

Phulaguri Dhawa: From Resistance To Tribal Revolt

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Abstract

In this research article we would like explore tribal resistance and revolt that took place in Phulaguri Dhawa in 1861, an earliest popular tribal peasant revolt in Assam and North East India its nature, organization, methods and mass participation against the unjust British administration. Due to numbers of faulty legislations against the local peasants, undermining of tribal social organizations, land and goods taxes etc. by British administration were responsible tribal uprising during this period. Tribal movement is considered as more rebellious and ‘civilized’ rulers suppressed them as they had higher level of quality arms. They were in a situation of conflict with the British colonists as seriously encroached customary rights and territories. Phulaguri Dhawa is such kind of revolt against the ineffective British administration i.e. increasing forceful taxes burden and bureaucratic mindlessness. Dhawa means battle, to Lalung (Tiwa) word “Tawa” meaning encounter, battle. Phulaguri Dhawa was the first people’s and peasant revolt in the Assam of North East region desiring freedom from British administration. The agitation in Nowgong is mainly in Phulaguri area inhabited by Lalung. The peasant tribe at the very beginning were started organized form peaceful assemble, protest and resistance. Consequent period the resistance took into a violent one. The major objective of the piece of research is to endeavor the nature, issues and participation of masses, leadership of tribal resistance to revolt in Phulaguri (Dhawa i.e. Tribal Uprising), a desiring freedom from British colonial administration. In this paper we would use historical and descriptive methods of research and sources like books, journals, government records, newspapers etc. will be considered.

Key Words: Phulaguri, Dhawa, Tribal, Peasant, Resistance, Revolt

Introduction

Tribal movements in India are old as other kinds of movement. Tribal movements generally considered being rebellious and ‘civilized’ rulers suppressed them as they had standard quality arms. They were also in a situation of conflict both with the Hindu feudal and the British colonists as the occurring seriously encroached on their indigenous rights and self-govern territories. According to Roy Burnan, during British rule, alienation from land, due to faulty legislation (land & goods taxes too) pertaining to forest lands, and lack of understanding of the

tribal social organization (chieftain) were responsible for many tribal uprising. However, later the tribal movement is being characterized by strong tendency towards establishing tribal identity.

In India, from 1763 to 1856 various regions against situations existing due to the Company Rule and numbers of rebellions took place. Nevertheless, these rebellions by nature were not national but local, as were the effect that they had. During colonial period numbers of tribal resistances and revolts outbreaks, similarly there is no systematic analytical work which

examines these struggles from the point of view of delineating the roles of specific sections and classes of the tribal population which to leadership, provided guidance, raised local specific issues, mobilization and revolt against the British rule. Since the uprisings had their specific local issues as well as purposes they remained isolated from uprisings in different regions. However, the tribal resistance and revolt which took place during colonial period never obtained the focus it rightfully earned, although it contributed a lot in the dissolution of British rule in India. The nature of the struggle against the British changes after 1860. Meanwhile, the British imposed taxes on land and productive goods that hampered their indigenous beliefs and traditions they took it as a challenge to their birth rights and revolt against the British colonial authorities. Phulaguri Dhawa is a battle of the peasant against the British wrong administration i.e. increasing tax burden and bureaucratic mindlessness that's led by of the heroic Lalung tribe with organized form of mass (male & female) resistance to revolt in 1861.

Review of the Literature

About eighty-six tribal revolts in India, thirty-seven revolts is said to have occurred in the North East India. Tribal resistance in the region had been considerable and what makes these revolts bear an impact on British policy towards the tribal people (Meeta Deka, 2011). Tribal movements in India are as earlier as other kinds of movement. Tribal movement is considered being rebellious, but 'civilized' rulers suppressed them as they had standard level of quality arms. The Tribal were in a situation of conflict both with the Hindu over lords and the British colonists as latter seriously encroached on earlier customary rights and territories (M.S.A. Rao, ed. 2012). Phulaguri Dhawa was the first people's and peasant revolt in the Brahmaputra valley desiring freedom from British administration. The leaders of the Dhawa were Tiwa (Lalung) Raja Powali i.e. Chieftains

(A.J.M. Mills, 1984). In 1861 the peasant population of the Phulaguri area in Nowgong District, mostly tribal, vehemently protested through their mels (assemblies) against the prohibition of poppy and imposition of taxes on incomes and betel-nuts and pan (K.N. Dutt, 1958).

Methodology of the Study

Basically this piece of study is used historical as well descriptive method of research. The proposed research work is to be done and considered based on secondary sources including books, government records, journals, newspapers etc.

Objective of the Study

The major objective of the piece of research is to endeavor the nature, issues and participation of masses, leadership of tribal resistance to revolt in Phulaguri (Dhawa i.e. Tribal Uprising), a desiring freedom from British colonial administration.

Why Phulaguri Dhawa is Significant?

The North East India and especially Assam has major contribution in different areas to socio-cultural, political and economic life of the Indian Nation, however much of these contribution have often remained unnoticed, unobserved by the national intelligentsia. For instance is with the freedom movement in India. Assam of North East India had her significant role especially the tribal i.e. Tiwa tribes had significant share in the freedom movement (much earlier of Non-cooperation movement), where the country fought to a man in order to oust the two-century old British rule from the country. The Tiwa of middle Assam were acted as the major mover i.e. in the official records of freedom movement was organized and uprising Phulaguri Dhawa in 18 October, 1861. It was the first ever organized peasant movement in the context of Indian freedom movement, took place much before the

Champaran led by Mahatma Gandhi and Bengal farmers had revolt.

Therefore, Phulaguri Dhawa (Tribal uprising) was not a historic event but also a expression of their sentiment. It was also the first ever non-cooperation movement of Indian freedom movement where, the local tribal people and peasants of Phulaguri had appealed and later decided to stopped payment of taxes to the British administration. It was never ever seen earlier anywhere within Indian territory before Phulaguri Dhawa.

Historical Background

The Treaty of Yandaboo was official marked the end of the Ahom Monarchy and established the British Sovereignty in Assam. After the occupation of the British, Assam was divided into two division- Lower Assam and Upper Assam, head quarter Guwahati and Rangpur respectively. David Scott who was appointed as the Senior Commissioner of Lower Assam and Upper Assam was given under the direct military rule of Colonel Richard who was also appointed as the Junior Commissioner. David Scott was not only appointed as Commissioner, but also Civil and Criminal Justice and charged him collection of revenue too. The British was gradually expended their sovereignty to Raha and Kaliabar though; Sovereign Gobha was ruled independently by the Lalung (Tiwa) king up to 1835. Finally, on the 15th March, 1835, the British forcefully occupied and ruled under leadership of Captain Lister. However, the Tiwas were fought and against the British unjust imperialism continuously.

Phulaguri Dhawa, 18 October, 1861

According to Hemkosh Dhawa means battle. Ganesh Senapati a Tiwa researcher states that the word “Dhawa” owes it origin from Tiwa word “Tawa” meaning encounter, battle. Phulaguri Dhawa, 1861 of Nowgong district in Assam was one such local tribal (Lalung) led agrarian uprising. India came under the direct control of the British after end of East India Company Rule in 1858. But the British rulers continued their policy of peasant exploitation and resources. The well-to-do middle-class peasant proprietors and government servants were not actively co-operated who were no less affected by recent taxes on income, trade and profession. It was the 1860 ban on poppy cultivation, the increase in land revenue on dry crop lands in 1861 was much represented in Nowgong that affected the peasant economy the most. In September 1861 about 1,500 peasants marched to district head quarter peacefully. It was fact that the Magistrate always dealt with riots in a high-handed and provocative manner, and did not allow them to even enter his office compound. The Phulaguri locality of 18 October, 1861 was the first occurrence of determined resistance by the riots of Assam through organization of Raij Mel (people’s assembly). The British policy of 1860 banned the cultivation of poppy, thereby making totally dependent on Government opium and this prohibition order shattered the traditional domestic economy of the tribal areas where consumption of opium was estimated highest in the province. Definitely, it had also effects on tribal habit, social custom and economy at the same time, introduction of the licence tax which was unexpected to the local tribal and alarmed at the prospect of another impending tax. Again a rumour spread that a new tax was to be levied upon their houses, barriers and betel leaf cultivation.



Phulaguri Dhawa (Dhewa), October 18, 1861

Method, Participation & Nature of the Revolt

Approximately 1,000 riots assembled by 15th October (1861) 500-600 of whom were armed with bamboo lathis. A police party that came to spread over a wide area the assembly was driven out, save one policeman who was taken into custody by the people. By 17 October, 3,000 to 4,000 people was gathered. The police incidentally made yet another attempt to break up the assembly and arrested the leaders the same day. However, all of them forcibly rescued by the people, the police had to leave the spot but the situation remained unchanged. The next day, on 18 October a British officer, Lieutenant Singer came with a people party and met the leading members of the assembly. The riots restate, through a spokesman their complaints about the ban on opium cultivation and their unpleasant will about the income and pan taxes. They added that as the District Magistrate had not interested and attended to their grievances, they were examining means of carrying their complaints to the higher authorities in the mel. But Singer ordered them to scatter and tried seize their

bamboo lathis. Accidently the British officer Singer got killed in the revolt. The panicky Nowgong District Magistrate came himself at treasury and sent armed force to the trouble-spot. He fired on the crowd, leading to several deaths. By 23rd October all was quiet again fresh military forces arrived from Tezpur and Gauhati. Narsingh Lalung and eight other tribal peasant leaders were punished with long-term imprisonment.

It is need to mention here that Panchaoraja (Five Kings viz- Sararaja, Khaigharia, Topakuchia, Barpujia and Mikir raja) and Satoraja (Seven kings viz- Tetelia, Mayang, Baghara, Ghagua, Sukhnagog, Tarani Kalbari and Damal) of the then Lalung (Tiwa) kings under their jurisdiction were also participated and support in the revolt against the British government administration as they had also their grievances. However, the Phulaguri Dhawa tribal uprising was not a proper organized revolt; it was the climax of a large number of deep rooted grievances of Lalung peasants against the British Government. Unfortunate that this uprising was degraded the good reputation by colonial journalists as an uprising of some opium eater against the ban of poppy cultivation. The Phulaguri tribal uprising has an immense

significance primarily because it inaugurated a new era of peasant awakening in Assam, later such as peasant uprising in Rangiya, Lachima and Pathorighat. And, however Phulaguri uprising was basically a tribal led peasant uprising, the rebellious received support and sympathy of other segment of peasant. It was an evidence of people's desire to liberate them from the slavery of imperialistic exploitation. The decision of the tribal peasant of the Phulaguri locality not to pay taxes and refused to government policies in 1861 must be considered as the early beginning part of non-cooperation movement in India.

Result of Post Revolt

General Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam arrived at Phulaguri of the second half of October with hundreds sepoy and started an all-out torture regime in the Raha-Phulaguri of Nagaon. Disturbed over the violent atrocities on the fellow people, the leaders of uprising surrendered before the administration. Laxman Singh Senapati, Rangbar Deka, Changbar Lalung and were hanged in the Nagaon Jail, some of them i.e. Rupsingh Lalung, Sib Singh Lalung, Hebera Lalung, Nar Singh Lalung, Katia Lalung and many others were banished to Kalapani of Andaman Island, because they were confessed to killing Lt Singer. The rest Narsingh Lalung and more others tribal peasant leaders were punished with long-term imprisonment. And thus the Phulaguri Dhawa a peasant movement was suppressed ruthlessly by the British Colonial authority.

Causes of Failure

The Phulaguri uprising of 18 October, 1961 was purely based on local issues and demand that limited in a particular area as well as sporadic one. It was probably confined only at Phulaguri, Raha and other remote areas of Nowgong district of Assam. The organization of the revolt was not

spread as now in the various parts of India. Lack of modern leadership capacity, standard modern arms, and mass participation especially educated proprietors and government servants, middle classes, traditional methods of organization and techniques, sound economy, lack of communication and insulting of intelligentsia about the Revolt were the major causes of the failure of the Revolt. Therefore the Revolt failed to achieve its aims and objectives to a great extent.

Conclusion

Observation and discussion from the above it is seen that the Lalung tribe organized and participated in revolt against British government and policies that they were felt disturbed. The peaceful self-governed Lalung (Tiwa) were counted highly exploited social groups since the colonial rule. The Lalung had follow by chief (Raja-Kingdom), customary laws and traditions for administration their affairs. They mostly preferred peaceful existence with isolation and depended on the land and forests as sources of livelihood. It is also observed that the British administration did not pay specific attention and care to improve them in this stage. Tribal economy had contributed in local as well as national economy. State that execution of new irrelevant and unfamiliar legal systems by the British administration, which proved beyond the capacity of the Tribal. Consequently, the under privileged Tiwa is listed as Scheduled Tribe under the new Constitution of India since 1950, and now the Tiwa is fighting for survive another movement as in present form is being characterized by strong tendency towards establishing tribal identity.

Phulaguri Dhawa was not only resistance to tribal revolt; it was an anti-colonial movement of the people. Though the movement failed to achieved goal, the precedent was not lost upon the people; it was followed up soon-after. It is very

sad us that the state as well as national government has forgotten to commemorate the event and honour the martyrs. The free India regional and national government administration have no little time to organize an hour long function to commemorate and celebrate the day. However, this tribal resistance and revolt later encouraged the entire people to participate actively in the freedom movements of India as well as free India in many parts of the Country.

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