

## Anandaram and Maniram : A brief Comparative Study

Rajendranath Saikia.

Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829-1859) and Maniram Dewan (1806-1858) were two important figures of public life of Assam. History, combined with folk memory and other flatulent writings have contributed to our knowledge and its pit-falls as well about them<sup>1</sup> the upbringing, education, outlook and stations of life of these two persons were so different that their outward features would hardly admit of historical comparison. But to our mind, a comparative study of their contributions to the new awakening and the resultant growth of nationalism in Assam is unlikely to be prevented by any historical semantics. In this paper, we will attempt such a comparison.

Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan hailed from an orthodox Brahmin family. His father Haliram was an Assistant Magistrate, a fact which got him on in the world quickly. From 1849 till his untimely death in 1859 Anandaram served under the provincial government in various capacities.

Maniram also came from a family of considerable power and prestige. His father Ram Datta first served under the Ahom King, then under the Burmese and lastly under the British as a loyal officer. David Scott utilized the services of Ram Datta and his son Maniram.<sup>2</sup> In his early career Maniram served the British over-zealously and sucked advantage out of that.

The year 1853 is a landmark in the history of constitutional agitation against alien rule in Assam. Both Anandaram and Maniram separately submitted petitions and memorandums to A. J. Moffatt Mills, a Judge of the Sadar Diwani Adalat, who visited Assam to make an on the spot study of the province.<sup>3</sup> The issues raised in the representations could give us a clear idea about the commitment, vision and intellection of their authors.

Anandaram had a thorough knowledge about the province of Assam. As soon as Mills' visit was proposed he prepared a memorandum in English and submitted it to Mills on 4th July 1853. As a government official he was found by certain fetters and his memorandum was couched in careful language. Shorn of the frills, it was a charter of demands.

Anandaram admitted that under British rule the people had 'acquired' a degree of confidence in the safety of their lives and property but he did not fail to point out the shortcomings of their

rule, particularly the plight of the peasantry. His main grievances were: the Revenue officers were indifferent towards the ryots. He criticised the permanent settlement in Bengal as it had 'enslared the Ryots to the zemindars.' He decried the short term basis of tenancy and pleaded for long term ones to put an end to 'the ease and grandeur of a few opulent Zemindars.' The Judicial and Police system, according to him, could not afford the ryot any relief against extortion or injustice. The Revenue Officers, he alleged, used to 'cause an over assessment of the Ryot's land', and levied 'illegal impositions for their private use.'

He raised his voice against disproportionate taxation and pointed out that 'the present uniform rate on lands'..was' 'comparatively light upon some and heavy upon other.' He exhorted the supreme government to improve the methods of agriculture.

Anandaram dispraised the 'retrograde state' of education. His grievance was against the medium of instruction in schools. 'Instructions in these schools are imparted in a foreign language, vi, the Bengalee..' He urged upon the government to do away with Bengali in Assam. He sought establishment of technical and medical schools. He groused the 'inefficiency of the police' and 'sordid corruptons' in the court. They were used 'to sell justice for money'. He said, 'when a poor ryot is put to duress or extortion, the wealth of his oppressor gains over the darogah to his aid..' He favoured decentralizations of power and then only he thought, 'the infliction of oppression and various other injuries by the rich on the poor, with the connivance of coorrupt police, will be put in end to.'

Maniram submitted two petitions to Moffatt Mills in 1853. In the first petition he represented his own case and begged favours from the government. The second petition, a complete handiwork of Maniram himself was submitted under orders from Ghanakanta Singha. In this petition Maniram pleaded for the restoration of the Ahom monarchy in favour of Ghanakanta. The petition highlighted some aspects of the British rule and deprecated very many other measures.<sup>5</sup> He criticised, 'Unjust taxation; lack of pensions, discontinuance of poojahs at Kamakshya temple, discrations of the tombs of the Assam Rajahs, abolision of *logua*, *lickso* and the freeing of slaves. Maniram espoused the cause of those upper-class people 'who had been exempted from the payment of revenue for 600 years..... whose ancestors never lived by digging, ploughing or carrying burdens.....' but were throughout under assessment by the British government. He pointed out,

while a number of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalees from Sylhet have been appointed to Mauzadarships; and for us respectable Assamese to become the ryots of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification'. He 'prayer' that 'the old habits and customs of the people (be) reestablished.....'.

On the opium question, Anandaram and Maniram held different views. Maniram was opposed to the introduction of government opium only and he sought 'gradual reduction (of production) at the rate of one in twenty per annum....' Anandaram pointed out the fearful example of China and demanded that its production should be 'so crushed as eventually to lead to its total extinction.'

Anandaram imbibed the spirit of Bengal Renaissance. He knew English well and had working knowledge of Parsi and Urdu. He could speak and write Bengali correctly. Occasionally he attended the Church and the Brahmo Samaj prayers and provoked the ire of the orthodox community who criticised him for having allegedly lost his caste. Anandaram stood for educational reform including education for women. He attended the first conference of the Bethune Society of Fenganl in January 1852 and was a regular member of that Society which took up the cause of women education in Bengal. Anandaram was largely enthused by the reformist zeal of Peter the Great who had Europeanised Russia at the cost of offending the reactionary boyars and church hierarchy.<sup>6</sup>

Without ever visiting England, at the age of eighteen Anandaram wrote 'An Account of England.'<sup>7</sup> He was aware of the boon of the Industrial Revolution. That was a time when capitalism was in full bloom and the challenge of its opponents had hardly started. He pointed out that the strength of England lay in her trade. At the same time he realised the importance of mechanisation of agriculture. He emphasized that the knowledge of history of England was most essential. (Macaulay was yet to say 'The History of England is the history of progress.')

Anandaram had admirable political perception. He wrote, 'English people are free which means they do not live under anybody..... It is the Parliament which governs the country and all expenditure have to be approved by it. As such the king cannot do anything independently and is incapable of doing things un-sanctioned by Parliament.' Without love for freedom nobody could adore freedom like this. Perhaps he envisioned, although mistakenly, that freedom would dawn on his countrymen through

a process of evolution. His writings could be comfortably compared with the utterance of some notable nationalists. Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) said, 'let us speak out like men and proclaim that we are loyal to the backbone ; that we understand the benefits English rule has conferred upon us.'<sup>8</sup> Surendranath Banerjea (1848-1925) said, 'To England we look for inspiration and guidance . . . . . From England must come the crowning mandate which will enfranchise our people. England is our political guide.'<sup>9</sup>

Charmed by the 'British adventure' Maniram in his *Buranji Vivek Ratna* wished the 'uninterrupted and undiminished sovereignty' of the British for thousand and thousand of years<sup>10</sup> Anandaram did not outstep the truth of their welcome but nowhere he desired the eternal subjection of his country under the British.

The ripples of the 'Bengal Renaissance' and the Young Bengal movement reached Assam by a fine sweep. Anandaram was sympathetic to the Young Bengal movement and wished such a movement grow in Assam.<sup>11</sup> Maniram belonged to the old privileged to class. His retroactive mind was less than sympathetic towards the new trends of thought. Even the bourgeois revolutionary slogan - 'all men are equal' did not appeal to him.

The resumption of Upper Assam in 1838 upset the applecart of Maniram. He got three Mauzas and a pension of fifty rupees per month which did not yield him a respectable living. He left them and joined the Assam Tea Company as its Dewan or Chief Executive. Since then Maniram came to be widely known as Maniram Dewan. He soon fell out with some of his British colleagues and ultimately left his job in 1845.<sup>12</sup>

In the Assam Tea Company the Dewan had picked up the tricks of the trade and having been confident of his prospects, he started two gardens of his own. As a native tea planter Maniram was not given the benefits available to the white breeds. His disillusionment with the English began when he found that inspite of all his past services he was not considered one among equals.

In 1848, Maniram set up an weekly *hat* or market place at Arjunguri, Sibsagar. It was at that time a news to the province.<sup>13</sup> A rapacious Revenue Sheristedar now stood face to face with the darned-clothed peasant. It was but natural that the deprivation and discrimination to which Maniram was subjected, would push away any self-respecting person. We do not exactly know how Maniram reacted to his misfortune. We are inclined to believe that definitely a change of outlook came over him at this stage. But he

failed to diagnose the malady. His consistent loyalty to his feudal class interest blurred his perception and diffused foresight. His long association with an indolent monarchy, intellectual ostracism and easy access to spoils deprived him of the fervour of a new outlook.

Anandaram and Maniram have long been inviting comments from historians. To H. K. Barpujari, Maniram was a 'revolutionary'; Anandaram was 'not a revolutionary like Maniram but that does not mean that he was less patriotic.'<sup>14</sup> Amalendu Guha called Maniram 'the last of the old aristocrats - turned an extremist' and although not 'a very consistent freedom fighter' yet 'a bridge between the old and the new.'<sup>15</sup> Anandaram, according to him, 'was precursor of the Modern School and of its mendicant and economic nationalism in more than one respect.'<sup>16</sup> Another recent study calls Maniram a 'conservative' and Anandaram 'an apostle of the new age.'<sup>17</sup>

The growth of nationalism in Assam had some features in common with Andhra, Orissa and Bihar. The nationalist consciousness in these regions found its expression through the dream of a separate geographical identity and the consolidating agent of this new consciousness was the oriflame of language.<sup>18</sup> Very much as in Andhra and Orissa, nationalism in Assam was also language-based. Free from the slightest touch of chauvinism, Anandaram was the first and foremost champion for the cause of the Assamese language. What was Maniram's view? Prof. Maheswar Neog observes, 'We do not have his opinion on the language question, but do very much see that in his remarkable *Buranji-Vivek Ratna* he is torn between Assamese and Bengali.'

On the two main issues of the day, viz. opium and language, Moffat Mills broadly agreed with Anandaram. He considered opium as the greatest hindrance to the progress of the province; admitted the 'great mistake of imposition of Bengalee and reminded 'that the Assamese must acquire its rightful place.'<sup>20</sup> Mills outright rejected Maniram's plea for restoration of the Ahom monarchy. The Dewan was further disheartened. He had no alternative but to go on pressing the button here and there. He went to Calcutta in early 1857 and tried to impress upon the Governor-General in favour of restoration. He was not yet a rebel in the making. But Calcutta did not answer his expectations favourably. While he was there, reports of sepoy revolts and sporadic mass unrest came in. 'Probably for the first time, Maniram's fancy played round the idea of a similar action in Assam. A man of

considerable organizing capacity, he immediately collected some people around him and got on to a plot ; but circumstances doomed it to perdition. Maniram and his collaborators were tried and punished. Maniram and Peali Baruah were held guilty of treason and were hanged. The trial of Maniram smacked of superstitiousness.<sup>21</sup> Historians have not so far traced any contact of Maniram with the contemporary heroes of India. The intellectual climate of Calcutta could not have encouraged him.<sup>22</sup>

Sadananda Chaliha says, 'By accepting the suzerainty of the Emperor of Delhi these rebels wanted to make Yuvraj Kandarpe-swar Singha the king of Assam.'<sup>23</sup> But the Assamese people were unlikely to accept the overlordship of the Mughals, with whom their relationship was anything but friendly. 'Assam was not committed to them',<sup>24</sup> remarked Mahendra Bora [correctly. Politically, such an ideal of Maniram would always stand beyond justification. With the growth of political consciousness a legend was built up. It was realised more and more that Maniram and Piyali through their sacrifice in the upheaval of 1857 increased the political prestige of the Assamese people. Maniram still lives in legend. He was a hero of local patriotism whose name inspired the freedom fighters of this century in Assam. As a Symbol of sacrifice his name is engraven in people's heart.

Bipan Chandra has nailed down three characteristics of the early nationalists of India : (1) they 'were fearless critics of the individual administrative measures and worked incessantly for the reform of an administration ridden with corruption, inefficiency and oppression.' (ii) they 'agitated against the oppressive and tyrannical behaviour of the police and the Government agents towards the common people' and (iii) they 'criticised the low level of the welfare service in India and urged the Government to undertake and develop the welfare activities of the state. In particular, they emphasised the need for the spread of education among the masses.'<sup>25</sup> Judged by these formulations, Anandaram may be undoubtedly ranked among the early nationalists of our country. Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam, once observed, 'Anandaram is to Assam what Raja Rammohun Roy is to Bengal,'<sup>26</sup> Perhaps he spoke more truly than he believed. Anybody accepting the *raison d'être* of recognising Ram Mohun Roy as the father of Indian Nationalism has to accept the fact that Anandaram was the father of Assamese sub-nationalism which merged into Indian nationalism. It was he who prepared the ground to receive the message of nationalism.

In a beautiful poem, Tagore wrote,

'Faith is the bird that feels the light  
and sings when the dawn is still dark.'<sup>7</sup>

Anandaram sang the song of modernism and so far as nationalism was a modernising force Anandaram would have been the first men to welcome it. His untimely death denied him the honour and opportunity of going through with it.

### Notes & References

1. Gunaviram Baruah, *Anandaram Dhekiya'l Phukanar Jivan Charitra*, 1880, Reprint Guwahati, 1971.  
Maheswar Neog (ed), *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan : Plea for Assam and Assamese*, Jorhat, 1977.  
Benudhar Sharma, *Maniram Dewan*, 2nd Edition Guwahati 1966.  
Benudhar Kalita, *Phulagurir Dhewa*, Nagaon, 1961.  
Lila Gogoi (Compiled), *Maniram Dewanar Geet*, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1976.
2. David Scott was the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier. He had played a significant role in the crucial years of expansion and consolidation of the British rule in the north-east. For a thorough account see *Davia Scott in North East India* by N. K. Barooah, New Delhi, 1970.
3. Moffatt Mills submitted his voluminous Report on the province of Assam to Cecil Beadon, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal Calcutta 1854, Reprint Guwahati, 1984. Henceforth to be called Mills Report.
4. Mills Report, Appendix J, pp. 93-132. It is a long and elaborate document. We have noted the salient points only.
5. From Mills Report, Appendix K. B., pp. 605 - 609.
6. Gunaviram Barua, no. 1, pp. 94-95, p. 101, also A. Z. Manfred (ed), *A Short History of the World*, Vol. 1, Moscow, 1974, pp. 304-5.
7. *The Orumodoi*, April, 1847.
8. Cited in A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* Reprint, Bombay 1982, p. 322.
9. Ibid, p. 321.
10. qtd. in B. Sharma, no. 1, p. 199.
11. Letter to Hemchandra Barua, qtd. in Padmanath Gohain Barua (ed) *Jivani Sangraha*, Guwahati, 1969, p. 22.

12. B. Sharma, n. 1, p. 106.
13. *The Orumodoi*, January, 1848.
14. H. K. Barpujari, *Assam : In the days of the Company*, 2nd Edn, Guwahati, 1980, p. 317.
15. Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj*, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 19-21.
16. Amalendu Guha, 'Nationalism : Pan Indian and Regional in a Historical Perspective' in *Indian History Congress Proceedings*, Burdwan, 1983, p. 346.
17. H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *Political History of Assam*, Vol. 1, Guwahati, 1977, p. 123.
18. See, V. C.P. Choudhury, *The Creation of Modern Bihar*, Patna, 1964, p. 6.  
H. Mahtab, *History of Orissa* Vol. 2, Cuttack, 1960, p. 449.  
K. V. Rao Narayan, *The Emergence of Andhra Pradesh*, Bombay, 1973, p. 29.  
Nivedita Mohanty, *Oriya Nationalism Quest for a United Orissa*, New Delhi, 1982, p. VI.
19. M. Neog (ed), *The Orumodoi (1846-1854)*, Guwahati, 1984, p. 65.
20. Mills Report, para 92, p. 28.
21. Benudhar Sharama and H. K. Barpujari have discussed this point at some length. S. N. Sen also held identical view.
22. The Journal *Sambad Prabhakar* bears testimony to it: S. N. Sen, *Eighteen Fifty Seven*, Reprint, New Delhi, 1977, p. 408.
23. Sadananda Chaliha, *Bharat Buranji*, Guwahati, 1984, p. 194. (Translation ours).
24. Mahendra Bora, 1857 in *Assam*, Guwahati, 1957, p. 2.
25. Bipan Chandra (ed), *Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi, Reprint 1982, see foreward, P. V.
26. P. Gohain Barua, n. 11, p. 18 (translation ours).
27. *Ravindra Rathanawali*, Vol. Two, Calcutta, 1982, from 'Lekhan'