

SOCIAL TRANSITION IN ASSAM

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In 1831, Lord William Bentinck commented that the Ahom administrative institutions were miserably defective with no disposition to improvement though their uninterrupted continuance for six hundred years indicated something intrinsically good in the original Constitution.

The descendants of the first Ahom conqueror Sukapha and his captains formed a class of aristocrats, monopolised all political powers, social privileges and jealously resisted the intrusion of non-Ahoms. The appointments of Manthir Bharali Barua or Kekeru Kalita or Kirtichandra Barbarua were exceptions and were never appreciated.² The socio-economic³ system was based entirely upon the khel system. The Ahom religious policy of toleration was unique - Hindu Saktism, Vaishnavism, and even Islam which entered first in the train of the Muslim saints, prisoners of war and artisans were all practised in the Ahom State.⁴ But the assimilation of those diverse components, specially of the Muslims, as Shihabuddin Talish claimed "have nothing of Islam except in name",⁵ is doubtful, because Mirjumla's invasion was secretly supported by the "vast body of slaves, some being Mongoloid serfs but most being Bengalee prisoners of war. These last were unwilling dwellers in the land, and at the first shock of foreign invasion rose against their masters"⁶ perhaps because in Assam they were "forbidden to chant the call to prayer (Ajan) or publicly recite the word of God."⁷ Thus the Ahoms built a vast monolithic political structure but not without cracks and fissures.

"The Ahoms were ever vigilant of the merchants of the foreign territories and never allowed

them to settle"⁸ lest they create disruption as secret agents of the enemy power. Assam, therefore, remained forbidden land for foreigners.

Assam had to buy salt from Bengal as her own production was not enough for her needs; but the salt merchants had to come through the Duaria Barua from Hadirachoky, opposite Goalpara, where Bengalee, British, French and the Greek merchants thronged. Hadirachoky proved to be the main gate through which foreigners and foreign influence infiltrated into the heartland of Assam long before the Company's rule was established in Bengal.¹⁰ The Assam-Bengal trade was very limited because of primitive economy and dearth of cash in Assam and the khel system rendered formation of guilds impossible. The Assamese society was in stagnation and its reason was explained by Dr. Guha: "It was in the seventeenth century, that the emergent feudal relations became a centralising force in the economy as well as in the polity. But at their base, militia continued to retain much of its tribal legacy."¹¹

Education languished as the Ahom Bailungs and Deodhais kept the Ahom knowledge secret from others and the Satras imparted it only to a select few as they were interested in utilising the labour of their disciples in cultivating the arable lands allotted to them. In temporal and spiritual spheres, the main burden on the society was shouldered by slaves, serfs and other bondsmen.¹²

The Satras became rich and in time challenged the authority of the Swargodeo. Gadadhar Singh's policy to persecute and plunder the Vaishnava Mahantas¹³ was reversed by Rudrasingha who reinstated them¹⁴ but lionised Saktism by establishing Krishnaram Bhattacharyya of Nadia as the Parbatiya Gosain.¹⁵ No other Bengalee has rendered so much disservice to Assam as was done by Krishnaram. Pramatheswari or Phuleswari Devi, the consort of

Siva Singha, the de jure sovereign and a disciple of Krishnram persecuted the Vaishnavas and initiated an era of Sakta-Vaishnava clash which rent Assam beyond repair. Another Sakta Church was born in the reign of Lakshmi Singha when Ramananda Acharyya was recognised as the Na-Gossain. The depravity, cruelty,¹⁶ and caprice of Siva Singha and Gourinath Singha, intrigues of the nobility against the hated Kirtichandra Barbarua and his lending support to the Moamarias by Matakas and Singphos¹⁷ revealed the vulnerability of the Ahom Kingdom. In spite of efforts made by Purnananda Buragohain to protect the "people like a mother bird guarding her nestlings under her wings,"¹⁸ Assam could not be saved as the Moameria devastation hastened its bankruptcy. The depredations of the Fakirs, Sannayasis, Burkandazes and lastly the Burmese invasions resulting from rivalry between Purnananda Buragohain and Badanchandra Barphukan forced Gourinath Singha to seek protection from the British in 1792; and the commercial treaty of 1793 with the Company ended the centuries-old Ahom policy of "splendid isolation"¹⁹ a realisation of the dream of Raush and Cornwallis.

Assam tried to recover her helplessness by training an army on the Company's model under one Captain Gohain²⁰ with flint guns. The Moameria, Dundia and Singpho troubles could not be subdued entirely by Pratap Ballav Kolia Bhromora and he advised Purnananda to seek²¹ permanent British protection only to be scorned. The invasions of the Burmese army, one of the most savage in history, decimating Assam's population by half, was never resisted by the people who were so degenerated that they are said to have plundered their neighbour's properties in the guise of the Burmese. Depravity could be recognised in the secret rites of the "Aratiya" sect and transformation of the "Bihu" festival into licentious orgy²² Polygamy became almost universal; women were looked upon as mere

slaves and fathers bartered their daughters for financial gain.

The treaty of Yandabo (1826) left Assam to British control and in 1833 Purandar Singha became a tributary on payment of Rs. 50,000 a year, in Upper Assam. His rule became unpopular as he preferred educated people to aristocrats in employment and because tax collectors were rapacious. Trade, agriculture and communication dwindled. Opium, epidemic, indolence, lack of skilled handicrafts and shortage of capital were the greatest handicaps for development.

Purandar Singha was deposed and Assam was annexed in 1838. Drastic changes followed e.g., the emancipation of slaves, likchos and ligiris who tilled the lands of the princes and aristocrats. Princes became pensioners of the British and with their ruination, feudalism, being imposed from above, met its natural death together with the priestly class. Trade and commerce under the British protection thrived. The khel system became non-existent and was substituted by a mauzadari revenue system. The system of payment of rent in cash was not in vogue. The British administrative system brought a new civil, criminal and judicial organisation and also the 'Assam Code'. These required an educated class to fill up subordinate offices and to act as lawyers. Education and educational institutions were so neglected for a long time that Bengalees had to be recruited for lack of qualified natives. There were neither schools, nor teachers, nor textbooks to educate the Assamese youth in their own language.

David Scott, and Rae (a Missionary from Calcutta) first established schools in Assam. In 1835, a Government School in Gauhati was opened. The American Baptist Missionaries, Brown and Bronson and Cutter established schools in Sibsagar, Sadiya,

Nowgong and Kamrup and favoured imparting education through the Assamese language and for its improvement translated books, and published the first newspaper in Assam, the "Arunadoy".²⁵

The change in the political situation was first realised by Haliram Dhekial Phukan who may be called the pioneer of New Assam. He was learned and widely travelled. He published the Assam Buranji in Bengali in 1829, and took measures to attract prospective employees, artisans and traders from Bengal.

The rising generation of Assam felt that the heyday of the princes was over and a new society of the educated began gaining prominence. The first group of students went to Calcutta in 1840. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and his cousin Durgaram left for Calcutta in 1841. Anandaram returned, educated in the Hindu School in 1844, he published Assamiya Lora'r Mitra, a summary of civil and criminal laws, championed the cause of vernacular education and submitted to Mills his observations on the administration of the Province of Assam hailing the British rule as a blessing and suggested restrictions on the sale of opium, and encouraged female education, long term lease with ryots²⁶ and eradication of corruption in police department.

Maniram Dewan, to Mills "discontented, clever, untrustworthy and intriguing", was a man of contradictions: who prayed for the continuation of the Comapny's rule for its benevolent reforms and for enforcing law and order, but at the same time pleaded for restoration of Purandar Singha and the Sabha composed of "Sat Gharia" and "Char Gharia Ahoms" and asserted that no substantial benefit was derived from the British Rule. He was a true representative of the tottering feudal age. He lamented the loss of "Logwas" and "Licksos" for the gentry, the result of abolition of slavery - an idea

shared by Harakanta Sadaramin.²⁷ Moreover, a disappointed official of the Assam Tea Company, he became a pioneer Indian tea-planter but failed in business as the Government grossly favoured the British capitalist interest with lease of lands (962²⁸ poorahs in Luckimpore only) for a mere song. Moneeram sacrificed his life supporting the Mutiny of 1857 and identified Assam's interest with that of the rest of India.

In tea industry, the Baruas Rasheshwar, Jagannath, Bishnuram and Radhakanta Handique were successful. Regular steamer and railway communications between Calcutta and Upper Assam was the demand for commercial and intellectual interest and was realised by the turn of the century.

Gunabhiram Barua, Lakshinath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Goswami, Phanindra Nath Gogoi, Anandaram and Jagannath Baruas, were the representatives of the 'new' middle class intellectuals, educated at Calcutta and deeply influenced by the Bengal Renaissance and literary giants like Michael and Bankim searched for an identity of the Assamese language. The American Baptist missionaries through "Arunoday" pointed out rightly that Assamese was not a 'patois' of Bengali. In addition to 'Mou' published by Balinarayan Bora, the Assamese students created a new literary movement with the 'Jonaki', a monthly and other publications. The contributions of the gifted Bengalee teachers like Chandra Mohan Goswami and Rameshwar Sen who moulded the minds of their students Anandaram Barua, Lakshminath Bezbarua or Padmanath Gohain Barua must not be forgotten.

A new social phenomenon developed with the growth of the tea industry. The economic exploitation of the labourers engaged in the tea industry was first revealed by Dwarakanath Gangopadhyay (in "Slavery in British India") and Ramkumar Vidyaratna

(in "Coolie Kahini"). The latter travelled widely and propagated the Brahma religion in Assam and narrated his experiences in "Udasin Satyasrabar Assam Bhraman". Gunabhiram and Kamalakanta became Brahmans and married widows - an act signifying social revolution.

The tea planters and businessmen like Lakshminath Bezbarua and Bholanath Barua were representatives of the comprador bourgeoisie and the hundreds and thousands of the labourers formed the proletariat, and before long, created an elite-subaltern relationship.

The young Assamese scholarly new middle class claimed recognition of their language for medium of instruction, first raised by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, and use in law courts - case supported by Mills' Report, and memorandum submitted by R.C. Dutta and considered by Sir Campbell. Assamese became the official language for law courts in 1871; Assam became a separate province in 1874; and the University of Calcutta recognised Assamese as a separate language for examinations in 1903, thanks to the Assamese educated class who published the necessary textbooks.

The political consciousness promptly grew up with the formation of the "Jorhat Sarvajanic Sabha" and the "Assam Association". Newspapers and periodicals were printed in large numbers. Thus the press and platform strengthened public opinion which was the monopoly of the middle class.

With the participation of Assam in the Congress movement since 1886, she was drawn in the main currents of modern Indian life.

Assam's transition from medieval to modern age with a reforming bias in social, political,

economic, and cultural aspects was the natural outcome of the birth of a new middle class, supported and encouraged, though unwittingly, by the British rule, and inspired by the ideals of western democracy.

Notes & References

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