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REVIEW ARTICLE

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF REANG UPRISING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN TRIPURA

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INTRODUCTION

Social uprising may be defined as violent action against an established government or ruler or to refuse to acknowledge someone or something as having authority. It may also be defined as an attempt to end the authority of a person or body by rebelling or a refusal to continue to obey or conform to the authority. Social uprising may be of different types eg. in National, Regional Local. Local uprising is generally a community oriented one. The uprising may be against social-economic exploitation and oppression. In the mid of 20th century, in Tripura, such an uprising took place among the Reang community which shattered their traditional socio-political and economic structure of the society. To understand the causes of the Reang uprising, one is to study their traditional socio-economic and political structure of the society.

The Reangs are the second largest Tribal Community in Tripura. It is believed that their original homeland is the Shan region of Burma. They migrated to Tripura, via Chittagong hill tracts of present Bangladesh. They settled in southern part of Tripura and gradually spreaded to northern Region gradually in search of land, food and to avoid political turmoil etc. The unit of Reang's social organization was their family. It was a patriarchal society and the eldest male member was considered to be the head of the family. According to Bhobananda Mukerjee, a famous anthropologist, "The family entails four principles, namely to propagate progeny, to have kin to attain virtue, to educate children in tribal culture, and to live a midst paddy and riches."¹ Village was the primary unit of political organization of the Reangs. *Kamifang* was the head of the village. He was responsible for the administration of the village. *Kamifang* was assisted by a village council. However by the early twentieth century the village organization under went change and the power of the council was considerably eroded. Around 1913 Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909-1923) introduced the term *Choudhury* into Reang village organization.² Over the Choudhuries was the institution of *Rai* as the highest political unit. Like the designation *Choudhury* the title *Rai* was also conferred by the Maharaja.³

Although the office of the *Rai* was not hereditary but it was for life. Only after the death of one *Rai* another *Rai* might be selected. In due course the *Rai* began to exercise enormous authority over the tribe. In any disputes his verdict was the final. He was responsible for the collection and payment of taxes to the state. It needs to be emphasized that the common-

Reangs were not the subjects of *Rai*, but of the Maharaja of Tripura. All though *Rai* was as powerful as a Raja among his community. He was not an independent ruler but much like a feudal chief under the Maharaja. Like a loyal subordinate chief he had to ensure peace and order in the Reang villages at any cost. But the *Rai* did not enjoy direct access to the Maharaja, he had to negotiate with Maharaja through a *missip* i.e. intermediary. The Reang used to practice Jhum or shifting cultivation and their economy was barely above the subsistence level. By nature Reangs were peace loving tribe, but during the days of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya some adverse situation developed causing the Reang uprising in 1940-1943. Ratanmoni, the leader of Reang uprising entered into Tripura from Chittagong in 1937 as a mystic Sanyasi with long hair, a tong in his hand, a garland of Rudraksha around his neck. Initially his objective was purely religious so he established an Ashram at Tafoam and initiated Diksha among the Reangs for the socio-religious upliftment. As the number of Ratanmoni's disciples increased some of the Choudhuries (village headmen) became very much anxious about their position and status. Soon a conflict developed between them and Ratanmoni and his followers.

At the source of the river gomoti at Dombur known as Tirthmukh, the Reangs performed some religious rites to their ancestors at the time of *Paus Sankranti*. On that particular day a large number of Reangs gathered from all parts of Tripura. The Brahmins of East Bengal usually acted as priests in this religious function and openly exploited the simple, unlettered Reangs in the name of *Dakshina*, which they paid either in cash or kind. These Brahmins and the Reang Choudhuries shared the *Dakshina*, with the result that Brahmin Chudhury nexus effectively exploited the common Reangs in the name

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of religion.⁴ Ratanmoni and his followers at once protested against this system saying that he and his disciples were qualified enough to act as priests and the assistance of alien Brahmins was no longer needed. The Choudhuries and the Brahmins opposed it tooth and nail but were not strong enough to counter the new move. The Choudhuries eventually lost their major sources of income. This marked the beginning of the conflict between the Choudhuries and Ratanmoni and his followers. The Choudhuries complained to Maharaja of Tripura about the activities of Ratanmoni and without any proper investigation he was arrested and confined into the special royal custody known as *Alang ghar*. But he was able to free himself. His disciples believed that his divine and supernatural power enabled him to escape. But the fact was that he had some followers in the capital, Agartala, even some of them were royal employees and most probably one of them helped him to flee. This was a turning point in his life. It not only enhanced the status of Ratanmoni but also he was regarded as an incarnation. The obvious result was that more people flocked to him.

It is very interesting to note that although Ratanmoni was a Noatia very soon he assumed the leadership of the Reangs, a different tribal community. The reason may be traced in their long socio-economic and political exploitation and oppression by the Rai (Chief of the Reang Tribe), Choudhuries and the Maharaja. Firstly, the Maharaja discriminated in imposition of the common tax *ghar chukti* on his tribal subjects in the hill areas. Reangs and Noatias had to pay at the highest of Rs. 5/- per family while the lowest rate was Rs. 1/- since 1904.⁵ Besides they paid excise duty on sale of bamboo and cane again at a comparatively higher rate. Even Maharaja's Government had admitted the fact that Reangs and Noatias were specially overburden by the taxes. Secondly, in the traditional administrative system the Rai and Choudhuries enjoyed enormous power in their respective localities. The Rai and Choudhuries exercised judicial authority over the fellow Reangs to the extent of imposing fines over them.⁶ Again as tax collectors they were an extension of the state. They paid no tax but received commission on the collection. The Rai and Choudhuries took pride on collecting taxes by means of fair or foul and were financially rewarded. The Maharaja was not bothered about the means of collection of taxes, he was only interested in the amount. The subjects of Maharaja were not assured any precautionary measures against the oppression and exploitation of these agents and the taxes were not based on any careful assessment of the capacity to pay. Thirdly, with the outbreak of second world war Tripura like other Indian states found itself committed to support British war efforts. The Maharaja informed the Viceroy that he was placing his personal services and resources of his state at the disposal of the Government of India.⁷ The Maharaja had to resort to additional taxation to raise funds. The tax collection machinery was therefore geared up; and additional amount of Rs. 4/- per family (*ghar-chukti*) was imposed largely around the Dombur Region of Amarpur which was mostly populated by the Reangs who now had to pay Rs. 9/- in place of Rs. 5/-. This was quite high for the jhum cultivation oriented Reangs and this aggravated the grievances of the tribe. The year 1939-40, had been particularly difficult for the Reangs, Rainfall had been insufficient and jhum cultivation inadequate. The majority of the Reangs naturally found it extremely difficult to pay their taxes. They also refused to enlist into the state forces.

Devi Singh Reang, the Rai since 1923 lost no time in reporting his inability to collect Reang recruits as well as realize taxes. At this state Khogendra Reang, the then *Chapia Kha* began intriguing with certain influential officials in Agartala to obtain the *Hudda* of Rai. In order to achieve his long cherished dream, he assured the Maharaja that he would be able to realize all dues and prevail upon the Reang youths to enlist in good numbers in the state forces. The Maharaja anxious to do his bit actually under some pressure from the Imperial power for war contributions violating an established tribal norm⁸ dismissed Devi Singh and granted the *Hudda* of Rai to Khogendra Reang.

The new Rai and his associate Choudhuries instead of placing the grievances of the Reangs before the Maharaja, went about their oppression with even greater determination and vigor. The Rai increased the annual subscription for *Ganga Puja* from Rs. 2/- to Rs. 4/-. He was even able to exact a sum of Rs. 20,000/- as fines from them.⁹ Thus the Rai and Choudhuries began to alienate the Reangs and aggravated their discontent. Ratanmoni immediately took up the cause of the Reangs with Horendra Chandra Debbarma, the *missip*. But Horendra Chandra, a Tripuri was unsympathetic and Ratanmoni's hope of placing the problems of the Reangs before Maharaja through him failed. After that Ratanmoni made another attempt through the Lushai Chief Hrang Bungo but in vain. All other attempts of mutual negotiation with the Rai Khogendra also failed, to produce any result. At last the reactionary measures of Rai and Choudhuri's compelled the Reangs to take up arms in hand to save themselves from the greedy clutches of the Choudhuries. In the two subsequent meetings at Khamlong and at Taicharbuha at the presence of Ratanmoni the Reangs took three important decisions i.e. (i) the arrest and trial of the Rai and Choudhuries; (ii) no taxes and fines to be paid to them; and (iii) not to join in the state forces for the war. After the completion of all the necessary preparations the Reangs started attacking and burning the houses of the Rai Khogendra and his close associates like Kumaria Ojha, Tirtha Roy, Gangaprasad, Turbong Choudhuri and so on. They also confiscated the movable properties including paddy and live stock such as cows, buffaloes, pig and fowls etc. There were rumours that they would soon attack Amarpur, Udaypur and Bilonia towns where people became very anxious. The Reang rebels also captured two constables and Nayeab Daroga Dinesh Das who went to an interior area to investigate a case of dacoity and produced to Ratanmoni who ultimately released them, probably to avoid any direct confrontation with the Royal authority.

When all these reports of Reang disturbances reached the capital Agartala, The Maharaja dispatched a strong force under Lt. Nogendra and Lt. Horendra Debbarma with strong instruction to take harsh measures like firing, arresting the rebels and burning their houses to suppress them. This punitive expedition was successful and within no time they destroyed the Reang resistance. After the fall of Tuinani camp where they made their last bid, the rebels along with their leader Ratanmoni scattered. Ratanmoni along with some of his followers fled to Chittagong. Around 3000 Reang¹⁰ were arrested and brought to the capital. While Ratanmoni was crossing the Burma boarder, the British police arrested him. Under the warrants of extradition he was despatched to Agartala along with some of his associates. He was lodged in

the Agartala jail and from there to the palace where he died a tragic unnatural death. With his passing away the Reang uprising came to an end. 'All though Reang revolt fizzled out', writes Prof. J.B. Ganguly, "it gave a shack up of the socio-religious and political system of the Reangs". During the period of military operations a large number of the tribe had left their villages and the family became disintegrated. Harassment by the Choudhuries too had driven many towards the northern districts after their release. Ratanmoni's disciples and followers did not return to their own villages but moved into new areas to the north.¹¹ Their migration from the traditional villages to the new areas brought about important changes in their social, religious and political life. Apprehended Reangs were forced to embrace 'Baishnavism'. Christianity also penetrated the Reang society by this time. Traditionally political system also was broken down. Internal dissension has left deleterious effect on the social organization by creating a vacuum since 1940 The impact of the uprising has been well summarized by Bhabananda Mukharjee as follows – "Break down of the political institution has severed the connection between clans and political organization. Cessation of community rituals, clan rituals and other rituals no longer hold the individual together. Different hamlets which were tied together by the extension of kinship and common ceremonial bonds appear now as independent social political units." Thus it is clear that initially, the uprising was against the authority of the Choudhurys and Rai and not against the Moharaja of Tripura. But Moharaja could not understand the fact due to tricky role of Choudhurys and Rai. Due to this, a localized issue became the cause of the uprising.

Notes

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