

Oral tradition, nationalism and Assamese social history: Remembering a peasant uprising

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Recent advances in folklore studies makes it possible to reasonably address the complex origin of historical-ballads. This scholarship carefully explores the forms, linguistic styles and more precisely, the mental universe of the rural society embedded in historical ballads. Doli-Puran—an Assamese historical ballad narrating the events related to the peasant rebellion of 1894—could be a key to an understanding of the social history of the Assamese peasantry. The textual content of this oral narrative underwent significant transformation over the years together with the changing political landscape of Assam and the Assamese peasant society. This essay explains the dynamics of the social origin of this oral narrative and its significance. It shows how historical imagination and social memory, mostly drawn from an Assamese rural landscape, influenced the Assamese nation building process in the twentieth century.

Keywords: *Doli-Puran*, Assamese nationalism, oral tradition, memory, ballad, peasantry, British colonialism, peasant uprising

Plebeians speak their own stories, which are often embodied in oral narratives. For them, oral narrative is the ideal form through which they can retell their memories of protests against repression or their resistance against the state. Rulers have always attempted to capture, burn and/or destroy all evidence of their subjects' resistance, seizing every possible opportunity to punish those who spread such subversive narratives. As such, oral narratives have always provided an avenue

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of escape from the regime of control of the rulers. In the long run, these oral narratives, as a means of escaping the state's surveillance, become important for a proper understanding of 'how their listeners and readers viewed themselves and their society'.¹ At the same time, these stories have something else to tell and constitute an alternative voice to the documents produced by the modern nation-state.² Furthermore surpassing all other forms of oral narratives, the historical ballads, originating as they do from the world of the peasants, have come to play a key role in sustaining the performance of the modern nation-state. Their role in the national historical imagination involves its transition from oral to print form.

Advances made in folklore studies address an array of issues such as the historical origin of these ballads, their form, linguistic styles and more significantly an attempt to understand the wishes and desires of the folk.³ The methodological sophistication that has been attained in folklore scholarship—particularly to explain the historical ballads—has been poorly manifested in the study of the Indian peasantry, though an ever-increasing volume of literature has questioned the relationship between historical memory and peasant uprisings. Rarely do they address the complex process of the social origin of oral traditions, their circulation and of their transition from an oral form to that of print. Several recent works have drawn attention to how dominant narratives of the Indian nationalist struggle against British imperialism have been challenged by peasant oral traditions. These works also ignore the scholastic tools provided by the advances that have lately been made in folklore studies.⁴

An illustrative example of an oral narrative and modern nation building process is an Assamese verse-narrative called *Doli-Puran*. The narrative describes the causes and consequences of a peasant uprising that took place in Patharughat in Darrang district of British Assam. Patharughat was a *tahsil* (revenue block) and it was located in Rainkushi *mauza* (circle of revenue). The event took place on 28 January 1894 when colonial police opened fire on protesting ryots. The latter disagreed with the new rate of revenue and refused to pay the increased rate. The *Patharughator Ron* (War of Patharughat), as the peasant unrest came to be better known, witnessed the combined strength of thousands of ryots resisting the colonial police. Several ryots were killed and many wounded. The event of Patharughat was not an isolated event. Already, since November 1893, ryots from the neighbouring raiyatwari-settled areas had been protesting against enhancement of revenue.

¹ Walthall, *Narratives of Peasant Uprisings in Japan*.

² Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*.

³ Importance of the ballad in the English speaking world has been explained in Atkinson, *The English Traditional Ballad*.

⁴ See, for example, Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*; Chaturvedi, *Peasant Past*.

The events of 1893–94 have been captured in detail in the historical literature.⁵ Literary works are more than enthusiastic to portray the ‘dramatic’ upheavals. Essays, dramas, poems and general historical works were produced to describe the peasant uprising.⁶ Historiography recognises the collective solidarity of the ryots⁷. These works have highlighted the key role of the *Raij-Mel* (village assembly) in the working of the peasant politics. In overemphasising a radical peasant politics, not only do these works fail to examine the impact of a differentiated revenue assessment on the Assamese ryots, but they also ignore the complexity of state responses. The importance attached to the event could successfully valorise peasant politics, but it is certainly misleading for a proper understanding of the internal dynamics of colonial Assamese peasant society. And when, a century later, in 1994, Assam celebrated the hundred years of ‘Patharughator Ron’, the narrative of 1894 became part of the idea of a contested nation. The result was the reinforcement of the idea of the Assamese regional polity which was already stirred up by intense competition within the Indian federal polity. The question of rights over natural resources became a major subject while questioning the politics of federalism. The legacy of the earlier nationalism—till now strongly defined by a sense of linguistic aspiration—gave way to a larger sphere of nationalism, located and defined by a discourse of economic nationalism of the post-colonial.⁸

Studies of Assamese folklore have thrown important light over an understanding of the relevance of these narratives to the social history of Assamese society.⁹ While these works confine themselves to the study of folkloristic elements of the oral traditions, they still leave room for an understanding of both the social origin as well as the circulation of the narrative. Conceding that these studies do little to explain the complexities of the political consciousness of a peasant society, the present essay is an attempt to highlight the importance of the ballad for an understanding of the political complexities that are prevalent in a peasant society. This article, briefly locating the setting of the peasant uprising, describes how, subsequently, this event came to be remembered in an oral tradition. Other parts of the essay employ several tools of folklore studies to understand the dynamics of the

⁵ Patharughat has been in the forefront of both historical investigation and public appropriation ever since the careful treatment given to ‘Patharughator Ran’ by Keshav Narayan Datta in Dutta, *Landmarks of Freedom Movement in Assam*. Since then a number of works have discussed the peasant uprisings. Amongst them Sarma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam*; Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*; Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*; Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*; Nag, *Peasant and the Raj*, pp. 24–36; Barman, *The Raijmel*.

⁶ Sarma, D. 1894; Konwar, *Patharughator Ran*, Nath, *Patharughat*; Rajbanshi, *Nangal, Mati aru Manuh*.

⁷ The best example of nationalist tradition is that of Dutta, *Landmarks of Freedom Struggle in Assam*.

⁸ Baruah, *India Against Itself*.

⁹ Datta, B. et al., *A Handbook of the Folklore Material of North-East India*.

social background of an oral tradition and its circulation. The textual content of the oral tradition has undergone a substantial transformation. This transformation bears testimony to the changing political landscape of the Assamese peasant society. The article examines how the event of 28 January 1894 has largely contributed to the making of Assamese nationality. It also explores how the historical imagination and social memory were included in the process of nation building after independence. Finally, the essay shows how narratives of uprisings turned the ryots into heroes—the subjects of action in a system that had defined them as the passive objects of authority.

Resisting Rent Increase: December 1893–January 1894

In 1893 the Government of India asked the Assam government to increase the rate of land revenue in the raiyatwari districts. From the administrative point of view the government followed all established procedures before asking the provincial government to enhance rent. Ryots and landlords had protested against this increase. They submitted memorials to the government seeking a stay in the enhancement. Despite this prayer, by the winter of 1893, the Assam government began to collect the revenue at the enhanced rate. This official move was only resisted by ryots and landlords. Opposition surfaced throughout the province. Protests took a violent form across both Kamrup and Darrang, the two densely populated districts in western Assam. Since November 1893, village assemblies passed a unanimous resolution refusing to pay revenue at the enhanced rate. Those who thought otherwise were challenged by the villagers across the northern bank of Kamrup. Over the next few weeks, ryots from western Darrang extended their solidarity to their neighbours in Kamrup. Official communications described a helpless situation in their failure to collect revenue in some villages. Officials also noted the collective solidarity of the cross sections of the Assamese ryots.¹⁰

In December 1893, the district administration of Darrang reported outbreaks of ‘riots’ in western Mangaldai. J.D. Anderson, the deputy commissioner, however, believed that he could successfully assert his control without escalating the situation. Nevertheless, Anderson could not force the ryots from western Darrang to pay revenue till February next. Also, contrary to his understanding, Anderson only received news of further deterioration in western Darrang. On 24 January, a

¹⁰ Illustrations of strong affirmation of peasant solidarity were noted in official records. A rich Assamese landlord, Bejay Chaudhuri, reported to the deputy commissioner of Kamrup about how he was threatened by a collective body of the ryots in case he disobeyed order. Robert McCabe, the deputy commissioner of Kamrup and the officer who became instrumental in controlling the peasant uprisings in neighbouring areas of Kamrup, observed that though the poorer ryots were willing to pay their revenue it was the rich and middle ryots who continued to threaten them for doing so. See, *Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots*, Home A, 220–344, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, No. 253, p. 9.

worried junior officer posted at Mangaldai, the sadar head quarter of Western Darrang—urgently telegraphed Anderson on the growing number of village assemblies. These assemblies were held mostly in Sipajhar—not too far from the sadar station. The junior officer had no doubt that these assemblies were marks of persistent refusal to pay the enhanced revenue. The officer also informed Anderson that these village assemblies were similar to those of Kamrup. He communicated to Anderson about the possibilities of more such assemblies to be attended by a large ‘crowd’. He also informed Anderson about his noting of large numbers of posters being displayed in public places exhorting the people to come to these meetings. Anderson, stationed at Tezpur, quickly responded to the worried tone of his junior officer. He understood that the best way to assert his authority would be to send notices declaring attachment of property to those ryots who had refused to pay revenue. Anderson had assumed his official duty only a month earlier. He did not lose time and asked Berrington the district superintendent of police, to accompany him to Patharughat on 26 January.

Anderson had chosen to travel to Patharughat because the area had reported large scale protests against the revenue enhancement. Along with others, he arrived at Patharughat on the 27th. Next morning Anderson asked Berrington to seize the property of a ‘defaulting ryot’. He also asked Berrington to be accompanied ‘with a party of Military Police and Armed Civil Police’.¹¹

The ryots, it seemed, were determined to resist any seizure of their property. They violently defied Berrington’s effort to seize the property of their fellow villager. Berrington faced intimidation from a large crowd while he was trying to attach the property of the defaulting ryot and the crowd continued to swell with every moment. He also realised that people from the neighbourhoods were also joining into the growing numbers of the crowd. In his inability to withstand the challenge of the ryots, a threatened and worried Berrington opened several rounds of fire on the crowd. Unprepared for such a situation, the crowd quickly dispersed. Berrington, with the help of the tahsildar and mandal, identified ‘13 leaders’ whom he thought had instigated the crowd to defy his act. He now attached the property of the ryot.

A tired and also shattered Berrington came back and reported the situation to Anderson. He produced before Anderson four ryots because ‘two of them were exciting the crowd, and two of them *did not give* (emphasis mine) satisfactory answers as to their residence etc’.¹²

¹¹ This account is based on Berrington’s diary immediately on 28 January 1894. Considering the fact that in later accounts by the Darrang administration, there were several discrepancies, it was very unlikely that Berrington thought carefully before writing what happened on that day. Telegram from Berrington, Superintendent of Police, Darrang No. 279, Dated 28 January 1894, in Government of Assam, *Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots*.

¹² *Ibid.*

It was already noon. Before Anderson could decide what to do, a crowd of about 800 to 1,000 people gathered near the bungalow where they were resting. The crowd conveyed the message that they wanted to speak to Anderson. They also communicated to Anderson that they wanted to know the fate of their memorial to the government regarding the rent question. Anderson denied them the permission to hold any assembly. He also insisted that they must pay enhanced revenue as decided by the government.¹³

The collected crowd was not ready for this answer. They were there to hear news of the government's concession on the rent. The news spread like wildfire and more ryots collected. Anderson surmised that the crowd could have been somewhere near two thousand. Berrington did not disagree with Anderson and wrote later about 'how great a crowd had assembled'. Days later Anderson wrote:

When we went out into road we saw that the leaders were armed with sticks, and they were beckoning to others behind to come on. The leader seemed, from their beards, to be all Musalmans.¹⁴

The situation soon became tense. Both sides were ready for something worse. The ryots were in no mood to pay the enhanced revenue. They saw in the morning clashes a victory for themselves. This encouraged them now to act aggressively. Soon the crowd, now restless and worried at the prospect of defeat communicated in the tone and defiance of Anderson, began to throw 'sticks, bamboos and clods of earth' on Anderson and his team. Anderson was hit on the leg. A few police men were injured. The crowd also quickly circled Anderson and his team.

Anderson ordered his police to open fire on the crowd which, however, refused to buckle down. They resisted the firing by throwing mud-stones and verbally abused the police. As the throng became more defiant, Berrington began to 'charge the crowd, firing continuously'. The ryots only 'retired about 50 yards along the Mangaldai road, firing all the time. The insubordinate crowd also continued to push Anderson and his team 'all the time'. A little later the dispersed gathering had again remobilised themselves but soon appeared to lose their strength. Meanwhile Berrington also 'fortified the bungalow' against any further attack.

Soon darkness approached and it seemed that the ryots had dispersed. The police went in search of victims who might have been injured in the firing. By the

¹³ Anderson to Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 30 February 1894. Berrington wrote that Anderson spoke to the ryots in Assamese 'a language I did not understand'. Diary of Berrington, 28 January 1894, no. 279, in File No. Home A, 220-344, ASP (ASA).

¹⁴ As part of the summary punishment, a Muslim tenant Akolo Shiekh was arrested along with six others. They were given prison sentences under section 143 and 147 of the Indian Penal Code. See Letter from P.G. Melitous, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Judge, Assam Valley Districts, 28 April 1894, no. 327 in Government of Assam, *Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots*.

evening Berrington had noted 'twelve men lying on the ground killed or wounded'. But he had reservations about the number and thought that 'it was difficult to ascertain with any particularity'. He also claimed that if they had not fired their 'detachment would have been swept away'.

Anderson was relieved that the situation was 'under control'. But, in the next few days, he worriedly despatched reports to the Indian government, describing the events leading to the incident and defending his actions. The Viceroy appreciated the threatening nature of the crowd and, in that context, the action taken by Anderson. Three days later, in an urgent telegram sent to the Secretary of State (SOS), the Viceroy reemphasised the violent nature of the crowd. He also admitted to the death of twelve persons and of no casualty to the police.¹⁵

The Viceroy sent another telegram to the SOS and informed him that the 'Assam riot occurred after the mob had been informed of the order of GOI reducing assessment of land revenue now being paid'.¹⁶ The Secretary of State reacted to events in Assam in a more careful way. He regarded its management as a matter of great relief to the Indian administration but he also differentiated the events of Assam from that of similar events in other parts of the country. In a carefully worded note, prepared on 20 February 1894, the Secretary of State summed up his thoughts: 'these riots appear to have no connection with the recent riots in other parts of India... (these) were caused by dissatisfaction with the new assessment of land revenue'.¹⁷

The prominent Assamese intelligentsia, including Padmnath Gohain Baruah, which had been vocal against rent enhancement in the previous year, decided to remain silent; and it is not difficult to explain this. Trained in the agenda of enlightened liberation and social reform, the Assamese intelligentsia could not support the 'dangerous crimes' committed by the rebel ryots. For many of them, located as they were within a liberal political paradigm, it was dangerous and unethical to cross the limits of opposition as defined by this idea of liberty. Not only had the ryots at Patharughat transgressed this limit, but amongst those who participated, some were poor, and many were 'Muslims'.¹⁸

Outside the region, however, the 'Assam Riot', as it had been invented in the official deliberations, found support in Indian Legislature from the leading Bengali legislator, Rashbehari Ghosh. Several contemporary newspapers published from

¹⁵ Telegram, Viceroy to Secretary of State, received in London 1 February 1894 at 12.12 pm, Judicial and Public Papers, L/PJ/6/366 File 171, *Asia and Africa Collection* (hereafter AAC).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Telegram 6 February 1894. The GOI had already decided to slightly reduce the already enhanced rate of revenue.

¹⁷ Judicial and Public Papers, L/PJ/6/366 File 171 (AAC).

¹⁸ The presence of Muslims in the riot surfaced repeatedly in the official accounts. See, Letter from P.G. Melitous, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Judge, Assam Valley Districts, 28 April 1894, no. 327 in Government of Assam, *Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots*.

Calcutta, Allahabad and London had defended the ryots and splashed news of the events of Patharughat.¹⁹

Back in Assam, the government arrested some of the ryots. As punishment, some were appointed as special constables.²⁰ Some others, mostly Muslim ryots, were now identified as ring leaders. The Muslims, largely because of their insignificant numerical presence—less than six percent in 1874—were yet to become a subject of serious attention to the government.²¹ The larger picture was, however, somewhat different. The colonial state was generally apprehensive of the loyalty and political views of the Muslims. These fears led to the immediate arrest of Ahona Sheikh, a Muslim peasant, as one of the ring leaders of the outbreak. Sheikh, along with five other ryots, was sentenced in a summary procedure.²² The memory of 1857, although not widespread in terms of violence and trauma in Assam, had continued to haunt the colonial state. They were not likely to ignore any form of public outrage as something beyond their control.

As a result, the authority of the colonial state in Patharughat was reinforced with additional administrative arrangements. A police outpost and post office were established in Patharughat.²³ The neighbouring Sipajhar tahsil office was merged with that of Patharughat. The police establishment in Assam was reorganised to curtail any future outbreaks of rioting in these areas. Despite the authority exercised by the State in the Patharughat incident of January 1894, it still could not force the Assamese ryots to pay their revenue until the next year, though there had been an increase in the amount of total revenue deposited into the treasury.²⁴ Describing the situation in the Land Revenue Administration Report, the Assam government noted that ‘there is still a conspiracy on the part of the raiyats not to pay the revenue’.²⁵

As a consequence of this incident, the government did agree on a reduction in the rate of the revenue assessment. The Assam administration anxiously examined the causes of what had happened in Patharughat. And in so doing, they kept their attention focused on three aspects: who were the ‘ring leaders’, how many people actually died and did the news of revenue remission actually reach the

¹⁹ For details see, Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*.

²⁰ The British colonial authorities often appointed ‘special constables’ often from the ranks of the ‘enemies’ making them responsible for law and order. Such examples could be found in other parts of India. See, Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793–1920*, p. 219.

²¹ Kar, *Muslim Immigration to Assam*, p. 69.

²² Government of Assam, *Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots*, p. 294.

²³ Correspondence regarding the establishment of an outpost at Patharughat, Home, Revenue-B, ASP, Nos. 366–67, 1893.

²⁴ Government of Assam, *Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam, 1893–94. Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam, 1894–95*, para 11, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

ryots?²⁶ The force used by Anderson, despite his own early apprehensions, found strong support at the highest level. Over the next few weeks, there was a concerted attempt to save Anderson from possible public outcry.²⁷ Although his senior officers were unanimous in their wish to reward him, he was transferred to Bengal in the summer of 1894. C.A. Bernard, Secretary of Public Department, had no doubt that ‘the rioters were in the wrong’ and thought that ‘the Durrung officers were justified in firing on the rioters’.²⁸ Bernard referred to the event of 1860 when the Assamese ryots had killed Captain Singer during protests against revenue enhancement.²⁹ As the most active supporter of the cause of Indian nationalism, W. Wedderburn had raised the question in the House of Commons in April 1894.³⁰ In a strong statement Wedderburn asked the Secretary of State for full information regarding the Assam incident. He also asked for an explanation of the government’s policy towards the handling of such riots. H. Fowler, who was the Secretary of State, then promised that urgent steps were being taken to receive full information on this issue. The Assam administration also squarely reprimanded Bhabanicharan Bhattacharya, the Assamese tahsildar, for his failure to control the situation.³¹

Who were the leaders of the uprisings? Long before the ryots had really challenged the government, Henry Darrah, the director of the Land Records department who was responsible for reassessment, had referred to those who had orchestrated the organisation of the ryots against the enhancement. He acknowledged that ‘the self-interest of the ringleaders has been allowed to override their obligations to the bulk of the countrymen’. He also noted with caution that ‘but the reason, I think, is not too far to seek: the agitators, who have acted as the ringleaders of the ryots, in getting up these memorials, are probably most of them holders of valuable lands which obviously come to the first class. It would naturally be better for them if a small increase was made on all lands alike’.³² Official accounts listed the dismissed police constables amongst the leaders, but we do not have the records to ascertain their role. A few police men had their share of grievances against the administration and some even filed suits seeking justice. The landlords’ participation in the uprising, on the other hand, was fuelled by

²⁶ Government of Assam, *Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots*.

²⁷ Praise for McCabe soon came forward. He was praised by C.J. Lyall who was then home secretary with the Government of India for his dealing with the situation. Lyall wrote to the Provincial Chief Secretary that McCabe really deserved the ‘thanks of the Government of India’. Letter from C.J. Lyall to Chief Commissioner of Assam, 4 April 1894, no. 679 in File No. Home A, 220–344, ASP (ASA).

²⁸ Note by C.A. Bernard, Secretary, Public Department, Judicial and Public Proceedings, Settlement Riots in Assam, L/PJ/6/370, 1894 File no. 559 (AAC).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *The Parliamentary Debates*, p. 1166 by Great Britain Parliament, Great Britain, 1894.

³¹ Government of Assam, *Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat Riots*.

³² *Ibid.*

their immediate loss of economic privileges. They were inspired by their family lineage and legacy of landed property. However, since the landlords' role in securing personal gains by instigating an uprising did not find any place within the colonial narrative or popular history, '1894' eventually came to be regarded as a collective resistance of peasant society against the Colonial State.

The revenue assessment of 1893 continued to haunt the Assam revenue officials. Repeatedly they expressed their concern of repeating the 'mistakes' of 1893–94.³³ The government's uneasiness spilled over into the next phase of reassessment. In the months immediately following the 'unrest' of 1894 the government was forced to rethink the land revenue policy practiced in Assam but nothing actually happened.

Birth of an Oral Narrative

Governmental ennuï notwithstanding, the Assamese ryots could not overcome the trauma associated with the event so easily. Personal memory or village parlance helped the event to remain in local memory. At some point these memories acquired the form of a verse narrative. The latter came to be known as *Doli-Puran*—literally meaning 'tale of a clod of Earth'. In fact, this oral tradition and its circulation began to define the way the Assamese ryots would remember the event of 1894. This oral narrative served two immediate purposes: first it produced a counter narrative to that of the colonial official history and secondly, it reinforced the Assamese nationalists' version of colonial atrocities on the Assamese. Much later, both the event and the narrative collectively became a powerful tool for Assamese nationalists to redefine their relationship with the Assamese ryots as well as the Indian state.

Folklorists studying Assamese folklore would like to identify this verse narrative as a ballad.³⁴ How crucial is this classification in understanding the importance of this oral narrative? Is the ballad a manifestation of deeper social dynamics? Can it also claim to have the advantages of contingent historical memory? Is it similar to other forms of narratives such as: epic—*mahakavya* or myth—*akhyan*? Folklore scholarship has urged that the ballad's scope and significance is significantly different from an epic. This is particularly true in the context of the traditions of Indian folklore. Although the epic form of narrative

³³ Darrah, *Reassessment of the Assam Valley Districts in 1893*. Before independence two resettlements took place. Both settlement officers specially referred to the difficulties faced by the government in the past. During the settlement of 1927–33, revenue officials mentioned that the 1893 settlement was 'a hard one'. See, Mukherjee, *Final Report on the Land Revenue Resettlement of the Darrang District during the Years 1927–33*, p.12.

³⁴ Goswami, *Baro Mahor Tera Git*. The Assamese literary critic Hemchandra Goswami emphasises the use of *Malita* as an Assamese synonym for ballad. Goswami, *Hemchandra Goswami Rachanawali*.

has a larger frame and various themes, a ballad is more focused on a single narrative. On the other hand, like myths,³⁵ a ballad does not occur in a condensed form: it develops itself. Ballads tell a complete story: they begin with the origin of the narrative and will end by demonstrating the consequences. In the *Doli-Puran*, for example, the causes and consequences of the event are arranged in consistency with the ryots' world of understanding.

This classification has another dimension: early folklore scholarship believed that since 'primitive people' were not competent to articulate a larger world view, a large corpus of oral literary materials originated from their social milieu, and this must be classified separately from the epic tradition.³⁶ This led to identifying peasant narrative largely as a ballad. Like the epic tradition, ballads must also be transmitted orally. However, the advent of modern print culture has reduced the weight of oral transmission.³⁷

The main characteristics of a ballad have been defined with the presence of a single story, the anonymity of the author and the repetition of verses in a narrative.³⁸ The presence of the first two functions in the *Doli-Puran* has been reported by several specialists. Others would also like to identify the *Doli-Puran* as folk epic—*loka kavya* but without strong substantiation. The ambiguity that has arisen is not based on a systematic investigation of the folkloristic nature of *Doli-Puran*. Also, the ballad, as a category of folklore comes from a western intellectual origin and thus needs to be contextualised in Assamese social history. This factor had already been noticed by scholars like Prafulla Datta Goswami. Despite such ambiguities, one cannot deny that *Doli-Puran* represents not only the way peasant society remembers its past but also the dynamics of local politics.

A close examination of this literary tradition will give us some leads towards locating the temporal origin of this oral tradition.³⁹ Before the *Doli-Puran* was

³⁵ There is a rich body of scholarship to explain the historical meaning embedded in myth. See, Dundes, ed., *Sacred Narratives*; Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*.

³⁶ In folklore studies, ballads are often associated with commoners unlike the epics which are linked to a more 'refined and Sanskritised' context. See, for example, Catarella, 'The Study of the Orally Transmitted Ballad: Past Paradi', pp. 468–78.

³⁷ For a comprehensive understanding of a ballad see, Child, *The British and Scottish Popular Ballads*; Dorson, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, pp. 10–11; Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition*. In Assam the first comprehensive and theoretically well-informed work on ballads was done by Goswami, *Ballads and Tales of Assam*. The most ambitious project to collect Bengali ballads was undertaken by Dinesh Chandra Sen. His four volume *Eastern Bengal Ballads of Mymensingh* published during 1923–32 was the most important example of the tradition of the early Indian ballad collection.

³⁸ Luthi, M. *The European Folktale, Form and Nature*. For an understanding of ballad and its essential features in folklore studies see, Dorson, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*.

³⁹ Various theories have explained the origin of the oral tradition. The best exponent of the origin of oral tradition is John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition*; idem, *Immanent Art*; idem, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*.

honed into a ballad and later acquired a printed form, various studies have shown that it circulated in other stylistic forms.⁴⁰ These narratives, which later came to be embodied in the *Doli-Puran*, had been in circulation as oral performative traditions. A song describing the events of Patharughat was in circulation in 1925, three decades after 1894. Several local literati remembered their childhood and listening to ‘tales of Patharughat’ told by their elders.⁴¹ The event had become a part of a larger narrative of local history in 1931, immediately after the well-organised Civil Disobedience Movement. A book on local history written by one Dineswar Sarma, an educated youth, briefly mentioned the event.⁴² The book was published on the occasion of the annual conference of *Asom Sahitya Sabha*—the Assamese Literary Society, the sole voice of the Assamese nationalists. The Sabha, formed in 1917, had already gained popularity in representing the cause of Assamese nationality and literature.⁴³

Folklorists argue that the process of the transmission of oral tradition into written text is associated with several layers of internal re-arrangement of the text.⁴⁴ This re-arrangement is especially true for the traditions that took longer to get registered in written form. Unlike the oral form, written transcription also gives stability to a narrative. Folklorists do not know exactly how long it took for the ballad to be transcribed. An anecdote records that this occurred after it was performed and the compiler of one of the printed versions described his mode of collating transcribed versions of the ballad in 1946 with the help of a young student. Did this process create critical gaps between its oral form, the pre-print manuscripts and the printed version? In the unavailability today of the oral tradition of this text, it is difficult to identify the changes that took place between oral and written versions. But we have to remain open to the fact that the oral narrative had come to acquire a stable form only after layers of interactions that take place within a performative sphere in *Oja-Pali* (on which more below). Undoubtedly, the input of the audience during the performance must have influenced the shaping of the narrative.

The earliest available printed version can be traced to 1948. Examining the history of colonial surveillance of literary materials in the 1940s it is doubtful if the *Doli-Puran* was ever printed before 1948.⁴⁵ It is important to keep in mind

⁴⁰ Sarma, ‘Asomiya Loka-Kavya aru Doli-Puran,’ pp. 24–29.

⁴¹ Illustrative of such initiation into the tales surrounding Patharughat were comments like: ‘Revered father used to tell the tales of Patharughat’ or ‘I heard the tales of Patharughat from my grandfather’. On these, see Sarma, ‘Preface’ in *Doli-Puran*.

⁴² For a short biographical information on Dineswar Sarma, see: Saharia ed. *Darrangar Jibani Kosh*.

⁴³ Sarma, *Mangaldai*. This small booklet outlines the history and glories of Mangaldai.

⁴⁴ Niles, ‘Editing Beowulf: What Can Study of the Ballads Tell Us?’, pp. 440–67.

⁴⁵ The list of confiscated books during the freedom movement in various archives did not indicate any trace of the *Doli-Puran*. Indeed Dineswar Sarma argued that it was British surveillance that curbed the public performance of the ballad.

that print has played an important role in the Assamese intellectual practices only since the second half of the nineteenth century when popular literature increasingly gained significance. A majority of these texts, were located around religious themes concerning the Assamese Vaishnavite traditions.⁴⁶ During this period several books on Assamese folklore were also printed.⁴⁷ But these materials were very different from the *Doli-Puran* of which no trace of a printed version has been discovered prior to 1948. In the intervening half century, the printed text certainly introduced supplementary meanings and additional dynamics to the narrative of 1894 and these will be discussed separately below. But before explaining these issues and analysing the narrative embodied in *Doli-Puran* as counter-history to the colonial narrative, it is important to explain the origin of the oral tradition and evaluate its importance as a dominant form of historical memory.

Where is the Author?

A rich body of literature explains how various forms of folk traditions play an important role in collecting, historicising and transmitting popular memory.⁴⁸ Amongst these, ballads are particularly significant in preserving and disseminating historical memory. Various genres of remembering can be drawn from the narratives of popular peasant uprisings in pre-colonial and colonial Assam.⁴⁹ The folkloristic nature of these oral traditions differ from event to event. In the case of the events that occurred at Patharughat, the ballad hegemonised other renditions. Gradually, other genres have disappeared or have lost their meaning. To understand why such a narrative strategy was used to remember and spread the events of Patharughat it is important to explore the cultural practices of the locality.

Various forms of cultural practices and their local variations have been noted by folklorists from Assam. These include a popular cultural practice known as *Oja-Pali* in western Darrang that is important for understanding the social context of the *Doli-Puran*.⁵⁰ In this cultural practice, a narrator—*oja*—together, with his associates—*Daina pali*—tell a story and perform it for an audience. Plots for performance are usually taken from Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata*, in particular. This form focuses on epics, known as *Byas Oja-Pali*, whose highly structured form made them less popular than those based on non-epical themes. Other forms contested pan-Indian narratives. Among them the *Suknani Oja-Pali* employed

⁴⁶ No detailed study has been made on the Assamese popular literary traditions. For a brief introduction see, Saikia, 'Asomiya Hat Bazaror Puthi'.

⁴⁷ A good example of such collection is that of Bora, *Kathar Malita*.

⁴⁸ A significant work has attempted to recover various Indian vernacular literary genres of narratives as form of history. Rao, Shulman and Subramanyam, *Textures of Time*.

⁴⁹ Goswami. *Ballads and Tales of Assam*.

⁵⁰ For a critical history and examination of *Oja-Pali*, see, Sarma, *Asomar Paribeshya Kala*.

themes/plots of a non-epical category. The *Suknani* form of *Oja-Pali* was more secular in nature, but it did not deny popular practices. Unlike the *Byas Oja-Pali*, the latter form was more popular in western Darrang. It also used an oral narrative known as the *Padma Purān* as a central theme.⁵¹ These two forms also provide an element of historical truth to their newly composed themes.

On the other hand, the *Oja*, the central character in the presentation, and his associates added multiple layers of stories and introduced various sub-plots of social satires during the course of the performance.⁵² These could consist of the tales of the Indian Freedom movement, the biographical stories of Gandhi or (even) a tale of tea.⁵³ As a result, the performance was important in the growth of the whole narrative.⁵⁴ Folklorists have identified that localised themes with strong political undercurrents, are regularly used in these narratives. The culture of *Kathakata*—story-telling—is closely connected with the practice of *Oja-Pali*.⁵⁵ Thus the practice of *Oja-Pali* is confined not only to the act of performance but also remains instrumental in the composition of the new narrative since such rendering were critical in incorporating new historical truths.⁵⁶ Often, new compositions were made to appear as Puranic tales, which also meant that these stories would have a significant place in the imaginative world of the peasantry. A wide variety of oral tradition acquired a rhythmical character through this process. *Oja-Pali* created a cultural space for creative literary composition suiting the interests of popular and, for the better part, a rural audience.

Can we claim that the performance and composition aspects of the *Oja-Pali* had played an important role in deciding the narrative content of the *Doli-Puran*?⁵⁷ Or is it the other way around? Accounts of the performance of the *Oja-Pali* narrative about the Patharughat event are not difficult to find. For example, a prominent folklorist recounted his encounter of such performance in his childhood: 'we saw its performance on several occasions. We also saw such performances during *nam*' (a collective prayer of the Assamese Vaishnavites).⁵⁸ Another account of the origin of the *Doli-Puran* claims that a young Muslim listened to this narrative being sung during an *Oja-Pali* performance and later copied it. These

⁵¹ Sarma, ed. *Padma Purān*.

⁵² Sarma, *Assom Paribesya Kala*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Despite their crucial attempt to understand the political system in Darrang there is no visible trace of any ethnographic description on the performance of *Oja-Pali*, a key cultural feature of the area.

⁵⁵ The practice of *Kathakata* in Bengali society has been best explained in Bhadra, 'Kathakatar nana katha'.

⁵⁶ Sarma, *Assom Paribesya Kala*.

⁵⁷ Elsewhere Prafulla Datta Goswami suggested that the *Oja-Pali* tradition gave birth to another such ballad which tells the story of the coming of the Indian Rail to western Assam in 1910. Goswami, *Bara Mahor Tero Git*.

⁵⁸ Sarma, 'Asomiya Loka-Kavya aru Doli-Puran.' p. 27.

discussions on the performance of the oral tradition, however, do not necessarily explain the suitability of the narrative of the *Doli-Puran* to be transformed into an act of performance.

We must also bear in mind that the *Doli-Puran* is neither a folktale nor an epic. An increasing number of Assamese literary texts, not essentially belonging to the Sanskritised Hindu religious tradition employed the suffix *Puran*. How can we explain this linguistic style?⁵⁹ Was it central to the linguistic form of the Assamese oral narrative? Was it a familiar practice to use this suffix for other printed or pre-print Assamese manuscripts?⁶⁰ A review of the Assamese literary history brings to light some interesting points and could provide some tentative observations.

The suffix *Puran* was commonly used in the titles of various manuscripts belonging to the 'high tradition' but clearly, such usage was also employed in popular vernacular literature. Popularisation of pan-Indian Hindu Puranic traditions had already occurred in pre-modern Assamese language since the sixteenth century.⁶¹ There is a wide variety of illustrative examples of the use of the *Puran* suffix. A foremost illustration of this usage was the *Rasik-Puran*.⁶² This text was composed in the early nineteenth century by Dutiram Swarnakar Hazarika (1806–1901), a close witness of the downfall of the Ahom kingdom, inheritor of the family tradition of goldsmithing and trained in the traditional pre-colonial Ahom historical writings.⁶³ *Rasik-Puran* locates the origin of production and consumption of opium, hemp and other intoxicating materials within the Hindu religious tradition. Describing the social life of opium eaters—*kanias*—the *Rasik-Puran* went on to narrate several demerits in the consumption of opium. It even hinted that the Company administration had found in it an important instrument of surplus extraction and popularisation of merchandise goods. Several other texts, produced after Independence, also were added with the suffix. One such text, entitled the *Guti-Puran*—the Story of a Seed—tells the story of the birth of a seed found in abundance in the locality. Another illustrative example would be the *Chah-Puran* which illustrates the early history of tea cultivation in colonial Assam.⁶⁴ Another

⁵⁹ For a discussion on the use of the Itihas-Purān model in the Bengali historical tradition in the early nineteenth century in detail see, Goswami, *Producing India*, pp. 154–208. A detailed discussion on the dynamics of Purān tradition see, Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*.

⁶⁰ Similar references can be drawn from other Eastern Indian languages. See, Dimock and Gupta eds and trans. *The Maharashtra Purān*. This text is based on an eighteenth century Bengali manuscript first discovered in 1904, in Bangladesh. It is a narrative poem, 716 lines in length, purported to have been written by Gangaram. The manuscript narrates the Maratha incursions into Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century.

⁶¹ Neog, *Asomiya Sahityar Rupkatha*, pp. 126–78.

⁶² The manuscript version of *Rasik-Puran* is in the library of Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, Assam.

⁶³ For a comprehensive description of the pre-colonial Ahom tradition of historical quest see, Gogoi, *The Buranjis: Historical Literature of Assam*.

⁶⁴ Sarma, *Asmor Paribeshya Kala*, p. 173.

text, published in 1983, *Bighini Puran*, describes the atrocities of the Indian police on the villagers. Most texts that carried this suffix, were of a non-canonical nature in Assamese literary history. The suffix added several levels of meanings to these texts. It empowered an anonymous text with intellectual legitimacy. By locating such narratives within a precise social milieu it made such narratives an integral part of a cultural landscape. As a result, the suffix, 'Puran' also ascribed an event with a significant local historical consciousness.⁶⁵

Although an important aspect of the ballad is its collective or anonymous origin, the *Doli-Puran* by contrast, has claimed the presence of its author. In one stanza of the text, towards the end of the narrative common to all the printed editions, an author appears and briefly introduces himself, along with the date of authorship.⁶⁶ Although a stylised introduction of the author was common in pre-print manuscripts, there had also been popular accounts in circulation which claimed that this long ballad was heard by a young Muslim boy, Dhaji Fandi, at a wedding who then wrote it down.⁶⁷ The confusion regarding the authors and the date of transcription is perhaps more reflective of the process through which an oral account was eventually textualised. Certainly in the first printed edition, the self-identification of the author is quite unambiguous. Towards the latter part of the narrative the author identifies himself as Narrottam and mentions that he belonged to a 'high caste', a euphemism for the generic caste of the Brahmin.⁶⁸ In his own words:

*Doli-Puranor katha bistari likhilo/...ussa kule janma dila prabhu-bhagaban/
najano bhagabat gaba bharat Puran...*

(I have narrated in detail about the *Doli-Puran*... God has given me birth into a high caste, I may not know how to narrate *Bhagabat* and *Bharat-Puran*)

A rather curious correction in this identity of the author took place in the second printed text, edited by Dineswar Sarma.⁶⁹ This text claimed that the author was born into a family of a non-Brahmin Sudra caste. Unlike the Hindu varna system where Sudra occupies the lowest rank, all non-Brahmin castes—*jat*—are characterised as Sudra within the Assamese caste hierarchy.⁷⁰ The author had now also acquired a proper full name—*Narrottam Das*. The text also identifies 1894 (equivalent to the Assamese year 1301) as its year of composition. Does this

⁶⁵ For a discussion on Puran and its social meaning see, Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 239–43. Also Chatterji, 'Purāna Legends and the Prakrit Tradition in New Indo-Aryan'.

⁶⁶ Sarma, *Doli-Purān*, p. 24.

⁶⁷ Saharia, Dineswar Sarmar Magaldai, p. 53.

⁶⁸ The name literally means the 'best of human beings', one who is above all human errors or vices. In fact most literary texts of this nature refer to Narrottam as the author.

⁶⁹ Sarma, *Doli-Purān*, p. 94.

⁷⁰ Bhattacharya, *Structure and Individual in Assamese Society*.

correction imply an entanglement with complex caste dynamics or does it mean that non-Brahmin caste groups in Assam began to gain social hegemony in the middle of the twentieth century? Intriguing as the questions might be, the answer probably lies somewhere else. The ‘correction’ attributed to the caste identity of the ‘author’ had emerged through a combined process of both editorial intervention and social history of *oja-pali*. A careful examination of the social background of the *Ojas* would reveal that they mostly belonged to non-Brahmin groups.⁷¹ This might have come to the notice of Dineswar Sarma, who had extensive expertise in the tradition and customs of Mangaldai.⁷²

Folklorists differ on the identity of the Narrottam. While one group of scholars asserts that ‘Narrottam’ is not a noun but a pronoun, others explain that Narrottam was a real person who hailed from Patharughat.⁷³ The early collectors identified him as a ‘*hoja gaonlia kobi*’—a simple village poet. Finally, the combined forces of the creative religious-literary tradition associated with *Oja-Pali* and the social context of its performance may be an important tool in resolving the fractured and obscured identity of the author in *Doli-Puran* and investigating the text’s historical origin.

A Counter-Narrative

The text of the printed version of *Doli-Puran* is distributed into four stanzas or *pads*, an organisation perhaps necessitated as the story shifted from its oral-performative to a textualised-printed milieu. The narrative commences with an offering of tribute to the gods and declares the intention of the composer. Although organised independently of each other, each *pad* is placed chronologically and sequentially to depict the circumstances leading to the event of 28 January 1894 and its immediate consequences. The narrative begins with an account of the British administrators’ investigation of markets in Darrang. It continues by describing the establishment of a bazaar in a neighbouring tea-garden and how the ryots had sold their meagre produce in this bazaar. The *Doli-Puran* tells how the colonial authorities made enquiries into the local markets. The text narrates a recent agrarian crisis and then claims that the ryots simply wanted that the authorities must take this into account while deciding about any revenue enhancement. The second stanza is a careful interpretation of imperial policy. Criticism of the colonial polity was typical of several other ballads. The *Doli-Puran* asserts that colonial officials thought that a shortage of labour force in the tea-gardens could be avoided by increasing the rate of land revenue. The text argues that market prices convinced the imperial authority to increase land revenue with the

⁷¹ See, Sarma, *Axamara Parivesyakala Ojapali*.

⁷² That he was generally aware of the history of social and political formation and the importance of various non-Brahmanical groups in this process could be gleaned from his other works.

⁷³ Sarma, N.C. ‘Asomiya Loka-Kavya aru Doli-Puran’.

consent of the *Maharani*. It was also impossible for ryots to pay revenue at a rate so high which would then result in forcing ryots off their land and compel them to work in tea-gardens. Portraying a vivid picture of rural Mangaldoi, the text recounts how the villagers realised that the reassessment was beyond their ability to pay. A village assembly had tried to bargain with the *Tahsildar*, who was an Assamese, and firmly expressed their refusal to pay the increased revenue. The narrative goes on to declare that this led to a conflict with the administration. The sepoy then arrived escalating affairs into a war like situation.

The third stanza consists of a description of the events of 28 January 1894. The text gives an account of how people from various places came to meet the *Saheb* who had come there. The text does not indicate the presence of any leader. In reporting those who were present, the text gives a detailed picture of a typical peasant society with their distinct social lineages which includes Brahmins, village headmen, the rich, traders, as well as the staff of the revenue office etc. An illustrative description of the crowd is:

Boraberia Jogi Geila Hatat Takun Dhari/Byasporia Ganak Gaila Dighal Phuta Mari

Thekaraberia Dhani Geila Ghof Keidal Muchari...Turaingonya Muchalman Geila Allah Allah Kari

A person named *Boraberia Jogi* went with a traditional stick, an astrologer called *Byasporia Ganak* went with a long vermilion on his forehead, a rich man went with a careful touch on his moustache while a Muslim person went by calling the name of Allah.⁷⁴ (The translation is mine, all quotations, unless otherwise mentioned, are from the first edition)

The next stanza narrates how the ryots met the *Saheb* and expressed their refusal to pay the increased revenue. A peasant, not recognised by the text as leader, spoke before the *Saheb*, on behalf of all. After listening to their objections, the *Saheb*, hands folded, told the *Raij* that it was beyond his ability to undo whatever the *Maharani* had already decreed. He agreed, however, to grant a concession which was far less than the demands of the ryots: This infuriated the ryots and there was some confusion. Authorised by the *Saheb*, the sepoy now charged the *Raij* and guns were fired on the ryots.

Is it possible for us to recapture how the *Doli-Puran* depicts peasant solidarity? To put it another way, does the *Doli-Puran* elaborate on the nature of the ryots' offensive against the colonial state? Nowhere does a careful reading of the text indicate the ability of the ryots to completely and successfully resist the power of the colonial state. The text describes instead, the state of the defeated ryots. For example, the text describes how seeing the soldiers, the people decided to retaliate and thus they attacked:

⁷⁴ Sarma, *Doli-Purān*, p. 6.

*Etikhane Sipahieye Banduk Marila/Guli Khai Katalok Bagari Parila/
Hena Dekhi Raij Sakale Mane Guni Chaila/Lahe lahe Bhabi Chinti Hate Farmut
Laila*⁷⁵

(By now the Sepoys started firing which felled many. Seeing this, the people also decided their course of action and slowly they began to take clods of earth into their hand)

Ryots gathered clumps, bamboo sticks and everything that was found in the vicinity. Soon a piece of earthen clod—*doli*—hit the Sahib and he was injured. The text explains that the ‘blow and the injury to the Sahib’ was like the tremors of the earth—*pralay kalat shristike nashila*. This resulted in the conflict and its consequences, when, the text tells us, the ryots ‘gathered with hundreds and hundreds of the dead and several wounded/the time to come saw the fall of the strength of the Raij’ (*Sata Sata Manuh maril tar sima nai/Chowa bhai kheda khowa rajor bilai*).⁷⁶ The text now appeals to the reader to look at the condition of the defeated. At this stage, the text comes to an end and explains that the first person narrative which is a description of everything that was seen and found to be true, was told by the narrator who was born to a high caste family, who expresses reverence for all Brahmins and the learned. Some key elements of this narrative underwent subsequent changes and we will discuss these later.

For now it is important to examine the stylistic arrangement of the text. As we have noticed, the verse text was amenable to recitation. Each sentence is arranged in metre—*chanda*—a key element of verse composition.⁷⁷ This style is the key to the unity and dynamism of the oral narrative. The four stanzas end with the usual rendering of a closure and a repetitive verse, normally present in Vaishnavite texts. Thus, the third stanza ends with: ‘The verses of the *Doli-Puran* are extremely soothing to the ear/Narottam says: chant aloud ‘Ram Ram’ (*DoliPuranor Pad Ati Anupam/Kahe Narottam Daki Bula Ram Ram*).’⁷⁸

The narrative order of the printed text has not been questioned by critics. Is it possible, however, that there was already substantial interpolation in the oral narrative before it acquired printed form? This is an important point to keep in mind in the context of the claim put forward in the *Doli-Puran* regarding its anonymous authorship. We must also bear in mind that whatever the present form of

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁷ All the nineteenth century Assamese grammar texts stressed that there were various parts/composition of the Assamese verse described as *chanda*. Amongst the nineteenth century Assamese grammarians widely referred to and discussed, mention may be made of Hemchandra Barua and Dinabandhu Tarkalankar. Both of them have referred to such stylistic arrangement of the Assamese verse. Bora, *Asomiya Kabitar Chanda*, Guwahati, p. 120.

⁷⁸ Sarma, *Doli-Purān*, p. 24.

the *Doli-Puran*, its oral narrative always ‘goes in [its]... own way, even to the smallest formulas’.⁷⁹

It is indisputable, however, that the printed text was markedly different from the dominant narrative produced at the behest of the colonial government. The *Doli-Puran* masterfully emplots the events of 1894 within a broader narrative frame. Whereas the ryots are the key players in the *Doli-Puran*, they are the accused in the colonial narrative, and are punished for disobeying the State. So, which side was the aggressor in the actual event? The colonial narrative, as reported by Berrington in his diary of 28 January 1894, said that the British were impelled to use force for their own defence. The *Doli-Puran* contradicts this, and claims that it was only when threatened by firing that the people decided to take up arms. There is no way to check which view is true, but there is no doubt that the *Doli-Puran* had a convincing story to tell.

There were other details in the *Doli-Puran* which are in marked contrast to the colonial narrative. For example, the subject of a labour crisis in the tea-plantation economy of Assam appears as a theme in the *Doli-Puran*. Its presence is worthy of comment, because the labour crisis was almost resolved in Assam, at least theoretically, and it had never been a serious subject of state policy in the late nineteenth century.⁸⁰ However, and more importantly, since this worked as a significant explanation for increasing revenue pressure, it came to have a lasting impact on the way in which peasant society was reflected in the *Doli-Puran*. Contrary to the recounting of the colonial bureaucrats, the *Doli-Puran* forcefully outlines the social map of the crowd, carefully recounting the participants. Nor does the text anywhere identify the presence of a leader. On the other hand, according to the colonial narrative, there were certain leaders among the crowd whose presence helped to encourage the ryots to participate in violence. The *Doli-Puran* is also silent on the question of who emerged the winner in the conflict but it does not hesitate to admit the deplorable condition of the ryots.

Equally relevant to this discussion is the understanding of the rhetorical significance of this narrative. Several works have explained how the use of adjectives, epithets, exaggeration and emphasis could explain the context and meaning of a narrative.⁸¹ Refrain and repetition have significant relevance in the understanding of the *Doli-Puran* as well.⁸² Its key stanza carries the refrain:

⁷⁹ Taylor, *Proverbial Comparisons and Similes from California*, p. 7.

⁸⁰ For an understanding of labour crisis in the Assam tea-plantation and official attempt to address it see, Behal, ‘Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule’.

⁸¹ For a comprehensive understanding of rhetorical devices in narrative see, Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*.

⁸² Refrain is usually a matter of either stylistic convention or technique of continuity or method of encasing a text within a breathing space. Repetitions may indicate foci, may be matter of emphasis.

*Doli-Puran or Pod Amrit Saman/Kahe Narottame Daki Bula Ram Ram*⁸³

(The verse of *Doli-Puran* is like nectar/this verse is being told by Narottam and all may chant the name of Ram)

The emphasis is clearly on the sanctity of the narrative. Through this rhetoric the audience and readers are constantly reminded of the importance of the *Doli-Puran* and its underlying truth. Through its linguistic devices the narrative carefully elevates the status of the collective crowd over that of the colonial administrator. For example, it indicates that the Deputy Commissioner with his *hands folded* requested the collected ryots to obey the order regarding the new revenue assessment, an abject surrender further underlined in his admission that he could not function independently.⁸⁴ More instances could be found to demonstrate the significance of the *Doli-Puran* both as a tool of historical memory and a project of counter-history.

This narrative, largely followed by the nationalist historians, however, ignores the broader picture of the agrarian structure prevalent in Mangaldai. The narrative of the *Doli-Puran* fails to capture how the agrarian relationship was primarily a tenant and landlord dominated binary. It did not recognise the fact that the new revenue assessment put only the landlords to inconvenience. Even the primary burden of the new assessment was to be borne by the landlords only. In their need to raise the rent to meet the new demand the landlords successfully mobilised their tenants. The pivotal role of the landlords in the mobilisation of their tenants could not find a place in the oral narrative, an elision which made it easier for its later nationalist appropriation.

Print, Folklore and Nationalism

However, both, popular historical memory and counter history, began to manifest their importance in the reinforcement of Assamese nationalism. This section explains the larger complexities of the transformation of an oral narrative into print form. The transformation of folk tradition into print involves multiple processes. By eliminating local variations, the printed form empowers these traditions with legitimacy and permanence. Its circulation acquires speed. However, and crucially, print also restricts the possibilities of an organic link between folklore and peasant society. The folklore-in-print becomes the site and repository where the literate class can appropriate these resources for their social and intellectual needs. This makes the social purpose of folklore in a peasant society irrelevant.

As mentioned earlier, even if the *Doli-Puran*, was available in manuscript before it acquired a printed form, the manuscript version still had the character of a ballad. As a transcribed ballad the *Doli-Puran* was still a part of the collective

⁸³ Sarma, *Doli-Purān*, p. 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

and popular practice of reading and listening. Unlike individual forms of reading familiar to our experience today, the dominant form of reading in the first half of the nineteenth century was collective. This is particularly true in the rural areas of western Assam. In the 1860s, the report on education in the province referred to the popular taste for religious reading. Occasionally, 'illiterate' peasants having little to do with the business of education, would surround someone reading a religious text aloud. It also explicates in part the popularity of religious publishing since the 1860s with the arrival of Assamese print.⁸⁵ Canonical and popular literature drawn mainly from the pre-colonial Vaishnavite traditions continued to be important in Assamese scholarship but with the onset of print, the circulation of these texts increased substantially.

But there were also important transitions. Since the late nineteenth century amateur collections of Assamese folktales or folklore became an object of scholarly attention.⁸⁶ Unlike the enormous body of ethnographic materials which were collected by the colonial bureaucrats-cum-anthropologists, Assamese folklorists, like Lakhinath Bezbarua who collected folklore, did not sever their links with rural society.⁸⁷ In 1947, an Assamese academician and folklorist claimed that a formal Department of Folklore Research should be an integral part of the newly proposed university in Gauhati.⁸⁸ A few Assamese scholars began to collect folklore and published them as printed material.⁸⁹ Often, these collections of oral literature faced opposition from the canonical intellectual practices in the Assamese literary tradition.

An example of this hostility is apparent in the experiences of Hemchandra Goswami, the compiler of the multivolume: *Assomiya Sahityor Chaneki*, a cardinal moment in the formation of the Assamese literary canon. He struggled to justify his collection of oral literature, arguing that although oral literature may not contain 'desirable prose style, philosophical content and refined taste...to allow such works to disappear would mean a great historical loss'.⁹⁰ That the process of collecting folklore also implied an editorial intervention is apparent from

⁸⁵ For a brief introduction to Assamese popular literary traditions see, Chakravarty, *Colonialism and Social History of a Vernacular*. As an example of popular literature in the Vaishnavite tradition see Bora, *Kathar Malita*. It is necessary to note here that native authors were not attracted to the missionary press in Sivasagar.

⁸⁶ The most illustrious example of such folklore collection was Bezbarua, 'Burhi Air Sadhu', in Goswami ed. *L.N. Bezbarua Rachanwali*.

⁸⁷ Levi-Strauss argues that such a rupture took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century collection of myths which were mostly done by 'outsider anthropologists'.

⁸⁸ Barua, 'Scandinavia Deshat Lokasanskriti Charcha aru Siksha Pranali' Sadiniya Asomiya, 1947.

⁸⁹ Department of Folklore Research, 'Editorial', in *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 1 (1), Gauhati University, 1992. Also see, Crowley, D.J. 'The Assam Dragon: Folklore and Folkloristics in India's Long Closed North East Frontier'.

⁹⁰ A note to a collected ballad entitled *Kanya Baramahi Git* by Hemchandra Goswami, quoted from his unpublished diary in Sarma, *Tukura Bahor Kuta*, p. 59.

the comments of the influential historian Suryya Kumar Bhuyan who emphasised on the 'purity' of oral literature and thought that they must be collected in their original form.⁹¹ Their transformation into print form involved subjecting them to layers of scholarly scrutiny: grammatical correctness with its emphasis on 'purity' meant exorcising their colloquial character.⁹² These Assamese folklore collections were not free of academic subjectivity.⁹³ One of the oldest examples of such collection and printing of historical ballads was by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan (1894–1962), the eminent Assamese historian. He was instrumental in collecting *Borphukanor Git* in 1910. Several others followed.⁹⁴

In its pre-manuscript form the *Doli-Puran* had escaped the attention of this new movement in folklore collection. As mentioned earlier, the first available printed version of *Doli-Puran* dates to 1948. The published version did not name the compiler but clearly indicated that the book had been published on behalf of *Bhebarghat Chatra Sangha*, a local student body. Only in the second edition of the text was the collective identity of the compiler replaced.⁹⁵ Readers were now informed that the text was compiled and printed by Prasana Sarma, a young schoolgoer, with the support of other educated youths. He stated that he heard this ballad when he had gone to another village where he had made note of its recitation by a peasant.⁹⁶ Later, he collected more material so as to give a complete form to his work. A preface put the whole narrative in the larger context of Assamese political history. This preface also removed the textual confusion regarding the number of people killed in Patharughat; according to the preface 120 people died. It is likely that in the transition from an oral tradition to a printed text, this edition had more interpolation.

After its publication, the printed *Doli-Puran* failed to impress Assamese historical scholarship, but four years later, in 1952, Patharughat was given a memorial dedicated to the cause of those ryots who had died in 1894. Subsequently, another version of the *Doli-Puran* was printed in 1957. This edition was produced by Pandit Dineswar Sarma, a freedom fighter and carried further corrections. Sarma, a native of the locality where the uprising took place in 1894, was a historian.⁹⁷ Sarma said he collected the version immediately before independence

⁹¹ Introduction in Bhuyan, *Borphukanor Git*.

⁹² This subject has been perceptively addressed by Goswami, *Asomiya Jana Sahitya*, pp. 47–54.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Bhuyan, *Borphukanor Git*. Goswami, *Asomiya Jana Sahitya*, pp. 50–54.

⁹⁵ The second printed version was reprinted in 1985.

⁹⁶ interview with Prasana Sarma.

⁹⁷ Dineswar Sarma (1894–1975), a local school teacher, began to participate in various stages of freedom movement after the non-cooperation movement. In 1931 he wrote a history of the locality known as Mangaldai and also organised a function to commemorate the sacrifices of the ryots in 1894. He continued to play a leading role in the freedom movement. He wrote several books which were mostly historical. This included an account of the event of Patharughat. In 1964 he published a full length account of the history of Mangaldai. One of the local roads has been named after him.

but it was never published.⁹⁸ Whether he had seen the text of 1948 or had access to another pre-print manuscript remains a matter of speculation. His area of historical interest was Darrang and in 1950 he was already an acclaimed authority on local history. He had published a small booklet entitled *Mangaldai*, where he described the culture and glory of the locality. His most important account, giving him an eminent position in the Assamese intellectual milieu, was *Mangaldair Buranji*.⁹⁹ It contained a preface by Nalinibala Devi, the literary doyen of Assamese literature as well as daughter of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, a leading figure in the early days of the freedom movement in Assam. This was the time when the Indian nation was celebrating the hundred years of *Sepoy Mutiny*. The government-sponsored Towards Freedom Movement project was collecting materials and in the 1950s, while tracing the history of the Indian Freedom Movement, a large body of private and official documents were sent to the national commission by Assamese nationalists. In a brief note, R.C. Majumdar, the chief editor, wrote that 'these materials make little interest in the understanding of Indian Freedom Movement'.¹⁰⁰ This coincided with the period when Assamese nationalists had started articulating their sentiments of grave discontent at being marginalised on the national periphery. Although the evidence relating to the participation of Assam in the freedom movement was ignored by the authors of the *Towards Freedom Movement*, it provoked a series of writings which emphasised the role of Assam in the freedom movement. The major respite came in the form of Benudhar Sarma's *Maniram Dewan*, a biography of a person belonging to an old aristocratic family who was hanged in 1858 for his role in the 1857 rebellion.¹⁰¹

It became imperative, therefore, for Sarma to write an 'authentic' history of Patharughat and together with careful elaboration provide all the 'correct facts'. This concern for empirical detail was evident in his new edition of the *Doli-Puran* and its history of the peasant uprising. The new edition corrected and altered the 1948 edition. The changes were both grammatical and derivative, keeping in mind the importance of the ballad. It is in this context that Sarma transformed the ambiguities in the text concerning the number of people killed in the event into an authentic figure.¹⁰² A reliable figure, rather than a 'colloquial' estimation was important to emphasise the role of Assam in the legacy of the

⁹⁸ Quoted in Nabin Chandra Sarma.

⁹⁹ Sarma, *Mangaldai*.

¹⁰⁰ The Assamese nationalist intelligentsia were often 'pained' by the general apathy shown to regional history within the Indian historiographic traditions. This criticism was most often illustrated by the short shrift given to Assam in the larger history of the Indian freedom movement. Such ideas were reinforced by the note of R.C. Majumadar, chief editor, History of Freedom Movement in India project, private paper collection, National Archives of India.

¹⁰¹ The book received an award from the Sahitya Academy of India in 1957.

¹⁰² See Appadurai, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination'.

Indian Freedom Movement. Since then, in the popular imagination of Assam, the number 140 or *Satkuri* came to play an important role. So far, the vernacular history of the freedom movement in Assam had not bothered with the number of people killed in the event.

To understand this insistence on 'number' and the variations in the accounts of mortalities, we must return to the colonial narrative. Most of the reports were unanimous on the numbers of ryots killed in police firing.¹⁰³ *The Times* flashed news with a title called *Revenue Riots in Assam*. Reported by *Reuter* the news claimed that at Mangaldai:

The police were compelled to fire upon the mob, and 14 persons are reported to have been killed. The outbreak is believed to have been instigated by certain Ghosains, and is regarded as the direct result of the reassessment of those districts. Volunteers were called out to protect Mangaldai and 100 Goorkhas were ordered to Gauhati. All is now quiet.¹⁰⁴

Two days later *The Times* published another report about the history of reassessment of Assam and informed on the government's policies.¹⁰⁵ Differing from its previous account, the news reported that only 12 ryots were killed. *The Times* also mentioned that ryots had been pushed by vested interest and the situation had improved now. However, a new element that had created many problems in the administration was reported from a place called Margherita, a coal station in eastern Assam. The reporter said that 36 people were killed, immediately drawing attention to the mismanagement of the event and the damage it had created in the public eye.

In March 1894, Geoffrey Godfrey, the Commissioner of Assam Valley, had argued that there was nothing wrong with the pressure exerted by Anderson to ensure 'obedience to authority'. Godfrey argued that 'the firing at first, when the actual riot occurred, was without aim and over the heads of the crowd. It was only later on that the firing was with aim.' He described what happened:

The military police had 10 rounds of buckshot each and 30 rounds of ball. The Armed Civil Police and Civil Police had the converted smooth-bore snider, with ball. Altogether 15 persons were killed on the spot, or died of wounds, 37 were wounded, so far as is known. Many of the latter were just touched with spent buckshot. I dare say many more were touched, but it was to their interest

¹⁰³ News of the event was reported in several Calcutta and Allahabad based newspapers. Amongst them: *The Rais and Rait*, *The Statesman*, *The Hindustan*, *Anandabazar Patrika*. See, Sarma (2000), Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*; Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*.

¹⁰⁴ *The Times*, Saturday, 3 February 1894. Oriental and India Office Library, British Library (OIOC).

¹⁰⁵ *The Times*, Monday, 5 February 1894.

to keep out of the way and not to let it be known, as they were aware that persons who were found with wounds on them were to be tried for being concerned in the riot.¹⁰⁶

The colonial narrative created a space for debate. Eventually, both the nation-state and the popular perception agreed to the ‘number’ claimed by Sarma.

But beyond the arithmetic of this new arrangement, Sarma also strengthened various aspects of the text to make the narrative more suitable for a printed narrative form. He altered the identity of the author, previously identified as a person belonging to a low-caste, into a person from a high-caste.¹⁰⁷ To understand this sudden appearance of a Brahmin who claims to be the author, we must go back to the social condition of Assam in the middle of the nineteenth century, where the upper castes spared no effort to claim their distinct social position, either through the purification movement or even asserting them as a [Brahmanical] peasant caste.

While it is true that census categories had created a new social consciousness where different castes sought to assert new identities, the example of the high caste movement in Assam requires a separate exploration. Mostly driven by a pan-Indian purification movement the affirmation of high caste identity had taken a strong root in the western Assam districts. A well-known example of this movement is the *Bryatodhar Andolan* led by eminent Congress leader Gaurinath Talukdar in Kamrup.¹⁰⁸ Another is represented in Harinarayan Datta Baruah’s compilation the *Prachin Kamrupor Kalita Jatir Itihash*—the history of a family lineage.¹⁰⁹ This new social consciousness attempted to consolidate the social control of the upper caste Assamese. What was the situation in Mangaldai? For the late nineteenth century, it is difficult to verify the actual presence of Brahmin families, turning to scholarly traditions in a bid to consolidate their social stature in the region. What is easier to notice through this period, however, is the case of various Brahmin landlord families beginning to plough to assert their rights to lands.¹¹⁰

Another dimension that must be considered is that historical ballads, ‘built around more or less authentic historical incidents or figures’, indicate the sensitivity of the peasant society to the forces of transformation.¹¹¹ This is particularly

¹⁰⁶ From Chief Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No. 760G, dated 27 March 1894, No. 320. in File No. Home A, 220–344, *ASP (ASA)*.

¹⁰⁷ Sarma, *Doli-Purān*, p. 94.

¹⁰⁸ Talukdar, *Kalita Jatir Bratyodharar Kahini*.

¹⁰⁹ Barua, *Prachin Kamrupor Kaysatha Jatir Itihash*.

¹¹⁰ A number of Brahmin landowners, even after taking to the plough themselves, had put a gold cover in the plough in order to remain ‘pure’.

¹¹¹ Goswami, *Assamiya Jana Sahitya*, p. 11.

true in the available Assamese printed collection of ballads.¹¹² The role played by Maniram Dewan, an employee of the Assam Company for tea plantation and a self-made entrepreneur, has been perceptively captured in a historical ballad known as *Maniram Dewanor Geet*.¹¹³ Similarly, contemporary events such as the introduction of the railway in the 1910s in Kamrup have been recorded in the ballad genre.¹¹⁴ Peasant uprisings that took place along with Patharughat have also been recorded in ballads. Oral narratives have also been expressed in other genres. In this sphere, legends have enjoyed a dominant role. Several historical legends came to have a lasting impact on the new political culture of the region. A classic example is *Jaymati Akhyan*, an Assamese legend based on the death of a pre-colonial Ahom princess and the subsequent succession of her husband to the Ahom Kingdom which acquired an iconic character. Publication of popular literature has also helped to reinforce newer social dynamics. Texts focusing on political issues have also been prepared and turned into public performance. For example, at least two of these texts, *Gandhi Charit*—an Assamese biography of Gandhi, in verse, written in 1930 and *Swadhin Asom*, a treatise espousing the cause of independent Assam outside the Indian nation state (with a preface by a leading figure of Assam Provincial Congress Party), became popular reading material for different levels of readers.

Remembering History

Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, the narrative of Patharughat did not play any evocative role in the larger political happenings of Assam. The situation changed in the last quarter of the century when the Assamese ultra-nationalists rediscovered the heroic deeds of the Assamese ryots in Patharughat. Their martyrdom at Patharughat became a symbolic point of bargain for the Assamese nationalists. The event came into the forefront of the Assamese historical imagination and became an integral tool in defining the post-colonial Assamese nationalist sense and sensibility. One of the illustrative examples of this new engagement with the narrative is a historical account of Assam portrayed by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Aimed at resisting Assam's post-colonial engagement within the framework of the Indian nation-state, ULFA found in the narrative of *Doli-Puran* an evidence of the beginning of Assam's exclusive and long standing struggle against internal-colonialism.¹¹⁵

¹¹² A perceptive summary of ballads can be found in Goswami, *Ballads and Tales of Assam*, pp. 7–17; also see, Goswami, *Baro Mahor Tero Git*, pp. 171–217.

¹¹³ Goswami, *Ballads and Tales of Assam*, p. 28.

¹¹⁴ Goswami, *Bara Mahor Tero Git*, pp. 181–84.

¹¹⁵ An illustrative example of such use is that of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) who emphatic arguments for a valiant 'Assamese sacrifice' in the Indian Freedom movement through the example of Patharughat. See the site, <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/history.htm>, for an example of ULFA's portrayal of the event: 'with the increase of British exploitation the

Such popular appropriation of a historical event, however, is also unhesitatingly present in most standard Assamese academic histories. These have recognised the *Doli-Puran* as equivalent to a 'true', 'authentic,' historical text. Both popular and academic histories, privilege the *Doli-Puran* as the essential and sole voice of the event.¹¹⁶ Popular historical accounts, which are based on the *Doli-Puran*, also gained acclaim. 'Patharughat', the account penned by the local Assamese historian, Dineswar Sarma, which had faithfully retold the events of 1894 as narrated in the *Doli-Puran*, has often been hailed as the 'true' account of 1894. Beyond acquiring the status of 'authentic' it has also become a pride of the Assamese nationalists since the early 1990s.

Over the years 'Patharughat' came to be recognised as a metaphor for the sacrifice of the people in the annals of the Indian Freedom Movement and Assam's struggle against imperialism.¹¹⁷ Memories of the events of 1894, as embodied in the *Doli-Puran*, came to play a key role in modern Assamese historical consciousness. These helped to remember the nature of peasant resistance against British colonialism. The *Doli-Puran* revealed the complex layers of interests that challenged the colonial state and became an account of Assamese nationality. It also helped the events of 28 January to become a 'day for celebration' and public remembrance. Such celebrations gained a more coherent form in the 1980s. Since then, the State also began to play an important role, deeming it necessary to extend state support and sanction this celebration. Politicians from all parties began paying visits to the place of 'War'. They entered into the melee to celebrate *Patharughatar Ran*.¹¹⁸

But the State is not the only agent involved in drawing attention to this event; for over a decade, the *All Assam Student Union* (AASU), a key nationalist student organisation, has been celebrating this event because it was deemed to be compatible with its struggle to reconfigure Assamese nationalist positions in the Indian nation state.

people became irritated and finally they burst into rebellion. The agitated people under the leadership and guidance of 'Rajmel' (peoples council) turned to life and death struggle. First at Phulaguri on 17 September 1861 and later up to 1892 at Patidarrang, Nalbari, Lachima, Barama, Bajali, Khetri and Upor Barbhag; in 1893 at Rangia and the last one in 1894 in the famous Patharughat against the British imperialist to recover their sovereignty. Though these valiant struggles failed because of some limitations, the struggle under the leadership of 'RAIJMEL' irrespective of different nationality, tribes and races was the harbinger of Assamese nationalism'.

¹¹⁶ Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*; Sarma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam*.

¹¹⁷ There is parallel discourse in Assam that makes an effort to create heroes from the last days of twentieth century. See, Sarma, 'Heroes for our Times: Assam's Lachit, India's Missile Man'.

¹¹⁸ On 28 January 2003 the Assam chief minister regarded this as a more important event than Jalianwalabagh. The state governor also graced the occasion in the earlier year and appealed to the Assamese people to remember the heroic military nature of the Assamese peasantry as reflected in the Patharughatar Ran.

The attempt of the Assamese nationalists to highlight the events of Patharughat as a symbol of Assam's sacrifice in the larger saga of the Indian nationalist movement is significant for several reasons. The social origin of the post-colonial Assamese nationalists is markedly different from their nineteenth century counterparts.¹¹⁹ This difference is manifest in both, the caste composition of the Assamese middle class as well as their rural origin. In the heyday of the colonial period, the Assamese middle class was mostly dominated by the Hindu upper caste. By contrast, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the social fabric of the Assamese middle class came to be constituted of a conglomeration of communities, castes and ethnic groups; but perhaps, most critically, they were no longer drawn only from rural society. A large number of them come from business or service families whose tie with the land was snapped a long time ago. Many of them do not depend on rural agriculture as a source of secondary livelihood. Essentially, the Assamese nationalists have increasingly distanced themselves from agrarian society. By contrast, the social and cultural ties that existed between Assamese nationalists and the peasantry in an earlier generation were relatively strong and resilient. To resurrect this relationship, it is necessary to highlight the sacrifices of the peasant society.

The narrative of Patharughat became an important instrument in this context. Dramas have been written and staged recalling Patharughat.¹²⁰ The narrative of peasant sacrifice has also found a voice through the visual media as the film and the popular television serial based on the Patharughat narrative has helped to further popularise it.¹²¹ Popular media has successfully carried a rather localised event to a wider Assamese social milieu now also consisting of a diasporic Assamese population.¹²² A website puts the events of Patharughat at par with other monuments and representative figures of medieval and modern India.¹²³ Associated with the visual transformation of the event of 1894, there has been architectural renovation to the place where the dead were believed to have been cremated. An erstwhile paddy field where local traditions have claimed that the ryots were killed during the shooting, has been decorated with a slab of black

¹¹⁹ For an account of the social origin of the Assamese middle class in the nineteenth century, see, Gohain, H, 'Social Origin of the Assamese Middle Class'.

¹²⁰ One of them, Sarma, 1894, even suggested that it was an attempt to liberate the kingdom of Darrang from foreign rule.

¹²¹ *Anal*, an Assamese feature film based on this event became an instant hit. Several Assamese popular artists portrayed the leading roles. The script, under the title 'Nangal, Mati aru Manuh,' was written by dramatist, Paramanda Rajbonshi. <http://www.cs.uccs.edu/~kalita/assam/news/1999/1999-01-04.html>.

¹²² See, <http://news.oneindia.in/2007/01/29/martyrs-of-ryots-uprising-against-british-raj-remembered-1170081515.html>

¹²³ This web design randomly selected from a few describing the event of Patharughat thus uses both India Gate (New Delhi) and Taj Mahal to signify the importance of this event in the mainstream political history of India.

granite marble with a commemorative inscription of the event. Some names of those killed were also inscribed there, and is visited by politicians from the state each year.¹²⁴

A historical introduction to the political system and society of the region now begins with a reference to this incident; this has become a point of entry into a discussion of the modern history of Assam. Even the official web page of the Darrang district begins with the slogan of 'Patharighat is Assam's Jallianwalabagh'. Then it tells readers:

Darrang has a long history of resistance against any oppressive rule. That happened during the Ahom and British periods, the people first organized a Rajmel on the assembly of the people at Patharighat, about 15 kms. west of Mangaldai, to protest against the unreasonable taxation of the Government. At that time (1868), the people also gheraoed some top ranking officers of the district, but the situation did not deteriorate because of the intervention of some leading persons. The great event of 1894, popularly known as 'Patharughatar Ran' (Battle of Patharughat) is too well known to need any repetition here. On that fateful day (January 28), some 140 persons belonging to all the communities lost their lives as a result of unprovoked police firing while protesting against enhanced revenue. The number of injured was also very high. The administration did nothing to tend the injured or remove the dead bodies.¹²⁵

The political histories represented through popular literature not only tells the heroic deeds of ryots and people of Darrang in the nineteenth century against the mighty colonial authority, but also reinforces the importance of these heroic deeds in contemporary Assamese polemic. What is a more crucial element in these accounts is not the introspection of what happened but the romanticisation of the narrative of 1894.¹²⁶ Popular historians and scholars engaged in the production of historical knowledge have also tried to build a strong tradition of political awareness in the region dating from pre-colonial times. This was done by continuous production of historical knowledge of various events associated with the attempts of the peasantry to resist the pre-colonial state.¹²⁷ This sense of a *longue durée* of

¹²⁴ However, a detailed list of 140 people who died is still waiting. Interestingly amongst the identified names, a few have been identified as either beggars or guests to a particular village. Since 2002 during my several visits to the place, I have not seen any new names coming up. In one of my visits, the district commissioner's office asked me to supply the names of those remaining, if possible.

¹²⁵ See, http://darrang.nic.in/Darrang_files/history.htm.

¹²⁶ The spelling and pronunciation of the place name differs. However, the history of etymology of Patharughat signifies an important aspect of communal harmony and Hindu-Muslim syncretism as demanded by the politics of the last decade of the twentieth century.

¹²⁷ Since the early twentieth century, a number of Assamese authors actively promoted the idea of a rebellious peasant society in Darrang through their literary works. The publication of *Darrang Rajbansawali* brought not only a political legacy to Darrang and its subject population but also a

peasant resistance has been strengthened by the publication of *Mangaldoir Buranji*, a history of Mangaldoi, the larger region where these events transpired.¹²⁸ This provides a much desired social recognition in the highly contested world of the social history of Assam polarised into distinct worlds differentiated by their languages. The localities representing the districts of upper Assam, claimed a more *suddha Assomiya* (correct and pure Assamese language) than the western Assam districts which remained on the outer fringes of this world.

Clearly the 1980s and 1990s marked a period of considerable transformation in Assamese society, not only in terms of newer social alignments, but also in terms of the region's political culture. From an aggressive brand of regional politics, the Assamese nationalists have since aspired to expand their share of achievements within a larger national space. This critical step has further slackened the close ties they once enjoyed with peasant society. For a long period Assamese nationalists had appropriated surplus through their investments in land. This has lately failed to provide them any meaningful support and there has been a marked decline in the interest of the Assamese nationalists in land. The affluent amongst the nationalists are now empowered with more choices within the scope of the modern nation-state. The number of Assamese occupying important positions in offices of national importance has increased slowly.¹²⁹ This new sense of influence has forced many of the Assamese nationalists to revisit their past with a markedly different sense. Thus, we see a greater number of issues raised and discussed by the nationalists that are inevitably associated with their class aspirations rather than sharing a political consciousness with peasant society. In contrast to the decades immediately preceding, the State Legislative Assembly had far fewer issues that were vital to the Assamese peasant society in the 1990s.¹³⁰

How did the Assamese nationalists appropriate the narrative of Patharughat to realise their historical consciousness? Was this a conscious decision of the Assamese nationalists? Or could they have presented no other narrative to facilitate their nationalistic journey in the making of the Assamese nation?

sense of political independence. As many as three editions had come out since the first printed publication in the previous century. See, Goswami ed., *Darrang Rajbansawali*.

¹²⁸ Sarma, *Mangaldoir Buranji*.

¹²⁹ No comprehensive official or non-official data is available on the numerical strength of people migrating out of Assam. Most of these migrations took place either in search of better education or better job opportunities. Not surprisingly the number of students seeking higher education in various educational colleges in Delhi or other places outside Assam has spiralled.

¹³⁰ In fact, the debates in the Assam legislative assembly since its formation in the early part of the twentieth century drew immensely from the peasant question. This continued to sharpen into the 1930's. A careful perusal of assembly debates since 1985, however, reveals that the attention of legislators has been more directed towards the well-being of the Assamese nationalists than the peasantry. For a brief discussion on the history of legislative debates in the 1930's see, Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*; Saikia, 'Agrarian Society, Economy and Peasant Unrest'.

The answer seems to be negative. Several episodes of peasant resistance against the colonial state were necessarily associated with violence. The tribal ryots were the major participants in most of these incidents but the memory of these incidents is sometimes very conflicted. An example of the combination of complex issues that could surround peasant resistance is evident in the riot of 1861 that took place in Phulaguri, a trading village in central Assam. The event is better known as *Phulaguri Dhewa*. The local ryots protested against the imposition of taxes. They killed Captain Singer, the British official and temporarily dislodged the authority of the British government. Local oral narratives grew surrounding the heroic deeds of the events but these never gained importance in the Assamese historical imagination. An example of the varied memories surrounding this event is evident in an application submitted by the Assamese historian Suryya Kumar Bhuyan to the colonial government in the early decades of the twentieth century. The application was for a job where the historian reminded his potential colonial employers that he deserved the much coveted position because of the loyalty displayed by his ancestors. In the events at Phulaguri leading to Captain Singer's death, his grandfather had carried out the body of the deceased British officer.¹³¹

The oral tradition associated with this narrative, rarely finds any reference in the contemporary Assamese nationalistic imagination. This may be explained by examining the social composition of the crowd in the oral tradition of the *Phulaguri Dhewa*.¹³² Although not clearly narrated here, the 'crowd' is supposed to have consisted mostly of the tribal ryots. During the course of their resistance, the local tribal chiefs aspired to assert their sphere of authority, and articulated their explicit faith in a traditional and communitarian political system. The narrative of *Phulaguri Dhewa* could only allude to a 'primitive' stage of Assamese nationality which was not the case with the *Doli-Puran*. In the latter, not only does the narrative reaffirm a trust in the modern 'rational' political system but also, the crowd is transformed into *Raij* who are equal to the citizens of the modern nation-state.

Equally important is the social landscape imagined by *Doli-Puran*. *Doli-Puran*, as has been explained in a previous section, reflects a 'typical caste-Hindu' Assamese social structure which entertains an apparent co-existence with the members subscribing to non-Hindu faiths. This co-existence and equality of religions as imagined in *Doli-Puran* is highly qualified. This social imaginary construction of a 'secular' and 'rational' Assamese past is also continuously reproduced in Assamese literary history and is the point of reference for many contemporary Assamese nationalists. *Doli-Puran*, through its literary techniques and standardisation of language ensuring 'purity', made sure that any remnant non-Sanskritised

¹³¹ Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *Private Papers, Vol. 6* (personal collection of Bijay Kumar Bhuyan, Guwahati).

¹³² In this peasant uprising of 1861 by the ryots, mostly tribal, who protested against the government's ban on poppy cultivation in the district Nowgaon, a British officer was killed.

Assamese language was erased. The Assamese nationalists—often haunted by their non-Aryan historical past—appreciated these linguistic reworkings. And thus, the presence of a desired social landscape in the oral tradition was nudged to conform to a social history acceptable to the Assamese nationalists. This went a long way in allowing for the integration of the narrative of Patharughat in the imagination of Assamese nationalists.

Conclusion

This essay was a tentative examination of the social process through which an oral tradition had come into existence. It then examined the mythologisation of this tradition in the age of nationalism. While the historical ballad is not unique to the Assamese oral tradition, the *Doli-Puran*'s importance lies in the fact that the Assamese nationalists used this text to displace the hegemony of the colonial narrative. The *Doli-Puran* is one example through which the modern nation-state reaffirms its grip on the changing rural landscape. Yet, unlike the *Doli-Puran*, several other Assamese oral narratives—either of peasant uprising or Assamese national heroes, have not found much space in the contemporary historical Assamese imagination. After India's independence, and as the textual content of the *Doli-Puran* underwent substantial transmutation, the narrative of this peasant uprising became important in the process of the manufacturing and institutionalisation of the Assamese nationality as well as the Assamese historical imagination. Thus, quite ironically, an oral tradition and its printed form, not only lost its meaning in the vernacular over the years, but it has emerged transformed today as a strong rallying 'memory' in the campaign for Assamese nationality. The *Doli-Puran*, originating in its complex social milieu, continues to occupy a place in the popular nationalistic historical imagination as a crucial event marking the sacrifice of the Assamese 'ryots' for the cause of the 'nation'. And this sacrifice has remained critical for sustaining and strengthening the concerns and aspirations of Assamese nationalism. Advocates of Assamese nationalism have made no mistake in reaffirming their faith in this oral narrative. It must be mentioned here that the Assamese nationalists have repeatedly reproduced their 'sense of marginality'¹³³ and believed that the contradictions of the Indian federal state and Assamese nationalism could be negotiated through a careful use of such an oral narrative. On other hand disgruntled Assamese nationalists had chosen the narrative of *Doli-Puran* not only to negotiate with the Indian state, but also with Assamese peasantry. The Assamese nationalists have never missed any opportunity to make use of this oral narrative to reinforce their link with the Assamese ryots. The nationalists are only partially successful in this task. They have not been able to completely incorporate the Assamese ryots as their political allies. Meanwhile, while

¹³³ Gohain, H., 'Positions on Assam History'.

mediating between Assamese ryots and Assamese nationalism, the *Doli-Puran* also acts as a stage for the Assamese ryots to reassert their continued relevance in the larger Assamese political landscape.

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