the British.

- **Opium Policy**

Many of the grievances of the people were related to the opium policy of the British Government. In 1860 the government banned the cultivation of opium. But the volume of trade in opium increased, with the government acquiring monopoly over it. By levying an excise duty the government realised a large amount of money from opium in Assam. The government did not restrict the sale of opium and large scale consumption continued. The excise duty on opium was another heavy burden on the people.

- **Decline of Local Industries**

Dislocation of local industries added to the troubles of the people of Assam. A process of deindustrialisation was set in motion with the entry of British manufactured goods in the markets of Assam and the traditional industries suffered so greatly that most of them were on the path of ultimate ruin. The healthy balance of the pre-colonial economy maintained by a co-ordination of agriculture and industry was totally destroyed. Infact, the people lost their subsidiary sources of income. Deindustrialisation thus aggravated

the process of economic exploitation of Assam, making the people conscious against the evil effects of colonial rule.

The British Government set up tea, coal and oil industries in Assam, but they failed to have any visible impact on the local economy. By virtue of the export of tea, coal and oil, Assam was an export surplus region. Yet, it remained one of the most backward regions in India. These industries failed to absorb the displaced local population as they provided no source of employment. Managed and owned by Europeans and worked with immigrant labour force, industrialisation in Assam was an isolated phenomenon confined to certain sectors only and divorced from its indigenous population.

- **Illegal Allotment of Waste Land Grants**

Jhum-

A type of cultivation.

Allotment of waste lands to Europeans caused much resentment among the local cultivators. By designing harsh terms for possessing waste land grants, the British Government indirectly discouraged the local people from competing to secure waste lands. The terms were so favourable for the Europeans that a scramble for land took place among the planters. Often, the land that was traditionally used by the cultivators was sold off as waste land to the tea companies. In many instances the tea planters encroached upon the*jhum* rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. All this led to the displacement of many cultivators. Moreover, the tea planters in spite of being the largest land owning class paid the least revenue to the British Government.

- **Immigration**

There was the large scale immigration of people from different parts of India to Assam. The majority of them were the tea garden labourers, and workers in the coal and oil sector. The immigration of people increased the population of Assam. But there was no corresponding increase in the production of the cultivators in Assam. They did not produce enough to feed the growing population. Under pressure the subsistence economy

steadily eroded resulting in growing dependence on imported food grains. Large scale immigration changed the demography of the region.

- **Introduction of Western Education**

With economic grievances in the background, the introduction of Western education and the infiltration of new liberal ideas and knowledge through it instilled in the minds of the people a spirit of rational enquiry. There was a growing demand for economic reforms and eradication of social evils. Having no facility for higher education the students from Assam had to go to Bengal which was the epicentre of rising Indian nationalism. There they imbibed the idea of nationalism and on their return spread new ideas among the people of Assam.

- **Growth and Development of Press**

The growth and development of Press in Assam led to the general awakening among the people. In Assam, the birth of journalism may be traced to the publication of *Arunodoi* by the American Baptist Missionaries in their press established at Sibsagar in 1844. Within a short period of time many other newspapers and periodicals were published in Assam, such as, Assam Bilashini, AsamMihir,AssamDarpan,The Assam News, etc. These newspapers and periodicals provided information to the people on modern knowledge, raised awareness and created public opinion on current issues. Continuous reports in the Press on issues like opium consumption, pitiable working condition of the tea garden labourers, etc raised public opinion to such a level that discussion on these topics became common among all sections of the Assamese people.

Moreover, the literary movement was crowned with success in 1872 when George Campbell, the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, restored the lost glory of the Assamese language. Bengali was replaced by Assamese in 1872. This restoration of the Assamese language provided the people of Assam with the much needed moral boost and showed that demands could be secured from the British Government in an organized manner.

- **Emergence of Assamese Intelligentsia**

The introduction of Western education and the development of the Press along with the economic grievances of the people led to the rise of

Assamese intelligentsia. This group of Assamese people having knowledge of modern ideas and western values had a dramatically different outlook from that of the common Assamese masses. They sowed the seeds of *Renaissance* (new age) in Assam. Ananda Ram DhekialPhukan was the harbinger of this new age and his work was carried forward by Hem Chandra Barua, GunabhiramBarua and others. The new generation of Assamese writers like LakshminathBezbaruah, PadmanathGohainBarua and others, with their writings, infused Assamese literature and the minds of the Assamese people with both the liberalism of the West and the glorious tradition of Assam's past.

In Assam, traditionally, the *Raij-Mels* were there as an assembly of village people for discussing the socio-political issues. The Assamese intelligentsia formed socio-political organisations like the *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha*in 1884,*The Assam Association* in 1903 andthe *Assam ChatraSanmilan* in 1915. These organisations initially pressed for regional demands but gradually merged into mainstream politics. They immensely contributed to the rise of Assamese nationalism and to the nationalmovement for freedom from British rule.



ACTIVITY-13.1

Write a few lines on Ananda Ram DhekialPhukan.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q.1: The East India Company's rule came to an end in the year…….(Fill in the Blank)

Q.2: The Assam Association was formed in the year……...(Fill in the blank)

Q.3:……..was formed in the year 1844.(Fill in the blank)