

# MANIRAM DEWAN AND THE REVOLT OF 1857 IN ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT :

Maniram Dutta Barbhandar Barua popularly called Maniram Dewan was the most prominent Assamese noble man in the early part of the British rule in Assam. He remained loyal to the rulers as long as co-operation with them served his interest. Beginning his career as a loyal servant and friend, he held important offices of administration and excelled in every new situation. A man of dash and determination, he was the first among his compatriots to find each new avenue of success under the alien rule; yet he was also the first to raise the standard of revolt against it. As an administrative officer he gained the knowledge of the miserable conditions of the Ahom royal families, nobles and the people. As a Dewan in Assam Tea Company, he found a window open on the capitalist world outside and he now looked forward for the dawn of happier days for his fellow country men. Then came the Great Rebellion of 1857. Maniram wanted to take full advantage of the situation and attempted to take up arms to overthrow the British rule. But before his plan could be materialized, he was arrested and thrown to the gallows along with Piyali Baruah in Feb 26, 1858 at Jorhat jail. The Rebellion of 1857



and the name of Maniram Dewan go together in Assam. Folk songs called 'Maniram Dewanar Geet' are still recited in some places of Assam from which he hailed from. His determination, intelligence and efficiency made him a legendary character in Assam.

**Keyword :** Maniram Dewan, Tea, Trade, Rebellion of 1857, Maniram Dewanar Geet.

### **INTRODUCTION :**

Maniram Dutta Baruah was born on April 17, 1806 at Charing in Sibsagar district. His ancestors came to Assam from Kanauj in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The name of his father was Ram Dutta who served as the Dulakasharia Baruah of Ahom king Kamaleswar Singha. His mother Kaushalya Devi, was the daughter of Bar-Bhuyan dynasty. Maniram Dutta Baruah belongs to a respectable Assamese Kayastha family<sup>1</sup>. The family background provided Maniram with proper atmosphere to mould his career. He introduced his brilliant qualities in almost everything like geography, history, economics, politics etc. It was because of these qualities that he developed a cordial relationship with the British-East-India-Company. He and Bhulanath Parbatia Phukan acted as guide to David Scoot when he entered Nowgang through the Jayantia Kingdom. His relation with the British East-India Company was a remarkable chapter in the History of Assam and it has far-reaching consequences. Maniram was the medium of communication between, Swargadeo Purandar Singha and British rule. At that time he was also called "Kalita Raja" by all. But Maniram lost the post of Sheristadar cum Tehsildar of Upper Assam after Purandar Singha lost the state. In 1839, he joined the Assam Tea Company at Nazira as its Dewan or Chief Executive on an initial salary of Rs. 600.00 per month. Again however, he was infuriated by the overbearing attitude of the small minded Sahibs subordinate to him and retired from his office. Maniram Dewan later played a key role in spreading the 1857 nation wide Sepoy Rebellion against the British<sup>2</sup> in Assam.



## **OBJECTIVE :**

In this paper an attempt has been made to study the role of Maniram Dewan in spreading the 1857 nation wide Sepoy Rebellion against the British in Assam.

## **METHODOLOGY :**

The methodology of the paper is descriptive in nature. The data is collected from secondary sources like Books, Magazines, Journals and Websites.

## **DISCUSSION :**

### **Maniram and the restored Ahom Monarchy :**

After the treaty of Yandaboo 24 February 1826, British regime was welcomed by the common people of Assam as well as the noble of the Ahom Monarchy because the common people considered the Britishers as their saviour and the noble of the Ahom monarchy, thought the coming of the British regime as temporary, as they were totally unaware of the colonial interest of the British. But it was felt hopeless when the British annexed lower Assam in 1828. This inevitably produced a deep sense of resentment and this resentment manifested itself in a series of attempts by the nobility to overthrow the British government from Assam. It was therefore, decided to instal a native ruler in upper Assam. By a treaty in 1833 Purandar Singha was installed as the ruler in Upper Assam.

Maniram served the British first as the Tehsildar of Upper Assam after the dismissal of Janardan Barbarua. At the age of 22, he was appointed a Tehsildar and a Sheristadar of Rangpur under David Scoll's Deputy Captain John Bryan Neuville. Maniram was a true representative of the rising middle class in Assam, growing and maturing under direct British patronage<sup>2</sup>. He rendered great service to them in reorganising khels and tapping new sources of revenue so that the deficit of the earlier years was converted to a ground surplus. Further, during the years when the company Government had



been shaping its policy of alienating the hills from the plains, Maniram helped the local authorities in subjugating the Bhutiyas, the Khasis and the Garos. He was also indispensable to Purandar Singha who, on restoration, was overwhelmed by a number of problems<sup>3</sup>. The Raja vested him with the supervision of several newly created mouzas over and above his normal duties as Sheristadar in the revenue department, all of which, he performed with great competence and courage. Maniram then was almost the Chief Minister to the king (Barbhandar Baruah). Purandar Singha with the help of Maniram paid first year tribute in time<sup>4</sup>.

### **Maniram Dewan and the Assam Tea Company :**

Maniram lost the post of Sheristadar-Tehsildar of Upper Assam after Purandar Singha lost the state in 1938. However, Maniram later held the charge of Mouzadar of Serekapur, Konwarpur and Meteka in Subsagar district. In 1839, the British appointed Maniram Dutta Baruah as the Dewan of Assam Tea Company at a monthly salary of Rs. 600.00. And since then he has been known as "Maniram Dewan". Hence, in this new post, too, he proved his efficiency not only by opening several new gardens or raising the profits of the company but also by increasing intercourse with the people and enhancing its prestige in the eye of the contemporaries. But in 1844, the British appointed two more Dewans in the Assam Tea Company and reduced the salary of Maniram to Rs. 200.00. As a result of this eccentricity Maniram resigned as the dewan of Assam Tea Company in 1845.

### **The First Assamese Tea Farmer :**

Maniram Dewan was one of those involved in the discovery of tea trees in Assam. He was the man who helped Robert Bruce, who is said to be the inventor of tea in Assam. He informed Robert Bruce about the tea tree after he came to know about the tea tree from Sing fau Chief Bessa Gam. Samuel, Weldon ! author of the book 'Tea in Assam', has termed Maniram Dewan as the real inventor of Assam's tea. "The first attempt to compete with the Britisher's



was made by Maniram Dewan, who is regarded as the first Indian discover of indigenous tea plant in Assam". Maniram Dewan's relationship is mentioned this way in the book "Tea Industry in India".

Being disappointed with the British policy and discrimination towards him by the European Maniram Dewan give up the Dewan and established his own tea garden at Chenimora in Jorhat, thus he becoming the first Indian to grow tea commercially in Assam<sup>5</sup>. He established another plantation at Senglung at Sibsagar. He had a lot of experience working as a Dewan of Assam Tea Company for which he achieved impressive success by opening the tea garden. Maniram's tea leaves are appreciated among all. He was not only a tea cultivator but also ventured into gold procuring, salt production, iron smelting, manufacturing of goods, boat and brick making, ivory work, ceramic, agricultural products, etc. Maniram wanted to make Assam self-reliant through all kinds of enterprise. Some of the markets established by him include the Garohat in Kamrup, Nagahat near Sibsagar, Borhat at Dibrugarh, Sissihat at Dhemaji and Darrangiahat in Darrang<sup>6</sup>. But the important thing is that the British were alarmed by Maniram Dewan's success and devised various tricks to destroy his tea leaf business. Maniram now realised that there was no future for him and his countrymen under the colonial rule which would never allow the growth of any independent enterprise by an Indian. Maniram Dewan developed a feeling of resentment towards them. He threw his lot with Kandarpeswar Singha, the Charing Raja, who also, like him, had been facing utmost difficulties in maintaining the royal family. Maniram Dewan became the charing Raja's friend, philosopher and guide.

### **Role of Maniram Dewan in the Revolt of 1857 :**

To highlight the plight of the Ahom people, he initially presented his case before, A.J. Moffat Mills, a prominent Calcutta judge, who was sent to Assam on an official tour in 1853 by the lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Jon Campbell. But in his report, Mills made adverse comments on Maniram, Maniram's disaffection with the



local authorities in Assam has compelled him to represent his grievances before the Governor General. He went to Calcutta in April 1856. At Calcutta Maniram came into contact with several notable personalities and merchants like Raja Gurudas, son of Maharaja Nandakumar, Nilmani Mitra, Kunja Behari Mallik and Rajendra Dutta. Thus in Calcutta, he received an intellectual backing, which he needed most before plunging into a new course of action<sup>7</sup>. About this time, there occurred the insurrection of the sepoys at Meerut, Delhi, Lucknow and Kanpur and the news reached him that Bahadur Shah had been proclaimed Emperor of Hindustan at Delhi by the rebels and many princes were regaining their lost possessions. Maniram Dewan calculated the possibility of organising a similar insurrection in Assam for overthrowing the British Raj and considered the situation there very favourable. Maniram communicated all the developments in other parts of India to his friends and associates in Assam through messengers in the guise of fakirs called bhats. Letters addressed to the Charing Raja were delivered to Peali Barua, who acted as his chief advisor in the absence of Maniram. In thus preparing the ground for an insurrection, Maniram was greatly helped by Madhu Mallik, Mayaram Barbara, Chitrasen Barbara, Kamala Charingia Barua, Mahidhar Sarma-Mukteer, Luki Senchowa Barua, Ugrasen Marangi Khowa Gohain, Deoram Dihingia Barua, Dutiram Barua, Bahadur Gaonburha, an expert in repairing arms and weapons, Sheikh Formud Ali, a court musician, Madhuran Koch, a tea garden contractor and Urbidhar Baruah. The native soldiers were agree to help the rebel. Negotiations were carried on under similar terms with the sepoys at Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Saikhowa. The Sepoys were more active at Jorhat, where the Charing Raja was maturing his plan. The date of the uprising was set to coincide with Durga Puja, when Maniram would return to Assam and crown Kandarpeswar Singha as the Swargadeo. Rumours were afloat that a steamer was on the way and the Sahibs were preparing to depart and the English planters were on the run for a possible rebellion. All the condition was favourable for Maniram Dewan. Every one was eagerly waiting for him. Before Maniram could come to Assam to



take the lead, a few of his letters were intercepted by the Principal Assistant of Sibsagar, Captain Charles Holroyd through the instrumentality of Haranath Parvatia Barua, the Police Daroga of Sibsagar and a most trust-worthy person of the Europeans in Assam. After spread their plan, Britishers take firm action against them. On September 7, Holroyd with a detachment under captain Lowther made a night raid into Kandarpeswar Singha's palace and arrested him. He was immediately sent to the Alipur jail for detention. Maniram was arrested at Calcutta, detained for a few weeks in the Alipur jail and then brought to Assam for trial. Other implicated in the plot were all apprehended. Thus, the plan of to revolt against the British was proved failure in Assam.

Captain Holroyd was appointed special commissioner under Act XIV of 1857 to try the cases of the rebels. Maniram Dewan and Peali Barua, both of them being convicted of treason, were publicly hanged at Jorhat on Feb 26, 1858. Madhu Mallick, Kamala Barua, Dutiram Barua, Marangikhowa Gohain, Trinayan and Mayaram Nazir recived transportation for life. Bahadur Gaonburha and Seikh Formud Ali were deported to the Andamans with confiscation of property. Madhuram Koch was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment and many others to three years imprisonment. Kandarpeswar Singha was not brought for Trail. He was detained at Burdwan till 1860<sup>8</sup>, after which he was allowed to settle at Gauhati as a pensioner, where he died in 1880. Maniram Dewan's death was widely mourned in Assam and several tea garden workers struck work to express their support for the rebellion.

### **CONCLUSION :**

The Revolt of 1857 is an important event in the history of India. In Assam Maniram Dewan played a significant role in the initial stages of the revolt. He was instrumental in organising the local population in support of the rebellion. The revolt ended with failure but its impact is note worthy which gave the revolt a special place in the history of colonial Assam. Several folk songs called



"Maniram Dewanar Geet" were composed in his memory. Beside a statement, Maniram Dewan was also man of literary talent. He composed "Buranji Vivek Ratna", Bara-Bhuyaan Charitra and Bhakti Pradip. The petition that Maniram submitted to the Government from time to time, bear testimony to his sound knowledge of different problems of his society. However, freedom fighters in Assam with the progress of the freedom movement in the country looked Maniram Dewan as their pioneer, as a hero who sacrificed his life for the cause of his motherland. The martyr to the people of Assam, Maniram Dewan continues to be an inspiration for the Assamese.

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