

## Cry of the *Phulagurians* : A discourse on the causes behind

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### **Abstract:**

The blood that shed on the soil of Phulaguri is a tragic history written on the unwritten hearts of the *Phulagurians* of erstwhile Nowgong district of Assam. Each and every revolution is born out of the womb of injustice and the revolt of Phulaguri is also cannot be spared of this. The peasants of Phulaguri had fiercely resisted against the colonial government and the evils of foreign rule resulted to the culmination of the natural anger emanated from hunger in the succeeding days. In colonial exploitation system, those who suffered at best at the hands of the British government were the peasants and the subaltern class and the revolt of the *Phulagurians* is a clear example to that. Through this paper an attempt has been made here to address all this.

**key-words** : *culmination, subaltern ,apparatus, turbulence ,remission, centrifugal, centripetal, flushed-out, impediment, yeoman, leased out, jeopardized, mainstay, safety valve, languishing, induced, alluvial, withstand, imbecile, infringement, alleviates, indolent, emanating, misgiving, accentuated, imprudence, volatile, conflagrated*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

It is said that humanitarianism under laid many of the reforms introduced by the British in the 19th century. But we find a complete opposite picture as and while we go through the pages of history of colonial Assam. The government apparatus by initiating an endless process of raising revenue demand created tremors and turbulence in the hearts of the peasants what they could hardly forget. They remembered their previous years as halcyon since they had to pay less revenue during the Ahom regime.

The peasants of Assam led an independent life in pre-colonial period. Their independent life received tremendous set back after the introduction of British rule in their land. The alien government tried to employ them as labourers by imposing heavy tax what the indigenous peasants did not like. The planter community urged the government in 1859 to enhance the land revenue rates so that poor peasants could be flushed out of their villages to work for wages on their tea gardens.

According to Habib, nature's calamities underlined man's oppression. The heaviest burden that the peasants had to bear was the land tax, an arbitrary confiscation of such a large part of his produce. Payment of land tax was the root of all major social conflicts involving the peasants. In 1861, the government resorted to heavy enhancement of land tax throughout the province, more particularly in the western districts i.e. Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. People of Phulaguri of erstwhile Nowgong resisted against this in 1861. According to Kalita, the root cause of the Phulaguri upheaval was economic. Throughout the 19th century, the government had been primarily guided by financial consideration and complete protection of the peasants from the oppression of the government had been a mere dream in Assam. The colonial government realized Rs.1,55,651 in 1852-53 from land revenue and other taxes and that too only from Nowgong district. Realization of such heavy amount that too only from specific district bound us to think that probably the government resorted to harsh methods in realizing the revenue resulting culmination of anger of the peasants of Nowgong. Instead of criticizing the revenue hike, even the Christian missionaries also supported the revenue hike. In the issue of November, 1861, it was mentioned in '*Orunodoi*' that the rate of revenue in Assam was so light and nominal that such rates could not even be imagined in other provinces of India.

A peasant is always in close contact with his land which survives him. According to Walter Fernandez, land is not merely a source of cultivation or of building, in an agrarian economy; it is a sign of a person's social status. The British distorted their so-called social status by imposing heavy burden on land. Tribals in Assam especially of Nowgong were generally freedom loving people. Their only occupation was agriculture and for that they depended on land. So, whenever the government imposed tax on land, they took it as a challenge to their rights and social status.

The British government imposed heavy tax burden on the ordinary peasants. But the members of the royal family of Darrang Raja when applied for remission, they were exempted from paying land revenue. The members of the royal family of the Darrang Raja failed to pay the revenue even at half rates (1853-54, 1854-55) as fixed earlier and sought remission from the government. Bolinarayan Konwar, Amritnarayan Bahadoor, Rajooram Konwar and Rajnarayan Konwar were among them. Even government exempted land revenue and

money pension to the direct descendants of the Ahom kings. But such sympathy and tenderness was not at all shown to the mass people of Assam despite of their incapability and inability which gave birth to disdain against the colonial authority. The anomalies in the revenue system also created discontentment among the ryots against the British. The manner how settlement temporarily settled areas were conducted was arbitrary and unjust. The classification of land was neither scientific nor based on actual productivity of the soil. The conduct of the cadastral survey was defective. Monuments of the fields of each *mouza* were not carefully and systematically tested. Moreover, objections of the peasants were hardly discussed and less examined. Surveys were not free from errors.

Cheap price and high revenue also created problem for the people of Assam. The prices of edible goods were cheap and abundance in Assam in 1876 and 1888. According to Gunabhiram Barua, the price of *jaha*-rice was 4 or 5 paise per seer in erstwhile Nowgong. A family could take the curry of *mowa* fish at his table by 2 paise. With one hundred rupee, a family could lead his month happily and even saved from that. The price of 10 seers rice (good quality) were one rupee at Nowgong sadar market in 1875. The price of 8 seers gram or 20 seers *matimah* (a kind of black pulse) or 7 seers salt were one rupee. After 12 years also (1877-1888) at the same market, 8 seers good quality rice or 16 seers ordinary rice could be purchased at one rupee. Gram 9 seers or *matimah* 15 seers or salt 8 seers could be purchased at one rupee. There was no dearth and want of food and clothes. If the price of edible goods were cheap and available in 1876 and 1888, then it is quite natural that it was cheaper in 1860-61. For instance, there was probably no dearth of things at Nowgong in 1860-61. Prices of local commodities were cheap but on the contrary, the rate of revenue was too high. The relation between the price rate and the revenue rate were centrifugal and centripetal. The government gave them less price for their crops but collected more revenue from them. There was no conformity and uniformity between give and take which finally gave birth to a wave of resentment in their minds. A peasant takes a great deal of pride in his agriculture. It is the life blood of a peasant. Behind his crop lies his blood drop. The colonial government through the maximization of land revenue sucked the blood of the poor peasants.

Gandhiji very rightly observed that if villages live who can perish India and if villages perish, who can save India. The British by discouraging agriculture, sought to destroy the village economy of Assam. They did not encourage traditional agriculture of Assam rather tried to destroy it by abolishing the *paik* system so that they could be flushed out from agriculture to plantation. The nobles and aristocratic classes did not like its abolition and took it as an insult to them. For instance, Brahmin slave-holders of Kamrup even held a protest demonstration and submitted to the authorities a bunch of 1000 petitions seeking permission to retain their slaves and bondsmen.

In ancient and medieval period, our native government gave more importance in agriculture sector. For instance, for the development of agriculture, irrigation had been practiced in India from ancient times onwards. Many works of the Mughal emperors on the Ganges and the Yamnuna, the inundation canals of Sindh and the tanks, wells and field embankments found everywhere in India show that in ancient times people of India attached great importance to irrigation. On the contrary, colonial government showed more apathy in this irrigation sector. A scarcity of water was an impediment of agriculture; the British government should have given more importance in this irrigation sector.

For the improvement of agriculture, even Mohammad Bin Tughluq in medieval period opened an agricultural department called '*Diwan-i-kohi*'. But so called modern men with modern outlook and modern technology hardly seen taking such steps what our medieval ancestor did in the 14th century. By establishing Agriculture Technology Development Centre, they could have ameliorated the condition of agriculture.

Cattle are the backbone of Indian agriculture. According to Mills, the cattle of Assam were inferior and suggested measures to improve the breed of cattle by importing bulls from the North Western Province. But his suggestion hardly received due attention from the government. The area under cultivation, the nature of the crops grown and the extent of the livestock may be accepted as the best standards of agricultural prosperity. According to Gadgil, livestock is one of the standards of agricultural prosperity. The government by defying these standards blocked the road of development of agriculture. Unfortunately, the apparatus and process of agriculture throughout the hills and plains remain till date almost the same except that chemical fertilizers and power tillers have come to be used in a very limited way in some rice fields.

Moreover, to avail the services namely credit and marketing, services relating to seeds, fertilizer and agricultural tools, there was lack of co-operative office. The colonial government remained totally indifferent to them. They cared less for agricultural development of Assam and on the contrary, spent days and nights for tapping new sources of revenues. According to P. Goswami, in spite of the systematic maximization of revenue,

nothing was done to improve the condition of agriculture. Industrial growth and development had no links with the agricultural sector of Assam which finally invited resentment after resentment in the land.

Phulaguri is situated on the bank of Kalang. Kalang, Kapili, Haria- these rivers inundated Phulaguri during the flood season. In spite of her natural abundance, Phulaguri was not a secured land for agriculture. The rivers made the destiny of the *Phulagurians*-sometime paupers and sometime princes. Their progress had often been handicapped by floods and the cholera epidemic. It is said that humanitarianism resulted in many administrative measures to fight flood, famine, control epidemics. But that were on lips as the government showed absolute apathy in fighting the natural calamities. In 1822, there was a whole scale destruction of harvests by locusts in Nowgong resulting scarcity of floods. A second blight was noticed in 1840 and next to that occurred in 1858. The ravage of locusts was aggravated by the appearance of insects as well. Moreover, heavy cattle mortality also deteriorated the economic and agricultural condition of the peasants of Assam but measures taken by the government was far from satisfactory. They rather invited natural calamities by heavy destruction of forest. As a result, primitive fury of the people burst out as the time started to march on.

By introducing Disaster Management System, Animal Health and Veterinary Centre, Flood Control Department, Meteorological Department, Agriculture Technology Information and Development Centre; the colonial government could have evaded natural calamities to some extent. More noticeable aspect to be mentioned here is that there was no Crops Insurance System to compensate and give respite the peasants from the damage of crops caused by locusts, floods and drought. Disease of men and cattle, calamities of flood and fire, lack of cheap credit facilities and wiles and artifice of money-lenders contributed to the improvement of the peasants.

By abolishing slavery and *paik* system in Assam, the British did a yeoman service to the people of Assam but they did it only because of their own interest- that is to create labour class for tea plantation. Not only that, for the interest of their tea industries, they prepared certain waste land rules and by such rules, rural cultivators had been displaced from their lands. Moreover, the colonial government leased out to the planters such land which were actually not waste land. Land green and rich with natural resources had also been occupied by the European planters in the name of waste land. In Nowgong, some forest land (*sal* trees areas) had been sold as wasteland. The planters even usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the *jhum* rights of the tribal shifting cultivators.

At the initial stage of the British rule, people of Assam had good faith on the British and because of this; they showed their catholicity to the government. On mere request, king Purandar Singha even granted to the Assam Tea Company an extensive area near Gabharu hills in 1836 for cultivation of tea in anticipation that in near future, his subjects would be able to reap the benefits of this new enterprise. But his anticipation proved wrong in later period which finally gave birth to resentment and disdain in the minds of the people of Assam.

It remains expressed that the planters formed the largest land-owning class in Assam but this class contributed less to the revenue of the state. While the common peasants paid between Rs.1-8 and Rs.3 per acre annually towards the land revenue, the planters held most of their land rent free. Peasants of the province resented against this discrimination which finally burst out as an outbreak in the following days.

The colonial government encouraged migration to remove shortage of labour in their plantation industries. Migratory people at the initial stage came in small numbers but later on in large proportion including their children and family which found expression in the growing population pressure on the land. The population of the Brahmaputra valley, according to an official source, was estimated at 8,30,000 souls in 1826. It became 12,00,000 in 1853. This increase served only the interest of the planters; not at all the native cultivators. As a result, indigenous cultivators had expressed their anguish against the authority.

Moreover, due to the rise of tea industries in Assam, flow of laborers began to increase which gave birth to food crisis in the province. As a result, demand for productivity of food grain increased. To remove the food crisis, government then relaxed the waste land rules to encourage cultivators from outside. But governments such drive was not welcome by the native cultivators as it jeopardized their mainstay. In addition to the inter-state migration, there also occurred inter district migration in Assam. For example, peasants from Kamrup and Darrang migrated to other adjacent districts and marked their hatred for the present condition and social order. Heavy burden of revenue and taxes and thickly population density also compelled them to migrate. According to R.Saikia, their migration to another district was their silent protest and disdain against the *Raj*.

It is said that the *baniyas* and the money-lenders made the people of India poor. The *Marwaris* during the colonial regime took full advantage of trade and commercial opportunities and thus, they exploited people in

and around. Almost all the trades were solely in the hands of the Marwari traders but the profits they earned were not accumulated in Assam. Almost all profits had been sent and invested to enrich their homeland Rajputana which can be known from Jenkin's letter to Mills. It reveals that they came to Assam not to serve the people of Assam. Had they come with that motto, they would not have sent the profits to their homeland and invested and spent all that for the development and prosperity of Assam province. The exploitation of the peasantry at the hands of the *Marwaries* and money-lenders shattered the traditional peace and harmony of village life and created in its place tension, anger and a smoldering feeling of revenge.

A society steps in debt is necessarily a social volcano. The cultivators of Assam were born in debt, increased their debt and died in debt. They took loans for various purposes viz. social ceremonies, productive purposes and improvement of land etc. Social ceremonies like marriage, rites and rituals after death etc accounted for 1/10 to 1/5 of the total loans. Productive purposes like purchase of cattle, seeds, implements etc and improvements of land only 15 to 30 percent. Moreover, famines and crop failures were the general causes of loan. The cultivators and loanees of Assam had to mortgage their movable and immovable property such as land or land documents, ornaments, utensils etc in exchange of getting loans. Unfortunately, most of the peasant loanees failed to redeem the mortgage and finally lost their mortgaged property forever.

The British fiscal policy in Assam was directly linked with their commercial programme in rest of India. In order to achieve this broad objective in view, the British, in stages, converted Assam in to a vast colony. Most of the indigenous institutions were abolished and certain new arrangements which suited them most were introduced. The abrupt change in policy was bound to create internal instability and social unrest.

Throughout the British rule, India was mercilessly impoverished. Her famous manufactures were ruined and poor artisans and craftsmen were driven out. The cottage industry in India had, in the past, acted as a safety-valve for those depended on agriculture because it gave a second source of income to the peasants. The decline of cottage industry deprived the farmers of their subsidiary occupation, there by considerably reducing their income and compelling them to take recourse to borrowing. Moreover, due to languishing of trade and handicrafts, unavailability of cash transactions; it was difficult for the peasants to go to the markets to seek relief. In addition to that, ruin of cottage industries not only created pressure on agriculture but also made many landless. All these, prepared the ground for popular protest.

The colonial government introduced money economy mainly to meet the demand of revenue. The introduction of money economy without substantial increase in the existing currency inevitably fell crushingly on the peasants for whom there was no alternative but to leave their home with discontent and anguish. The growing monetization economy had induced many peasants to grow more poppy for cash, sometime even at the cost of other crops which were not healthy sign for the peasant society. One important thing to be noticed is that after selling their cheap commodities in the markets, what remained in their hands that were not enough to pay the high revenue. Moreover, the peasantry was traditionally unaccustomed to this new money taxation system. In addition to that, they got less opportunity to sell their produce in cash whenever necessary. As a result, they could not pay their revenue in time which becomes arrears causing hardship to them. Finding no alternative, they had to borrow money from the money-lenders which only increased the burden of indebtedness. On the contrary, the transaction of the peasants with the money-lenders after the harvest was no better than a distress sale. So, any proposal for augmentation of land revenue by the government made the peasants' blood boil in their mind.

Assam, girded almost on all sides by mountain barrier, remained practically isolated and geography had imposed a formidable barrier on her contact with the rest of the world. The people of this isolated land were happy and led a contented life as there was no lack of food because of the alluvial soil of the Brahmaputra valley. But confrontation started with the arrival of the British in to the land. The land abundance of food became the land of scarcity. They held the British for their pitiable condition as their interest received tremendous withstand at their hands.

It is said that the British judicial system established the principle of equality and created consciousness of positive rights. But their activities revealed their double standard. Slavery, for example, is an extreme form of inequality and because of this, government abolished the *paik* system in Assam. Outwardly, though their motive was good but their inner motive was disdainful: to lure the *paiks* to their tea gardens and make them their workers. Behind the abolition of *paik* system was their plantation interest, not establishment of equality in the land at all.

Moreover, another example of their bad activities was forcible collection of raw materials and goods. The servants of the government forcibly took away the goods of the *ryots*. Exploitation and exactions on the

*ryots* continued to increase but they got no justice from the courts as that were run by their own men. Discrimination and biasness in judging the cases became the general phenomena of the day. The Europeans, rich and well-to-do received justice in the courts, poor did not get it at all from the courts and had to lose their properties in the name of running the cases. The *ryots* of Phulaguri were aware of the injustice done to them by the British and therefore, they became more conscious of their rights.

Slow progress of education might be one of the causes of discontentment of the people of colonial Assam. The people of the land could neither compete nor could apply for the government posts due to the lack of their educational qualification. Therefore, all the posts were filled up by the educated immigrants. The illiterate immigrants, on the one hand, put pressure on the agricultural lands and the literate section, on the other hand, put pressure on the government offices. So, they held government responsible for this. The middle class section, indeed, became more victimized due to such imbecile picture of education. Illiteracy of the mass people was due to the lack of adequate number of educational institutions in the villages. The numbers of such institutions even in the towns of Assam province were also far from satisfactory. Few villagers, therefore, could take opportunity of this. Most of them, on the contrary, remained as illiterate and fell finally easy prey at the hands of the village mahajans and Marwaris.

The success of Jayantias against the colonial British also inspired the peasants of Phulaguri to revolt against the same authority. Nowgong, being the adjacent and neighboring territory of the Jayantias, was the next to revolt against the injustice of the British. According to Guha, encouraged and influenced by the Jayantia revolt, the peasants of Nowgong also started agitation against the authority.

The Ahom kings did not interfere in to the internal affairs of the tribal kings and thus maintained cordial relations with their neighbors. They instead of dissatisfying the tribal kings made them their part of administration. For example, the Kachari and Jayantia kings were the sentinels of the Ahoms. Making the kings as part of their administration, the Ahoms proved their political farsightedness. On the contrary, the colonial government eschewed this policy of the Ahoms and intervened into the internal matters of the tribal kings. They had been deprived of their posts and privileges. Ultimately, this gave birth to disdain and resentment against the government.

Everything procured from forest and *beels* by an Assamese peasant in pre-colonial period was free of cost. But all these were brought under assessment during the colonial regime. For instance, timber, thatch and reeds for the construction of his dwelling houses; *beels* and rivers fishing and fodder for the domestic animals—all brought under assessment. People reacted against this type of assessment as it created another financial burden on them.

While the people were uttering against the revenue-hike in the colonial period, the Christian missionaries were at the same time busy in converting the people of Assam in to their own religion. During the time of *Durga puja*, there was huge congregation in Nowgong and several other districts of Assam. Missionaries took full advantage of it distributing some religious pamphlets. In the pamphlets, it was mentioned that Jesus Christ could save people from the oppression of the *kala-jar*, earthquake etc. The colonial government, instead of rendering medical help to the victims during the time of fever, was busy in collecting revenue from the peasants. Similarly, the role of the Christian missionaries was also not satisfactory. They encouraged local people's conversion to Christianity on one hand and asked them, on the other, to utter the name of Jesus Christ during the time of natural calamities. To them, only Jesus could lighten their miseries and calamities. But people were not satisfied at this. They wanted practical and concrete step from them.

Opium was the most important source of revenue of the province of Assam, next only to land. It was a gold mine for the government. Therefore, to make the opium –eaters totally dependent on government opium, they were forced to purchase high priced government opium instead of growing it themselves. The government maximized revenue on opium for two reasons: to strengthen their economy and force the ordinary people to work in their tea gardens of Assam. Opium policy was one of the sources of colonial exploitation in Assam during the British regime. Britain was the centre of anti-opium agitation at the international level. But their anti opium agitation manifested their double standard. Opium probably could have been stamped-out completely, if the government had pursued a more rigorous policy.

Poppy cultivation was finally abolished by the British in 1861. Prohibition order of poppy appeared to the illiterate villagers of Nowgong as an infringement upon their social habits and customs. Capt Welsh by introducing poppy cultivation in Assam made the independent tribal people of Assam dependent on poppy and brought their physical destruction in the 18th century and economic destruction in the 19th century. Actually, government's prohibitory order was motivated not by humanitarian but by revenue consideration which ignited

people's mind against the authority. Most of the people did not like opium prohibition. To them, opium cures dysentery and malaria, alleviates pain and gives longevity. Opium gives them livelihood. Moreover, there is no religious bar of taking opium. Rather, opium-eaters used to believe that in *satya* age, the poppy trees were in abundance in the Parijat garden of Lord Indra. Lord Indra gave this priceless gift to the people of earth. People of religious bent of mind probably took the ban as an attack on their religion also. Moreover, already hard hit by the increase of taxation on land, prohibitory order irritated them. They feared they would have to pay dearly for the *abkari* opium which would compel them to work in the tea gardens of Assam as workers. People finally understood that the government's social measures to emancipate the people from indolence and degradation was just an eye-wash to hoodwink the tribal peasants of Phulaguri. It was just an ill-attempt of the government to draw their attention from real. Finally, they opposed the ban tooth and nails which precipitated the Anglo-Phulagurians enmity in 1861.

The Dravidian system of chewing betel nut has been widely prevalent in Assam from time immemorial. Regarding the chewing of betel nut, there are references in the *smriti sastra* and the *kalika purana*. It has great importance in marriage and worship also. Even the convicts could evade and lessen their crime by offering betel nut to their lord. Moreover, betel nuts determined the social status of the Assamese society. The contemplation of imposition of taxes on the betel nut and the betel leaf was just like an insult and blow to the social status of the Assamese society. Although the decision to impose tax on *pan* was not taken but it would be step frightened the people. Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam traced the origin of the outbreak of 1861 on *pan* and betel nuts. Though their fear was more imaginary than real but experiences had convinced them to be alert and conscious with regard to any rumor emanating from their political masters.

Multiplication of taxes became the matter of serious concern to the agricultural *ryots* of Assam especially the *ryots* of Nowgong. The government's measures for the imposition of tax on the dry crop land on which linseed and mustard were grown was enhanced as per Board of Revenue's estimate to the tune of Rs.11,222 in the district of Nowgong alone in 1861. All sort of evil stories are in circulation in the villages which increased discontent in Nowgong.

The income tax, though it did not touch a single agriculturist in Assam and even those who were assessed the incidence of taxation was extremely trivial. Still its introduction generated misgiving in the minds of the people who were already overburdened with taxes. It was not the amount which mattered the people but the principle of additional taxation that was objectionable for the people. Obviously, these measures shook the confidence of the people who became more and more apprehensive of the next move of the government. About this time, the government of India was finalizing the scheme for the introduction of the license tax for collecting forest products. Though the tax was not originally proposed to be extended to Assam, the agricultural community throughout the province was terribly frightened. That the imposition of income tax and license tax created resentment in the minds of the people of Assam especially the people of Nowgong of 1861, it is even confessed by Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam. He traced the origin of the outbreak of 1861 on imposition of taxes on income and license tax on forest products.

Except few, most of the people did not get benefit from the policy of David Scot. If it is true, then we can presume that the seed of dissatisfaction was germinated even in the early part of the colonial rule. Moreover, due to the corrupt practices and intrigues of the *amlahs*, irregular and undefined additional assessment, peasants became sick of it. The atrocities of the *choudhuries* and *tahsildars* also responsible for the outbreak of 1861. The announcements of the *tahsildar* that the property of the defaulter *ryots* would be seized also created scare and anguish in the minds of the peasants against the government. Peasants suffered lot under the exactions of landowners, *mauzadars* and *choudhuries* who were fully guarded by the state machinery. The situation of Nowgong could have been evaded had the district authorities been really sympathetic towards the difficulties of the common people.

The episode of Phulaguri was the culmination of a large number of deep rooted grievances accentuated by certain acts of omission and commission on the part of Herbert Sconce, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong. Had he been a little more tactful and cordial in his approach and instead of fining and detaining the people so often for making noise in the court, endeavored to calm their fears by explaining away all their misunderstandings in all probability the meeting at Phulaguri would never have taken place; the people would have regarded the District Officer as a friend. By his act of imprudence, Herbert Sconce contributed greatly to transform the excitement of the peasants into a devastating fire to consume the British rule in the Brahmaputra valley. His order to the *daroga* of the Nowgong *sadar thana* on the 14th October, 1861 to disperse and arrest the leaders of the *raijms* and leaders' refusal to disperse and rather continuation of the *mels* abusing and attacking the police party on the 15th October conflagrated the situation. For the volatile

situation of Phulaguri of 1861, Sir Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant General of Bengal also pointed his fingers to Herbert Sconce and held him responsible for that.

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