UNIT 9: RESISTANCE TO THE BRITISH RULE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Describe the Anti-British Uprisings in Assam,
- Analyse the different agrarians uprising that took place in Assam.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have discussed the coming of the British to Assam. The reaction to the British rule in Assam first made by the Ahom nobility. In this unit we shall discuss the anti-British uprisings made by the Ahom nobility in detail.

There were also various agrarian uprisings in different places of Assam as the Assamese ryots were dissatisfied with the British policies. This aspect too will be discussed in this unit.

9.3 ANTI-BRITISH UPRISINGS

In the previous unit we have seen how the British gradually established their rule in Assam after the first Anglo Burmese war. Though the British initially appeared as the saviour of the Assamese people, yet their imperialistic intentions soon became apparent. Therefore, discontent with the British rule soon began to rear its head. The people of Assam were resentful of the British from the very beginning. Especially, the upper class of began to doubt the motives of the British and became dissatisfied with their policy and actions. The nobles discovered that their estates and *paiks* were being taken away from them in lieu of petty pensions and offices in the subordinate ranks. The introduction of British rule actually broke the basic structure of the old regime. This loss of powers and privileges that they had always enjoyed as members of the ruling classes led them to rethink about the intentions of the British. They could now foresee a very bleak future for themselves under the British. Therefore, they joined hands with others to plan for the expulsion of the British from their country and to restore the old regime. Their actions soon resulted in a series of unsuccessful attempts to throw off the foreign rule.

- **Rebellion of Gomdhar Konwar**

Moamariyas-The Moamariyas were a group of disciples of the Mayamara Satra.

The first of these attempts was made in 1828 under the leadership of Gomdhar Konwar, the son of Phena Konwar, a prince of the Ahom royal blood and Dhananjoy Peali Bargohain. Some other ex-nobles of the Ahom court also joined hands with them. They declared Gomdhar as the Raja of the country. They collected men and arms and established Gomdhar on the throne at Bassa in the South-East corner of Jorhat. They levied taxes on the people and incited them to rebel against the British administration. After performing the coronation rituals the rebels with their armed forces advanced towards Mariani, twelve miles from Jorhat where they were intercepted by a detachment under Lieutenant Rutherford. The arrival of

the political agent, Captain Neufville at Rangpur and the swift action taken by him created confusion among Gomdhar's followers. After a feeble resistance, Gomdhar fled to the Naga hills, while most of his associates were arrested. Later on Gomdhar Konwar surrendered and he was sentenced to seven years imprisonment and sent to Rangpur Jail in Bengal. His associate Dhananjoy was sentenced to death but he managed to escape and fled to Naga hills.

- **The Second Rebellion**

The second rebellion was organized initially by Dhananjoy and his son Haranath in 1829. Dhananjoy and some other followers of Gomdhar managed to escape to the Matak country and they again designed an elaborate plan for an anti-British rising on a grand scale. Dhananjoy was aided by his two sons, Harakanta and Haranath and his son-in-law, Jeuram Dihingia Baruah. Very soon they were joined by Peali Barphukan, son of Badan Chandra Barphukan, the former Viceroy of Guwahati, Rupchand Konwar and Boom Singpho. Aid was also sought from the chiefs of the *Moamariyas*, the Khamtis, the Singphos, the Khasis, the Garos and the Nagas. Secret letters were sent to them and they were requested to send troops for the expulsion of the British. Rupchand Konwar was set up as their candidate for the throne. After performing the rituals called *Deo-Puja* the rebels marched towards Rangpur to set fire to the small British armoury there. But their attack was repulsed and they were driven out by the British garrison. Most of the leaders except Dhananjoy (who again fled to the hills along with his son Harakanta) were caught. Peali, Jeuram, Haranath, Rupchand and Boom Singpho were tried by the *panchayat* at Jorhat. All of them having been found guilty of treason and rebellion were sentenced to death. The final decision was taken by Scott. Peali and Jeuram were hanged. The other rebel leaders were sentenced to imprisonment for 14 years, banished to Bengal and their property confiscated.

- **The Third Rebellion**

A third attempt against British rule was undertaken in 1830 by Gadadhar Singha who was also known as Eyang Gomendeo. He was said to be a relative of the former Raja Jogeswar Singha. He tried to secure the

support of the sepoys at Sadiya by diplomatic means but they caught him and sent him to Guwahati. It was suspected that he got tactical support from the Burmese king to fight against the British. The British Government in alarm soon arrested him. Thus, his attempt failed miserably. Nothing is known about him after his arrest.

- **The Insurrection of the Khasis (1829)**

The discontent against the British was not restricted to Upper Assam alone. In the hills of Assam also, the local people resisted the British intervention. Dr. S.L. Baruah writes that the most determined and organized resistance against the British came from the Khasis (1828-30). Several Khasi chiefs, on account of their involvement with the Burmese War, lost their hold over the *duars* (passes) areas, which they had enjoyed under the Ahom Government. This led to an economic crisis for the Khasis and they resolved to protest against this. Barmanik, the ruler of Khairam took the initiative in this regard. In August, 1828 he came down to the plains of Dimoria near Guwahati and seized the revenue collected by the revenue officials. He also publicly declared his intention to re-occupy the *duars* soon.



LET US KNOW

Subsidiary Alliance

The doctrine of subsidiary alliance was introduced by Lord Richard Wellesley, British Governor General of India from 1798 to1805. Under this doctrine, Indian rulers came under British protection, suspended their native armies and instead maintained British troops within their states. They surrendered control of their foreign affairs to the British. In return, the British protected them from the attacks of their rivals.

But it was U. Teerut Singh, a brave Khasi chief and *Siyem* or Raja of Nongkhalo, who led the actual war of liberation. He had been persuaded by David Scott to place himself under British protection by a treaty in 1826 and he agreed to the building of a road across Khasi hills joining Assam with Sylhet. When the road was completed and a bunglow and police outpost

were constructed at Nongkhalo, doubts arose in the minds of the freedom loving Khasi people that it might be the beginning of a larger attempt of the British to occupy their territories. On April 4, 1829, a band of about 500 Khasis launched a sudden attack and massacred two English officials, Lieutenant Burlton and Bedingsfield and 60 Indian sepoys at Nongkhalo. They also burnt down the bungalow and released the convicts employed on the road. Teerut Singh himself led the attack having realized his mistake in allowing the British access to their territory. Other *Siyems* also joined hands with Teerut Singh and various other hill men joined the insurrection. The British sent forces from all sides to suppress the revolt. By 1830 many Khasi chiefs surrendered but Teerut Singh continued to fight till June, 1832. Teerut Singh, the hero of the Khasis, surrendered at last on 13th January, 1833 and became a prisoner in the British prison at Dacca where a separate house was allotted to him with a monthly pension of Rs.63.The British pacified the Khasis by bringing the *Siyems* under the *Subsidiary Alliance*.

- **Result and significance of the Early Anti-British uprisings**

The uprisings discussed above failed to achieve their immediate objectives. The rebels had failed because of the lack of popular support to their cause. The common people could not forget the bitter memory of tyranny and injustice which they had suffered in the hands of the nobles during the previous regime in Assam. They also did not forget the fact that these nobles did not come to the help of the common people during the Burmese invasion. Therefore, they preferred the alien rule to the autocratic rule of the local chiefs and nobles.

Secondly, the rebellions were not properly organized. They did not have adequate military strength to fight against the organized and superior British force.

Thirdly, most of these rebellions were organized in a hurried manner and the leaders of the rebellions lacked political acumen and foresightedness. The leaders failed to feel the pulse of the people who did not want to bring back the earlier anarchic rule again. For all these reasons the early anti-British uprisings in Assam could not succeed. But K.N.Dutt has rightly pointed out that though defeated and crushed, the leaders of the

unequal fight against the foreign rulers left behind them a burning lesson of patriotism and sacrifice that inspired later generations to fight for liberation from the foreign rule.

Moreover, the early anti-British uprisings though failed to achieve its immediate objectives, yet it brought about an important change in the form of government in Upper Assam. It led to the restoration of the Ahom Monarchy to the throne of Upper Assam with limited territorial jurisdiction. Purandar Singha, a member of the Ahom royal family, was restored to the throne as a concession to popular feelings in Upper Assam. On March 1833, an agreement was made with Purandar Singha, by which he agreed to pay a tribute of Rs 50,000/- to the British. He also agreed to obey the orders of the British political agent.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Choose the correct alternative:

a) The first anti- British uprising took place in 1828 under the leadership of Gomdhar
Konwar / Phena Konwar.

b) Peali Barphukan, son of Lachit Barphukan / Badan Chandra Barphukan.

c) Gadadhar Singha / Jogeswar Singha was also known as Eyang Gomendeo.

d) Teerut Singh/ Gambhir Singh continued to fight against the British till June, 1832.

e) The Ahom Monarchy was restored in Lower Assam / Upper Assam.

9.4 AGRARIAN UPRISING IN ASSAM

Gossain-

A religious preceptor and the head of a Satra.

Doloi-

The chief officer of Hindu temple in Kamarupa.

Gaonburha-

A village headman.

After the Revolt of 1857, the rule of the East India Company came to an end and India passed into the direct control of the British Crown. But there was, however, little immediate change in the character of the internal administration and the British rulers continued their policy of exploiting the resources of the country with the resultant state of impoverishment of the people. Popular discontent increased with every new assessment of the land revenue at enhanced rates or with the imposition of new taxes such as the Income Tax, Stamp Duties, License Tax, etc. Maniram Dewan protested against the opium trade of the East India Company in Assam. But his protest was unheeded and opium and salt continued to yield large revenue for the government. The language controversy which arose out of the introduction of Bengali into the courts and schools of Assam in place of Assamese in 1837 also agitated the popular mind in the 1860s.

Raij Mels were held in different parts of the state under the leadership of local leaders like *Gossains, Dolois* or influential land-owners to ventilate their popular grievances. Ryots both Hindus and Muslims became united under the *Gossains, Dolois*, or *Gaonburhas* of their respective areas to lodge their protests against the arbitrary and unjustified revenue assessment of the British Raj. Thus, discontent against the alien rule, which in earlier period was generally confined to the members of royalty and aristocracy, now touched every member of the society and popular movements became a usual feature of this period.

9.4.1 THE PHULAGURI UPRISING, 1861

In 1861 the peasants of Phulaguri area in the Nagaon district, who were mostly tribal (Tiwa and Kachari) people vehemently protested through their Raij Mels against the prohibition of Poppy cultivation. In that year rumours of imposition of taxes on incomes and on areca nuts and betel leaves made them angry. But the British authorities did not pay any attention to their sentiments and adopted strong measures to suppress the demonstrations of resentments made by the peasants in 1861.

One British officer, Lt. Singer, a Junior Assistant Commissioner, lost his life and his body was thrown into Kalong river. The Police force accompanying him fled in panic. Lt. Sconce, the District Officer of Nagaon, was greatly alarmed and sent an armed force to the spot. Several persons lost their lives while many were injured when the crowd was fired upon. Forty one persons were arrested on charge of their alleged implication in the murder case and eight or nine leaders, mostly tribal, were punished with death or deportation. This incident is still remembered by the people of Assam as the *Phulagurir Dhawa* or the Battle of Phulaguri. It was the earliest spontaneous popular movement in Assam against the policy of colonial exploitation.

9.4.2 The Jayantia Rebellion, 1860-63

The people of the Jayantia hills were greatly dissatisfied with the imposition of new kind of taxes like house tax, stamp duty, etc by the British Government. They rose in open rebellion. The British suppressed them with a strong hand, but the trouble did not stop there. The Khasi people were roused to action when a License Tax which interfered in their tribal customs was introduced shortly afterwards. The British finally suppressed them in 1863 after a long and hard campaign.



LET US KNOW

License tax was a tax fixed by the British Government for keeping arms by the people.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

2. Name the new taxes imposed by the British Government.

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3. Name the British officer whose body was thrown to Kalang River.

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4. In which year did the British Government suppress the Jayantia Rebellion?

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9.4.3 THE ASSAM RIOTS, 1894

Among the agrarian outbreaks in Assam, the most important rebellion was the Assam Riots of 1893-94. In 1893, the Chief Commissioner of Assam Sir William Ward decided to enhance land revenue according to its capacity. The new assessment increased the rates by 70 to 80 percent and this greatly annoyed the farmers. A series of Raij-Mels were held in the districts of Kamrup and Darrang to voice popular resentment. They demanded the withdrawl of the unjust orders which affected their economic stability that was solely based upon land and agriculture. The people of Rangia and Lachima in Kamrup, and Patharughat in Darrang launched a “no tax campaign” declaring excommunication to be the penalty for any one who disobeyed the *Raij* (people). It alarmed the authorities and they used force to suppress these popular uprisings which they called Riots.

- **Rangia**

In December 1893 and January 1894 the situation in Rangia was very tense. The movement at Rangia started with the looting of the Rangia bazar. The Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup McCabe arrived on the spot and arrested many leaders. On 10th January, several thousand people assembled in the field close to the Rangia police station. When McCabe ordered them to disperse they shouted “We won’t pay the increased revenue.” On the evening of the same day they attempted to release the arrested leaders by forcing their way into the police station whereupon the police opened fire on them. Finding the situation critical McCabe called for additional reinforcements. Many of them lost their lives and many were arrested. This uprising was suppressed with a strong hand. But even then

the Raij Mels in Nalbari, Barama, Bajali and other places continued to be as active as before.

- **Lachima**

On January 1894, a mauzada*r* and a mandal were severely assaulted at a village (Kalpa) near Lachima in the Sarukshetri mouza of the Kamrup district. They had gone there for collection of revenue. Seventy-five persons were arrested in this connection. The threatening attitude of the ryots compelled McCabe to arrive at Lachima and he adopted very strong measures to suppress the uprising. The local people still remember the barbarity with which the authorities here sought to cow down the people.

- **Patharughat**

A similar uprising took place at Patharughat in Darrang District in January, 1894. Not only did the ryots refuse to pay the increased amount of revenue but they also stopped those who sought to pay revenues to the government. To deal with the situation, J.D. Anderson, the D.C. of Darrang, arrived at Patharughat with a band of military police under Lt. Berrington. Next morning a huge crowd assembled in a paddy field in front of the rest house where Anderson was staying. Anderson asked them to disperse but the people would not listen and began to throw sticks and clods of earth at Anderson. Being ordered Lt. Berrington then opened fire resulting in the death of fifteen people and injury to many ryots. The Patharughat incident is still remembered as the *Doli Ran* as the people attacked the British with clods of earth.

There were similar uprisings in many other parts of Assam. The government adopted many strong measures to suppress them. The Raij Mels in Assam played an important role in making the people conscious of the utter helplessness in which they lived under the British Raj. From these uprisings, the British realised that unless the Raij Mels were crushed, the maintenance of British sovereign power in Assam would be next to impossible.

The agrarian uprising of 1893-94 in Assam had far reaching effect particularly in the context of the future struggle against the British Raj. The Raij Mels in Assam played an important role in making the people aware of the utter helplessness in which they lived under the alien rulers. The uprisings

of 1893-94 caused a deep stir throughout the province and had their echo even in the Imperial Legislative Council.



CHECK YOU PROGRESS

5. (Tick the correct answer)

Who was the D.C. of Darrang during the time of Assam Riots?

i) Lt. Mc. Cabe

ii) J.D. Anderson

iii) Berrington

iv) Captain Singer

6. Why was the Patharughat Uprising known as Doli Ran?

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ACTIVITY - 9.1

Make a list of the leaders of the agrarian uprisings in Assam.

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9.5 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you must have learnt about

- the anti-British uprisings in Assam.
- the various agrarian uprisings which broke out in different places of Assam.
- the peasantry of Assam was highly dissatisfied with the British rule and they protested against their rule.
- their discontent found expression in such events as the Phulaguri Uprising (1861), the Jayantia Rebellion (1860-63) and the Assam Riots (1894). All these pointed out to a popular dissatisfaction with the British rule.