

## ASSAM PROPER AND BEYOND: UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF PEASANT MOVEMENTS

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**Abstract:** Peasants, as the largest segment of humanity, have historically held a significant role in shaping our collective destinies. This paper delves into the multifaceted identity of peasants, tracing their evolution from simple land tillers to complex historical figures. The concept of a peasant, of French origin and widely adopted in English from the 15th century, intertwines work on the land with village life. Oswald Spengler's portrayal of peasants as organic rather than purely historical beings further underscores their complex nature.

This study reveals that the term 'peasant' emerged as a legal distinction during the high middle ages, marking a critical juncture in the history of agriculture. Defining a peasant proves to be an elusive task, with various interpretations encompassing individuals who engage in agriculture, utilize their own tools, and rely on family labor.

Shifting the focus to a global context, the paper highlights the emergence of revolutionary transformations worldwide, particularly drawing the attention of social scientists from the 1960s onward. Prior to this period, historians primarily concentrated on political history. However, recent developments have spurred social scientists to examine peasants within a class framework rooted in Marxism. Social movements, which can either seek to preserve the status quo or promote change, play a pivotal role in shaping societies according to their objectives.

The terminology surrounding social change is examined, shedding light on the interchangeable use of words like rebellion, revolution, revolt, uprising, movement, and insurrection. Dictionaries and encyclopedias offer varying definitions of 'movement,' with some describing it as the general tendency of current thought, taste, opinion, or action. Lenin's perspective frames revolution as a profound and complex science, emphasizing that revolutions are not manufactured on demand but rather mature through historical development and erupt due to a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Revolutions emerge when millions of individuals collectively reach the conclusion that the existing order is no longer tenable.

**Keywords:** Peasants, Revolution, Social Movements, Historical Development, Marxism.

### Introduction

The peasants, who constitute the largest single segment of mankind, play a special role in shaping our destinies. Literally, a peasant is one who tills the land. Raymond William says that peasant, a word of French origin, came to be widely used in English from the 15<sup>th</sup> century for one, who worked on land and also lived in the village.,<sup>1</sup> Oswald Spengler portrayed the peasant as an organic, rather than historical figure. The peasant in the legal sense was not an ancient figure unaffected by history but rather a historical figure that emerged in the high middle ages. Evidence reveals that the word 'peasant' did not appear before those engaged in agriculture became legally distinguishable.

It is naturally elusive to give a rigorous definition of the peasant. The peasant, a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, working with his own implements and using the labour of his family.

Revolutionary transformation has become a world-wide process and this transformation began to attract the attention of the social scientists since 1960. Prior to that, there was only political history as historians had concentrated their attention on that. Recently, some social scientists turn their attention on peasant study in a class framework that is rooted in Marxism.<sup>4</sup> Sometime, movements hope to preserve the status-quo in the face of threatened changes and in this case, social movement can play a vital role in changing the pattern of society according to its desire.

The terms like rebellion, revolution, revolt, uprising, movement and insurrection have been used synonymously. Dictionaries, encyclopedia and glossaries have given different meaning to the term 'movement'. According to Chamber's Dictionary, movement means 'general tendency of current thought, taste, opinion or action or mere drift.' So, a series of combined action and endeavour of body of persons for a special object is called movement. According to Lenin, revolution is a profound, difficult and complex science.<sup>5</sup> Revolutions are not made to orders; they cannot be timed to any particular moment. They mature in a process of historical development and break-out at a moment determined by a whole complex of internal and external causes. Revolutions break out when tens of millions of people come to the conclusion that it is impossible to live in the old way any longer.<sup>6</sup>

Revolutions are inevitable in the process of social development. Political and social revolutions are not the same thing. 'Every revolution dissolves the old society and to that extent, it is social,' wrote Marx. 'Every revolution overthrows the old power and to that extent, it is political.' Revolutions affect the foundations of the rule of one or another class but coups only replace persons or groups of persons in power. Similarly, reforms help to overcome social contradictions but revolutions not.<sup>7</sup>

The peasants throughout the world have displayed a great role in various movements, and their participation in all such movements catapulted the movements to a new height. Indian scholars were largely influenced by various peasant movements that took place within and beyond India. Chinese revolutions and number of agrarian movements in Latin America are special among them. Naxalite movement in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also provided more scope to Indian sociologists, political scientists and scholars. The peasants played a predominant role in bourgeois revolutions which helped in ushering capitalist society in England and France, and communist societies in China and Russia.

Regarding the rebellious nature, Barrington Moore Jr said that the Chinese peasants were more rebellious than the peasants in India. But A.R.Desai, Dhanagare, R.Guha and Kathlene Gough disagreed with Moore's comment. According to Marx, peasant movement took place in response to extraction of surplus by landlords, money-lenders and the state. In the rural society of India, caste and economic interest play an important role in all respects. 'Class conflict is based on exploitation of peasantry,' Marx said. He treated the peasantry as a secondary social class and criticized the French peasantry for not taking side with the industrial proletariat in their struggle against the bourgeois in 1848.

It is noteworthy to explore why Indian peasants couldn't achieve their goal what the Europeans and the Chinese peasants could. Scholars in their studies find the fact. Caste system and the Hindus religion is an obstacle for which poor peasants could not organize against the exploitation. Like Marx, Ranajit Guha also mentioned about the primary and secondary discourse, terrible insurgencies and elite leadership. He in order to understand the peasant movement gives importance to exploitation on peasantry. Some scholars want to explain the peasant movement as predominantly middle-class movement. But it is not true in the case of the south. The poor peasants and the labourers are the 'backbone of resistance from the beginning till the very end'.<sup>8</sup>

The emergence of innumerable social movements with a multitude of issues, values and demands are very noticeable phenomenon in all contemporary societies. With the gradual transformation of the economic and social structure of the society and as a result of industrial revolution, various social movements emerged. Industrial revolution tore the structure and relations of feudalism and replaced it with capitalism. Development of capitalism and its inherent contradictions gave birth to many social movements in history. Fundamental rights have also played a significant role in the emergence of various contemporary social movements. Most of the historically significant political movements by nature are social movements.

Many social scientists have attempted to provide definition of social movement. The earliest definition perhaps was provided by Lorenz Vonstein, the Danish historian in 1852. In his analysis of the French revolution, he defined social movement as people coming together to change the condition of society. According to him, masses were the volatile element in society which was capable of bringing about social disruption and political change. In order to reach its goal, a social movement needs collective action, a social mobilization. For social mobilization, a social movement needs to depend on some kind of organization to provide leadership and direction. For this, the leadership needs some kind of ideology to explain a situation convincingly which it seeks to change through mobilization. These are the foundations on which 'the edifice of the movement stands; the stronger the foundation, the stronger is the movement and its impact on society and history.'<sup>9</sup>

The term 'peasant movement' and 'agrarian movement' refer to all kinds of collective attempt of different strata of the peasantry either to change the system 'which they felt ,was exploitative or to seek redress for particular grievances without necessarily aiming at overthrowing the system. The rural sociologists have analyzed the peasant unrest in different terms. For instance, A.R.Desai calls the unrest as 'the peasant struggle', Kathlene Gough terms it as 'peasant uprising', for N.G.Ranga again, 'it is a struggle of the peasantry ' and according to Hamza Alavi, 'it is a peasant revolution'. It appears that the sociologists who are oriented to Marxism have analysed the peasant agitation as struggle on the pattern of class struggle and class war. These sociologists look at the peasant agitations from the perspective of class antagonism. D.N.Dhanagare reviews the peasant agitation as a 'peasant movement'. The Dictionary meaning of 'agrarian' means anything related to land, its management or distribution. Agrarian system also includes land tenure system. Andrew Beteille says that

Agrarian system does not mean only peasantry

It is argued by economists and sociologists that the present agrarian problem of rural India is the outcome of the colonial policy adopted by the British in Pre-Independent India.<sup>11</sup> the process of Sanskritisation and Westernisation brought socio-cultural change in India which widened the mental horizon of the people and brought a revolutionary change in their socio-economic life. Imbued by this, they tried to break hitherto prevailing obsolete system. This gave birth to confrontation. It does not mean that the people never sought change before the starting of the process of westernization. But it became imminent after that.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, the peasant study receives much attention at the hands of Subaltern groups. It may be noted that earlier the Imperialist and the Nationalist historians have paid less importance on the role of the peasants in their movements. They emphasized to study their history through the eyes of elite leadership. Those who believe in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist formulations regarding peasant movements, they assign the role of motive force in such movements to the urban proletariat, and in the rural areas, to the poor peasantry.

Middle peasants are taken to be firm allies and on occasions, alliance is envisaged even with the rich peasants. Counter to this in recent years, a school of peasant studies has sprung-up which sees the middle peasant as the class most liable to rise in revolt and feels that the socio-economic condition handicaps the poor peasants

including agricultural labourers and it makes them more revolutionary. To these social scientists, 'assigning primacy in peasant movement to the poor peasantry is no more than conforming to Marxist orthodoxy.'<sup>13</sup>

The system of British administration reduced vast masses to poverty. The result was maladministration as the alien government cared more for revenue than for the philanthropic works. For example, Nowgong became depopulated in 1832-33 due to the hike of revenue and ¼ of the *total population abandoned their houses and took asylum in Jayantia, Kachar and Yamunamukh*. Four years later in 1836, some peasants of Nowgong resorted to the path of revolt against the revenue augmentation. The attempted reform and reorganization of the administration could not eradicate the evils of an government and their satellites whose interest was more of economic exploitation than improving the lot of the masses or redress of their augmented grievances.<sup>14</sup>

Like the other parts of India, the echo of the revolt of 1857 was felt in Assam province also, and it was fuelled by Maniram Dewan. The revolt of 1857 had imposed severe financial strain on the British Indian government. Local authorities in Assam began to tap new sources of revenue to meet their increasing expenditure. The government increased the revenue demand by 3 to 4 times. Stamp duties and income tax were introduced in 1858 and 1861 respectively in addition to excise duties and taxes for grazing and cutting timber and reeds. To make the large number of opium-eaters dependent extremely on government opium, cultivation of poppy was totally banned in 1861. Already, the increase of land revenue on dry crop lands in 1861 was much resented in Nowgong. But as the news of the ban on the poppy cultivation reached Nowgong, the fury of the peasants burst-out, as it affected their economy the most. The people were also apprehensive about the imposition of tax on betel nut and *paan* cultivation. All these, however, led to an agitation, mainly among the Lalung tribe of Phulaguri in Nowgong in 1861. All sections came out in support of the rebels but finally met fiasco.

In 1868-69, the government had increased the rates of revenue on *rupit* and non-*rupit* lands from 25 to 50 %. The people particularly in the districts of Kamrup and Darrang reacted against this enhanced through the *raijmels*. The people launched no-tax campaign against the ruthless imposition of higher rates of assessment at Lchima, Rangia and neighbouring areas of erstwhile Kamrup and Patharughat of erstwhile Darrang towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both the Hindus and the Muslims met together in the *mels*, and nouseated their vehement protest against the revenue-hike on land. Anyway, the movements of Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat lost their edge and met ultimate fiasco. Indeed, all revolts against the British from 1828 onward failed to achieve their goals. P.N.Gohain Barua, the founder of the Ahom Sahitya Sabha said 'the period from 1838 to 1893 was a season of dead –march for the Ahom community.' Within these years, he said, they became 'insignificant and neglected'.<sup>15</sup>

Each and every movement broke out already and going to break out in the years to come, if it is observed and studied meticulously from ancient to modern; there lie some causes behind them and that's can mainly be categorized in to two, one emanates from discontentment and the other from intolerance, former emanates from hunger that gives birth to anger and the later emanates from excessive hike of revenue in the form of taxes in various items mainly on land which affect directly falls on the peasants. If the characters and nature of various movements broke out or breaking out hither and thither in various parts of the world from ancient onwards and till today are examined; all are either political or socials connected mainly with economy.