

**SOCIAL and
ECONOMIC
HISTORY of
ASSAM**

1853-1921

RAJEN SAIKIA

MANOHAR

The study unravels the under-researched aspects of social and economic history of Assam.

It analyses the erosion of the old ruling gentry and disappearance of the traditional and artisanal industries and examines to what extent it was due to the foreign rule and intrinsic limitations. The remarkable resilience of handloom is another area of investigation.

Introduction of the ryotwari land system, increase in cultivated acreage, introduction of cash crop, commercialization of agriculture and how a large section of marginalized peasantry broke into the labour market have been studied in depth.

The author gives an interesting interpretation of the peasant uprisings in Kamrup and Darrang in the early 1890s and shows that the personality of the Assamese middle class crystallized in a process of cooperation and confrontation. He marks out the creative and constructive role of the middle class so characteristically trivialized by many.

The impact of tea industry has been studied from a new perspective. Exploration of coal, petroleum, exploitation of the forest resources, floral and faunal disturbances have also been discussed.

This is a regional history fully taking note of the Indian background.

Rs. 400

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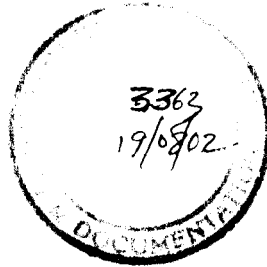
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Social and Economic History of Assam

(1853-1921)



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CHAPTER I

Erosion of the Ruling Elite

INTRODUCTION

VENTURESOME BRITISH traders established commercial contact with Assam even before the East India Company assumed power in Bengal in 1757. In the early years of the eighteenth century 'forty vessels from five to six hundred tons of burden each' came annually from Bengal to Assam chiefly with salt which gave the traders a record profit of 200 per cent. Business documents show that they also brought betel-nut and tobacco. They received, in exchange for their goods—silk, lac, *mugadhotis*, ivory and timber from Assam.¹

The East India Company dithered and drifted for long enough. In 1786 it resolved to open trade with Assam. It was sort of a calculated march on the part of the Company, from commerce to political control of the situation, which passed off in a dramatic speed. The Ahom monarchy was tottering under the impact of a series of internecine power struggles from the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The crisis was all-embracing. Ultimately, it gave the Company an opportunity to interfere and project its image as the saviour. It seemed as though the force of events was irreversible and everything lay in the logic of history.

In 1792, the dispossessed Ahom King Gaurinath Singha sought succour from the Company. Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General (1786–93), after a good deal of calculation decided to send an expedition under Captain Thomas Welsh to Assam.²

The Mayamoria rebels were mainly responsible for the ouster of the King Gaurinath Singha. Other opponents of the king, rising mainly from Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon took full advantage of the chaotic situation created by them. We may note, in passing, that the Mayamoria rebels represented a socio-religious sect of the same name. It started off as a popular social movement but the arrogance of the ruling class gave it an odd twist. Things moved from bad to worse when the leading priests

of the sect suffered humiliation at the instance of the king. It burnt deep into the hearts of their followers and they threw a challenge to the king. The monarchy was not equipped to face their desperate attack. A grim sequel followed; a social movement led to political consequence.

As a 'popular revolt' the Mayamoria uprising may be compared to the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536) in England. The suppression of the monasteries, use of religious imagery, use of banner of the Five Wounds, marching song, capture of the royal castle of Pontefract and the cruelty in putting down the revolt bear comparison with the course of the Mayamoria uprising.³

On his arrival, Captain Welsh correctly guessed that a carrot-and-stick approach would be more rewarding than a policy of hot war. The rebels and other opponents of the king were gradually brought under control and Gaurinath Singha's position was consolidated. A commercial treaty was prized out of the thankful king by Captain Welsh. He eventually became an adviser to the king.⁴

In October 1793, Lord Cornwallis was succeeded by Sir John Shore as Governor-General. Shore was loath to recognize any merit in the work of his predecessor and would have loved to upset everything done by Cornwallis. To fit in his policy of non-intervention, he recalled Captain Welsh. Gaurinath was restored to his throne beforehand. Welsh and his army left Assam in May 1794. With the departure of Welsh, confusion, anarchy and darkness sank upon the scene. There were claims and counter-claims of princes and pretenders, court intrigues, insurrections giving tempting calls to the adventurous neighbours and distant foes.⁵

To put it briefly, Badanchandra Barphukan, a villainous viceroy posted in Guwahati implored the East India Company to intervene in his favour which they refused. But a curious thoughtlessness possessed him, so he could not rest content. He next rushed to the king of Burma who agreed to send his troops in support of him. First they came and left. The political arrangements made by them were immediately unsettled. Their best man Badanchandra was assassinated and the protege was dethroned. On hearing this, the Burmese king hurriedly sent in his forces. Like a mighty rushing wind the Burmese troops reached Assam, took and occupied it with a vengeance. The marauding force stalked the land for several years.

Thus began what Edward Gait calls the 'Burmese rule' in Assam which lasted from 1819 to 1824.⁶ It was cruel and ugly as sin. The Burmese were known as the Maans. They left behind a lore, *Manor Din*, the days of the Maans, a metaphor for any experience of organized

violence. The inhabitants of Assam neither put up resistance against the Burmese nor accorded any welcome to them. They really found no cause to live and die for. They could act manfully only under an organized leadership. Such society can neither defend self-interest nor counteract self-destruction.

The easy success of the Burmese in the Brahmaputra valley inspired them to expand towards Cachar in the south. Cachar was also reeling under similar crisis. Politically, it was under the three Manipuri usurpers and the King Govindachandra sought shelter in Sylhet.⁷ From there he asked for assistance from the East India Company to regain his throne. Geographically, the position of Cachar was important and the British thought that it could be used by their enemy as a base of operation against the Company's territory. The officers of the Assam-Bengal border kept themselves informed of the dramatic developments. Towards the end of 1823, when the Burmese force spread out in Cachar, the British struck hard at the root of their campaign. The battle at Badarpur on the bank of the Surma sealed the fate of the Burmese in Cachar.⁸ The Company restored Raja Govindachandra to the throne and in March 1824 he entered into a treaty with the East India Company whereby the Raja put the 'territory of Cachar, or Herumba under their protection'; J.B. Bhattacharjee justifies British occupation of Cachar in these words:

...the internal condition of the country was so chaotic and the government so feeble that sovereignty had become a myth. May be it was fortunate for the people that they were subjected to the British, and not the Burmese.⁹

Sylhet was a district of many signs and wonders. In the fourteenth century it became a part of Mughal India. Under the Nawab of Dacca, Sylhet was governed by an officer called Amil.¹⁰ With the grant of Dewani in 1765, Sylhet and Goalpara, the western 'frontier of the old Ahom kingdom' passed into the hands of the East India Company.

In 1874 Assam was made a Chief Commissioner's province. The districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara were brought under the administration of the Government of Assam. Eastern Duars formed a part of Goalpara district.¹¹

After Cachar, the Company took up operation against the Maans in the Brahmaputra valley. The British troops had to advance haltingly for lack of information and adverse climatic conditions. The Maans in the meantime went on with their mad frolics. 'Some they flayed alive, others they burnt in oil, and others again drove in crowds into the village, *namghors*, or prayer houses, which they then set on fire.'¹²

Amid all the crying and chaos of those dark days, the British appeared on the scene as the 'deliverer' of the inhabitants of Assam.¹³ They welcomed them and offered their cooperation. An Assamese folk song may suggest the eagerness of the people to know the news of the English victory over the Maans. One cannot overlook the strange admixture of curiosity, admiration and expectancy.

Up the Brahmaputra comes the steamer of the
English, it comes shaking the earth
Moor, moor it, O steamer of the English
Is there any news¹⁴

The Maans were completely routed. The Burmese king was forced to sue for peace and he signed the Treaty of Yandaboo with the English in February, 1826. According to the terms of the treaty, the Burmese king abandoned his claim upon 'the principality of Assam and its dependencies'.¹⁵ Since then Assam formed a part of the Company's territory. Historically speaking, Assam became a part of political India by fluke. It helped to crystallize her emotional bond with Bharat. Geography shaped her sense of direction and culture confirmed her spiritual identity. Company's territory means company's administration. They had their own priorities. Life was tuned to the Anglo-Saxon view of things. Two major objects of social stability and augmentation of revenue were clearly perceptible in the extension of pax Britannica.

The Ahom kings, as a matter of policy, did not favour the growth of feudalism in Assam as a distinct social system. There was no landlord class who could exert political influence upon the king. The producers in the field were also the fighters in the battlefield. The saints and the lords of shrines, though powerful and complex in their respective social cause, were not strong enough to constitute a social class by themselves.

David Scott, Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, at first tried to propitiate a section of the nobility through awards of office. He was not prepared to accommodate all of them since he had a very poor opinion about their administrative ability. As the sentinels of a poor and decadent state apparatus the old aristocracy could not equip themselves with the brasstacks of a circumspect colonial government. The communication gap between the ruler and the ruled straining under long years of political turmoil was deepening.¹⁶ In spite of this, David Scott pleaded for some structural adjustment in the administration. He rightly thought that 'It would be unreasonable to expect that the Ahom nobility and the members of royal family whose predecessors ruled the country

for several centuries would relinquish their ancient rights upon the appearance among them of a handful of strangers.¹⁷ He suggested different measures for improvement and the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, was far too willing to consider them. But before any decision was taken, David Scott passed away in August 1831. It deserves mention that David Scott is held in high esteem in Assam. H.K. Barpujari hailed him as 'the patriarch of the Assamese'.¹⁸ S.K. Bhuyan contended that 'no Assamese could have more efficiently championed the cause of his country as did Scott'.¹⁹ N.K. Barooah remarks, 'He ended, as many of the great administrators did, by identifying himself with the interests and the good of the people under him, by being truly paternalist.'²⁰

Scott's successor T.C. Robertson was also an enterprising officer best suited to the need of a government with ever increasing responsibility. In accordance with the suggestion of Robertson, Lower Assam was organized into four districts—Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon in March 1833 and in Upper Assam the Ahom monarchy was restored next month.²¹ Purandar Singha donned the crown of a contractual monarchy in April 1833. The restored monarchy had a precarious existence from the very beginning. He did not receive any cooperation from the gentry and the experiment began to flounder. Robertson, who admired some qualities of Purandar, saw no reason why he should not be buttressed.

In 1834 Francis Jenkins succeeded Robertson as the Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General. The new Commissioner soon received petitions complaining about the tyranny of Purandar. Jenkins formed an unfavourable opinion about the king and recommended 'immediate resumption of Upper Assam'. The Governor-General, Lord Auckland, approved of the resumption which was carried into effect in 1838. It is on record that the moment government resumed possession of the territory of Purandar Singha, the *pykes* universally 'deserted their masters'.²²

The year 1838 saw the end of the experimental phase and it marked the beginning of a common system of administration. Officers of proven capacity were put in charge of the districts. But things were not smooth for them either. The former rulers and the nobility were unwilling to come to terms with the emerging situation. They resented the 'levelling tendency' of the British and Jorhat became a centre 'of innumerable do-nothing nobles'.²³ But Jenkins solved the problem with tact and imagination. The result was a gradual erosion of the ruling elite.

LISTENING TO THEIR TALE

Our account of the erosion of the ruling elite and the old aristocracy must begin with Kandarpeswar Singha, the Saring Raja. Kandarpeswar was the son of Kameswar Singha and grandson of Purandar Singha who was removed from the throne in October 1838. To soft-soap Purandar, the government offered him a monthly pension of Rs. 1,000 which he refused. Hurt and humiliated, Purandar was unable to challenge the authority of the British. A thoroughly disillusioned man, he died in October 1846. He was then barely 38. His son Kameswar flattered himself with the title of 'Maharaja' conferred on him by the Company Bahadur. He was also offered a monthly pension of Rs. 1,000, but having been impelled by Maniram Dewan, the former sheristadar of his father's government, Kameswar declined the pension as well. Far from organizing his own resources for a respectable living, Kameswar frittered away his money and energy. He died in 1852 leaving his son in the lurch.²⁴

Kandarpeswar, then a boy of eleven, threw himself upon the mercy of Maniram Dewan. In his memorial²⁵ dated 27 February 1863 to the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Kandarpeswar recalled that he 'was a minor at the time of the demise of his father' and as such was under the control of his late father's Dewan, who led him to entertain the most sanguine hopes of getting the country restored to his management.... He also noted that earlier in 1853 he waited on A.J.M. Mills to urge his claim to the territories held by his grandfather.²⁶

But Mills was forthright to tell him that the question of restoration of monarchy did not simply arise. When Kandarpeswar found his efforts 'unavailing' he privately intimated to Mills his willingness to accept the pension. The government, however, remained unmoved. Kandarpeswar repeated his requests for the pension in 1854 and in 1856. Everytime his request was turned down. In October 1856, Lord Canning observed that he saw no reason to give it as a favour.²⁷

Kandarpeswar then engaged a solicitor, P.J. Paul, who memorialized on behalf of his client. P.J. Paul was categorically told that the government would not reopen the case.²⁸ Soon after, Kandarpeswar was arrested on an unverified charge of complicity with the rebels of the unaccentuated uprising of 1857 in Assam. He was sent to Calcutta and confined for a few months in the Alipore jail. The Government of Bengal recorded: 'In consideration of his youth and inexperience, and the fact that he appeared to have been rather a tool in the hands of others than a voluntary agent in the conspiracy, he was never put upon his trial for intrigues against the State, in which he was, however, to some

extent, implicated.' Though released from jail, Kandarpeswar was kept under surveillance at Burdwan. He was given an allowance of Rs. 50 which he had never drawn.

In October 1858 the Government of Bengal directed that all his property be restored to him. For some unknown reasons a part of his property was sold by auction at Jorhat.²⁹ The sale proceeds of the property amounting to Rs. 5,331-9-4 was sent by draft in favour of the Raja after payment of his debts and deduction of commission, etc. In his petition dated 12 May 1859 addressed to H.B. Lawford, Magistrate of Burdwan, Kandarpeswar stated that he would 'incur great loss, as the articles sold will only realise about a quarter of their original value'. He then requested the government that 'such part of my property as can be removed to this place (i.e. Burdwan) at a moderate expense may be remitted to me here, and that such articles as cannot be removed from Sibsagar without great expense and risk in the transit, may be sold at Sibsagar, or at any other place at my mother's directions'.³⁰ Apparently, Kandarpeswar took assistance from some lawyer, so his petition could not be swept under the carpet. To reach at some compromise, the Commissioner of Burdwan, at the instance of the Commissioner of Assam, made some 'proposals' to Kandarpeswar Singha. The latter sent his reply to the Commissioner of Burdwan through Lawford, the Magistrate of Burdwan. Lawford was peeved by the spirit of the letter. He remarked, 'the Raja's language, considering the position he is in, is very unbecoming and haughty'.³¹

In his reply Kandarpeswar reiterated his earlier stand that he never requested the government to dispose of his personal property by auction. He wanted 'those precious stones, gold and silver and utensils and boxes containing my clothes to be brought and delivered to me here'. He suggested that the elephants, cattle, etc., be disposed of at Guwahati at prices agreed to by his mother and the sale proceeds be sent to him. He alleged that his guns and swords were sold at one-fourth of the real price. He urged the government 'to nullify the sale' and wanted all his property 'to be disposed of by me in your presence to my best advantage'.³² The Government of Bengal, upon that representation directed the Commissioner of Assam to 'send down the entire unsold property of the Raja to Burdwan and the proceeds of the goods already sold to the commissioner of Burdwan'. Our inquiries fail to reveal if Kandarpeswar came into contact with the Raja of Burdwan. There was hardly any such possibility, because the Raja, Mahtabchand Bahadur actively supported the government in suppressing the Sepoy Mutiny. He donated eight