

NORTH EAST INDIA

Political and Administrative History

*(A fascinating account of administrative
experiments in the region during the
19th and early 20th century)*

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*To the
Loving Memory of My Friend
Ramendra Narayan Chakraborty*

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.C.	Assam Commissioner.
A.L.C.P	Assam Legislative Council Proceedings.
B.P.P.	Bengal Political Proceedings.
B.S.P.C.	Bengal Secret and Political Consultations.
C.C.	Chief Commissioner.
D.N.B.	Dictionary of National Biography.
E.B.	Eastern Bengal.
F.P.	Foreign Proceedings.
G.G.	Governor General.
G.I.	Government of India.
H.P.	Home Proceedings.
H.D.	Home Department.
H.C.	House of Commons.
I.N.B.	Indian National Biography.
I.H.Q.	Indian Historical Quarterly.
J.A.S.B.	Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.
Mills' Report	Report on the Province of Assam, 1854 by A.J. Mofatt Mills.
Parl Papers	Parliamentary Papers.
P.P.	Political Proceedings.
P.R.A.B.	Papers Relative to the Administration of Bengal.
P.W.D.	Public Works Department.
Sec.	Secretary.

PREFACE

“North East India” is a study of the constitution of Assam into a Province with a Local Government of its own under a Chief Commissioner on being separated from the Lieutenant Governorship of Bengal in February 1874. Since then Assam continued to be a Chief Commissioner’s province upto 2nd January 1921 except for a short space of about six and a half years from 16 October 1905 to 31 March 1912 when it was united with East Bengal to form the Lieutenant Governorship of Eastern Bengal and Assam.

The constitution and reconstitution of the Province of Assam as aforesaid were so closely connected with the administrative system of Bengal to which it was added in 1826 and continued to be administered therewith prior to the formation of Chief Commissionership in 1874, that the former cannot be followed in its true historical perspective without a discussion of the latter in some details. The separation of Assam from Bengal in 1874 and its amalgamation with East Bengal in 1905 in the wake of a great debate and prolonged discussion on the administrative system of Bengal both in India and in London, has interesting, important but unrevealed history behind it.

In the following pages, an attempt has been made to present the political and administrative developments leading to the establishment of Chief Commissionership in Assam in 1874 (Chapter III) and the Constitution of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905 (Chapter V). The administrative area of the Chief Commissionership of Assam has been described in Chapter IV. The powers and functions of the Chief Commissioner of Assam and the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam have been dealt with in Chapter VI while their administrative systems have been discussed in Chapter VII. The personality of the Chief Commissioners and the Lieutenant Governors who served Assam and Eastern

Bengal and Assam respectively during the period from 1874 to 1921 has been briefly dealt with in Chapter VIII, styled 'Succession of Chief Commissioners'. These Chapters have been preceded by an introduction of Land and People (Chapter I), the necessity and importance of which is beyond question in all historical works, more so in the case of Assam and particularly, the instant work. In Chapter II, a brief account has been given of the historical and administrative background, which I consider to be essential to follow the course of events of the period under discussion.

Geographically, historically, ethnographically and also from the strategic point of view, Assam occupies a unique position in the Republic of India. But in spite of her importance, she could not be always in the limelight apparently because of the apathetic attitude of the administrators, statesmen and historians, both foreign and Indian, for the easternmost part of India.

Sir Alexander Mackenzie rightly remarked that had the field of David Scott's activities been in central or North western India instead of amid the jungles of Assam, he would have occupied a place in history by the side of Malcolm, Elphinstone and Metcalfe.¹ The same point was brought home by John M'Cosh, M.D., F.R.G.S. when he stated that the Indian and Home Governments and the people of this country were generally so morbidly sensitive about the North-western Frontier of India, whilst the North Eastern was utterly neglected and that the political and commercial interests of the empire were in that quarter left to their fate.²

Though Assam, with her multifarious peoples and races and her relations with the tribes presents to the historian a very engrossing field of study, it is regrettable that even to the historians of modern and independent India Assam has not so far got the treatment she so well deserves. To some extent, it may be attributed to her geographical position in an extreme corner of a vast country—the North East.

The only authentic account of Assam as a whole has been given by Sir Edward Gait in his admirable work *A History of Assam*. But with all regard for the great scholar for his pioneer work on Assam, it may be stated that he has not done

full justice to the modern period and has not even attempted to bring to light the subject under discussion. Moreover, the learned author's *A History of Assam* does not stand the test of time. As a part of the British administrative machinery, it was but natural for him to see and judge everything through the glasses of imperial interests.

Alexander Mackenzie did not deal either with the internal history of Assam or with the question of the separation of Assam from Bengal in his famous work *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*.

Dr. S.K. Bhuyan, in his valuable and laborious work *Anglo-Assamese Relations* dealt with the difficult question of the relation of the British with the Assamese. The students of modern history of Assam are very much indebted to Dr. Bhuyan for his indefatigable efforts in preparing the ground work of modern history of Assam and for indicating the scope for further research work. But several parts of Bhuyan's work are not relevant.

The Eastern Frontier of British India written by Dr. A.C. Banerjee, is a very comprehensive and noteworthy publication on the history of Assam from 1784 to 1826, narrating the policy followed by the British Government towards Burma and Assam. Dr. R.M. Lahiri in his wellknown work *The Annexation of Assam* has covered the period from 1824 to 1854. Dr. H.K. Barpujari in his praiseworthy book *Assam : In the Days of the Company* has carried the work further to cover the period upto 1858. Even in the *Political History of Assam* (1826-1919) edited by Dr. Barpujari, the subject under discussion in the present work has not received adequate treatment.

In preparing this thesis, therefore, I had no well marked tracks to follow and had to depend mainly, if not exclusively, on original sources preserved in the Record Office, Government of Assam, Shillong, now partly shifted to Dispur. The West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta, The National Library, Calcutta, The Calcutta University Library, The West Bengal Secretariat Library, The Gauhati University Library, and The Office of the Director, Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati. In some cases, the original sources have been suppl-

mented or confirmed by fresh data, information or quotation from contemporary works and Memoirs of the persons involved in the relevant events.

For the first two Chapters, I do not claim any originality. They are based on official records, reports, and authoritative works on the subject. I have all along endeavoured to reveal facts in their true historical perspective and to interpret them as correctly as I am capable of and I would like to conclude by quoting from Professor E.H. Carr that History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his fact, an unending dialogue between the present and past . . . a dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends. . . . To enable men to understand the society of the past and to increase the mastery over the society of the present is the dual function of history.¹³

It is my pleasant duty to acknowledge my indebtedness to my esteemed guide Dr. V. Venkata Rao, B.A. (Hons), M.A., M. Litt., Ph. D., D. Litt, Professor-Emeritus, Gauhati University, who has supervised my work all through. But for his special care, ungrudging help, affectionate guidance and valuable suggestions, it would not have been possible to bring the project to completion. I also take this opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude to Reverend Brothers R.B. Veyra and M.G. Shannon, erstwhile and present Principals, St. Edmund's College, Shillong who offered me all possible facilities to do my research work. My thanks are due to Dr. B. Dutta Ray and Shri P.C. Sarma, M.A., Keeper of Records, Assam Secretariat (Civil) Shillong for the help and encouragement received from them. I am also grateful to the Authorities and concerned staff of the Centres of Studies and Research referred to above and to the Librarians, Office of the Deputy Director, Anthropological Survey of India, Shillong and the State Central Library, Shillong, now shifted to Gauhati, for their help and co-operation. I gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance extended to me by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Eastern Regional Centre, Calcutta under its Study Grants Scheme. I am also grateful to Devajani Chaliha and Associates, who extended all possible facilities in connection with my research work in Calcutta. My sincerest

thanks are due especially to my friends Sarvashree R.N. Chakraborty, B. Sc., Umapada Bhattacharjee, B.A. and my cousin U.B. Chakraborty, B.A. who have always encouraged me in this project and helped me in very many ways in every stage of my work. Of my colleagues, my thanks are due to Sarvashree M.R. Bhattacharjee, M.A. (Double) of St. Edmund's College and Dr. Pratyush Ranjan Purkayastha of Sankardev College, Shillong who gladly took the trouble of checking and comparing the entire work. Lastly, my thanks are also due to Higherland Syiemlieh who has typed the work with all possible care and sincerity and to Shri Rathin Chandra Dey for drawing the maps.

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By the treaty of Yandabo, 1826, five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley namely, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur which were ruled by the Ahoms and to which the term "Assam" was originally applied, were ceded by the Burmese to the East India Company. These were added to the Presidency of Fort William and for administrative purposes Assam was formed into a Division of the Government of Bengal under a Commissioner. David Scott was the first Commissioner of Revenue and Circuit for Assam and Agent to the Governor General on the North East Frontier. There were accordingly two Establishments in his office at Gauhati—one for revenue and judicial administration of the Assam districts under British occupation and another for maintenance of political relations with the native Chiefs and Hill Tribes. An Assistant to the Commissioner was stationed in Upper Assam first at Rangpur and then at Jorhat. Some time later an Assistant was also appointed in Lower Assam.

Theoretically, the Commissioner was all powerful but in practice, for all acts beyond ordinary routine and all expenses above the prescribed amount, prior approval of the Government of Bengal was necessary. As a result there was administrative inefficiency, confusion and delay even in the execution of important and urgent development work.

As to the material condition of the people, which reflects the true character of the Government, we find that no improvement whatsoever took place in this regard though upwards of eight years had elapsed in uninterrupted peace. When this deplorable state of affairs came to the notice of the Court of

Directors, they admitted that Assam was governed "extremely ill."¹ Even after twenty-eight years of annexation, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, an Assamese of rank and respectability, observed on the administration of Assam that "little perceptible change has been effected in the condition of the people and the good government of the Province."²

It may be pointed out in this connection that the original Assam districts had a polity of their own from time immemorial. Therefore, there was justification for a separate Local Administration by reason of their isolated position and on ethnical and topographical grounds. These districts could not be properly supervised from Bengal due to the difficulties of distance and communication. The nature and conditions of the country and the peaceful and simple habits of the people deserved a Local Administration which was expected to give close and undivided attention to the needs of the people and of their growing interests. Assam which is very resourceful and important from the strategic point of view but backward, needed personal attention of the Head of the Local Government. The Head of the Administration from a far off metropolis like Calcutta and with multifarious responsibilities which he had to shoulder could not even enquire into the real state of the country and the condition of the people at large far from doing justice to their needs. The Bengal Administration was not able to solve the problems and satisfy the wants of a newly conquered and devastated territory with widespread poverty and ignorance.

Taking these factors into consideration 'Assam' proper as indicated above might either be created into a Chief Commissionership or be placed on the same footing in connection with Bengal which Sind had long held in connection with Bombay. The creation of a Province on either form would have been more rational and possibly more beneficial to the people concerned.

But the British in India did not follow any fixed principle in organising the conquered territories. The political map of British India was shaped by the military, political and administrative exigencies or conveniences of the moment with small regard to the natural affinities or wishes of the people. There

was not much, if any, attempt to conform to linguistic or ethnic principles.³ This was most pronounced in the case of Assam where we find that the territories acquired or annexed subsequently were all and sundry placed within the administrative unit of Assam. The districts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Naga Hills and the Subdivision of North Cachar Hills became integral parts of Assam during the period from 1826-1874. The Mikir Hills which also came into British possession at an early date formed part of the Nowgong district. Thus, even before the establishment of Chief Commissionership in 1874, Assam took a shape which was much wider in extent than Assam of the Ahom age.

Let us now turn our attention to the circumstances in which the Province of Assam came into being. The way the Province came to take shape was indeed typical of how the British established their rule in India. The creation of Assam into a Chief Commissionership was the result of the reorganisation of Bengal Administrative system. The disaster caused by the Orissa Famine, 1866 brought to light many serious defects of the Bengal Administrative system. Sir George Campbell in his Orissa Famine Report, 1867, suggested radical reforms in that system. Taking cue therefrom, North Cote, the Secretary of State for India, initiated a discussion on certain proposals on the administration of Bengal. In the course of discussions, two distinct proposals emerged.

One was to provide Bengal a full Government with an Executive Council as in the case of Bombay and Madras, the other being reduction in the territorial extent of the Province without bringing about any organic change in the form of the Government. This question though closely debated, was, however, allowed to drift until when Campbell as Lieutenant Governor of Bengal introduced various administrative reforms which made it impossible to defer any longer the reorganisation of the Bengal administrative system. In such circumstances, Mayo, possibly under the impact of Mizo raids over Cachar, preferred the alternative proposal of diminishing the territory of Bengal by creating Assam into a Chief Commissionership as originally suggested by his predecessor. And with the approval of the Secretary of State, Assam as a

separate Province came into being on February 6, 1874. This approval was, however, circumscribed by the conditions that :

I) The system of administration should be simple and inexpensive and that (II) The Secretariat would not have the full complement of departments and staff as normally a Chief Commissioner would be entitled to.

The reasons for the creation of Chief Commissionership of Assam "are mainly, that the burden of the Government of this great Province of Bengal has been found too heavy even for the very able and distinguished men, who in recent years, have filled the office of the Lieutenant Governor."⁴ It would be seen that Assam's case for a separate Local Administration was never considered from the point of view of Assam.

The Chief Commissionership of Assam thus created comprised apart from Assam proper, two Bengali districts of Cachar and Goalpara and the three Hill districts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Naga Hills. The district of Sylhet which was a part of Bengal proper was added to the Chief Commissionership of Assam in September, 1874. The North Lushai Hills, although hitherto administered as a part of the Province of Assam, was not formally placed under any defined administration. Under a Proclamation dated the 6th September, 1895, the Governor General in Council took the said territories under his immediate authority and management and placed them under the administration of the Chief Commissioner of Assam and directed that they should be included within the Province of Assam.⁵ The South Lushai Hills which had been controlled by an Assistant Political Officer under the Commissioner of Chittagong were formed into a district on 1st April 1891 and placed under a Superintendent.⁶ With effect from 1st April, 1898, the South Lushai Hills which under the Proclamation dated the 6th September 1895 were included within the Lower Provinces of Bengal and the tract known as Rutton Puiya's villages including Demageri in the hill tracts of Chittagong were transferred to the Assam Administration, and the district of Lushai Hills for the first time took its present form.⁷

In 1914, the North East Frontier district was established as an administrative unit separate from the regulation district of

Lakhimpur. The numerous hill tribes who had been previously controlled by the Deputy Commissioners of Darrang and Lakhimpur, were placed under Political Officers working directly under the orders of the Government of Assam. Accordingly, the North East Frontier was divided into three administrative units namely, (I) The Central and Eastern Section, (II) The Lakhimpur Frontier and (III) The Western Section.

In 1919, the Central and Eastern Section was renamed as the Sadiya Frontier Tract and the Western Section as the Balipara Frontier Tract. The Lakhimpur Frontier Tract, however, continued to be known as such. These tracts were treated as separate districts of Assam.⁸

The name 'Assam' was thus given a wider meaning when it was used to designate the whole territory of Chief Commissionership of Assam comprising the six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, two districts of the Surma Valley, four hill districts and the North East Frontier Tract.

It may be pointed out in this connection that the people of Assam proper, the people of the different hills and the people of Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara were essentially distinct each from all the others. These people who were ethnically and culturally distinct and whose material conditions were at different levels had obviously little in common to bind them together into a single political entity except the alien ruling authority.

This conglomeration of diverse elements whose interests were oftener than not conflicting and though ill-at-ease, continued so long the British ruled the country. Nevertheless, these conflicts of interests had their interactions producing stress and strain in which manifested itself from time to time in the public life of the Province. In an unitary India ruled by an alien power, these various incongruities scattered over the map of Assam did not matter so much, nor get publicity but they became serious when the British handed over power and for the successor Governments they raised many problems and difficulties.

The anomaly of the whole arrangement may first be noted in the movement for separation of the Bengal district of Sylhet which was included in the Chief Commissionership of

Assam disregarding the interests and wishes of the people. It became possible because public opinion was not then much of a power and the solidarity of the Bengali speaking people and their growing sense of unity had not been so pronounced a factor in the public life of the Province. The talk of Constitutional reform intensified the demand for separation of Sylhet. Kamini Kumar Chanda raised the question of reunion of Sylhet with Bengal in the form of a resolution in the Indian Legislative Council on 6 February 1918.⁹ The resolution was lost but the movement gradually gathered momentum and strength. Supporting the cause, Abdul Karim, a member of the Bengal Legislative Council said that the artificial relation between Assam and Sylhet failed to produce unity between the two peoples. It would also appear from the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council that even after fifty years of her stay with Assam, a resolution was moved in 1924 recommending the retransfer of Sylhet to Bengal.¹⁰

The Bengali speaking population of Goalpara also started a movement for separation from Assam and amalgamation with Bengal. Starting in 1912, the movement took a definite shape in 1918 when in a meeting under the auspices of the Goalpara Association it was resolved that the district of Goalpara should be placed under the same laws and administration with the district of Rangpur and Jalpaiguri.¹¹

Generally speaking, the Assamese public were sympathetic to the cause of the people of the Sylhet. But to the aspirations of the people of Goalpara, the opinion was divided. The situation, however, completely changed in 1919 when discussions were in progress on the proposed Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. Thereafter the leaders of the Assam Valley vehemently opposed the demand for separation of any district as they feared that the disintegration of the Province would adversely affect Assam's status in the new administrative set up. As the Government of India was also indifferent to any scheme of territorial redistribution on the eve of the Reforms, even Sylhet was not retransferred to Bengal.¹² In 1947, when the country was partitioned, Sylhet went back to Eastern Bengal, then forming East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

The process of balkanisation continued in the course of which Assam was split up into five political units : Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland are States and Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram are Union Territories. Without entering into details regarding the formation of Nagaland (1962), Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh (1972)¹², it will not perhaps be an exaggeration to say that the germ of the political disintegration of Assam lay in its very creation in 1874.

The approach which was manifest in amalgamating territories with Assam on administrative expediency without any regard to ethnical and cultural affinities was once again reflected in 1905 when Assam was tagged to East Bengal to form the shortlived Lieutenant Governorship of Eastern Bengal and Assam. The fact here was that the partition of Bengal was decided upon political considerations and Assam was practically annexed to East Bengal with no regard to the interests of her people. In the creation of the Chief Commissionership of Assam as well as in the constitution of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Assam's case was never considered or determined from the point of view of the people of Assam.

Turning back to the administrative arrangement, we find that the separation of Assam from Bengal in 1874 did not bring about any fundamental change in the conception of its status except the fact that it came directly under the Government of India. The signal benefits which were contemplated to be derived out of the creation of Chief Commissionership in Assam did not materialise for a long time. It remained as before a subordinate administration. That the Chief Commissionership of Assam was no better than a glorified Divisional administration upto 1905 is evident from the very simple and inexpensive administrative system provided for it. The Commissioner's office was simply converted into the Chief Commissioner's Secretariat which did not have the full complement of departments and staff as normally a Chief Commissioner was entitled to.

Moreover, the powers which the Chief Commissioner exercised were all delegated by the Governor General and as such, were subject to the latter's authority. The Chief Commissionership, again, did not owe its origin to any Statute. Therefore, although Chief Commissionership was regarded as a Local Government, it occupied a lower status to that of the Lieutenant Governorship which owed its origin to an Act of Parliament.

In these circumstances, it was no wonder that the establishment of Chief Commissionership in Assam did not improve the position of the Province. The executive authority of the Government of India over Assam was complete in theory as well as in practice. Every new appointments, every addition to the establishment required the specific sanction of the Government of India. The Chief Commissioner had practically no financial power. The Supreme Government controlled its budget. Its helplessness in the administration of finance would be seen from the fact that it had to take the approval of the Central Government even for trifling expenditure of contingent nature which was a subject of discretion of the Provincial Administration. The Government of Assam was handicapped by the stringent economy and rigid control enforced upon it. It had little freedom of action in the management of its own affairs.

The Chief Commissioner of Assam had practically no legislative power as Assam had no legislature of her own from 1874 to 1905. He had simply the privilege to propose to the Governor General the drafts of any Regulation for the Peace and Government of territories under his administration. The Governor General in Council had full control over Assam in the exercise of its legislative powers.

The Government of Assam had also no freedom of action in the maintenance of relation with the surrounding tribes.

Generally speaking, the Chief Commissioners of Assam were all regimented in the idea of restricted role and status of the administration. They were all ardent supporters of economy often at the expense of efficiency. Reforms and changes which were essential for the development of the pro-

vince and for the good of the people could not be introduced for lack of funds.

In the above context, one would find that the administrative set up of the Chief Commissionership of Assam was certainly not adequate. The inadequacy of the administrative system in relation to the task it had to perform was inherent in the restrictive conditions imposed on it at the time of its creation. Thus in effect, the Chief Commissioners of Assam at least upto 1905 could perform only a limited role in bringing about the expected benefits to the Province.

In spite of these limitations, most of the Chief Commissioners of Assam tried their best at ameliorating the conditions of the people of the Province. The Heads of the Local Government were selected from British administrators of proved ability. They were drawn from Indian Civil Service except in the case of the first Chief Commissioner, Colonel Keatinge, who belonged to the Army. Some of the Chief Commissioners of Assam possessed high academic qualification and some earned reputation as writers. At least one of them Sir Henry Cotton whose name is associated with the history of the Indian National Movement identified himself with the aspirations of the people of the Province. The love of the people for him, described as 'the foremost ruler of the Province', was perpetuated when the College at Gauhati was named after him.¹⁴

From the administrative point of view, Assam was, however, benefitted by her amalgamation with East Bengal in 1905. When Assam was reverted to her former status of a Chief Commissioner's Province in 1912, it retained some of the benefits of earlier expansion during the Lieutenant Governorship of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Assam emerged as an adult member in the family of Provinces of British India and henceforth its development began to receive greater attention. The Second Chief Commissionership (1912-1921) was better in many respects though economy continued to be the prime consideration. Assam got a Legislative Council in 1912.

At the end of this brief survey one cannot perhaps resist the conclusion that had Assam proper been given a separate Local Government of its own with adequate powers under the

direct control of the Government of India, had the Hill districts inhabited by so many tribes had their own political set up, had the districts of Surma Valley been continued with Bengal, the North Eastern Frontier of India might have made significant progress—political, economic and cultural. The centrifugal forces which came to the surface at a later period resulting in the dismemberment of the state of Assam could have been avoided. Instead, the unhindered development of both the Assam Valley and the Hills governed in their own way, might have given rise, under economic compulsions, to a centrepetal force that could bind the whole of the North Eastern India into a single political unit with a regional personality of her own with immense resources—mineral, agricultural, tea and forest.

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