

**BRITISH  
ADMINISTRATION  
IN NORTH  
EAST INDIA  
1826-74**

**MEENA SHARMA BARKATAKI**



Nineteenth century is the most remarkable period in the history of North East India and the years 1826-1874 constitute an eventful and also formative period when we take into consideration her great progress and march towards modernization. Assam was the central place of British administration during this period. As in other parts of India, in Assam also British administration became a catalytic agent of change and the herald of modern civilization. The revolutionary character of the British administration is nowhere better illustrated than in the field of social transformation of the conquered territories and Assam was not an exception to it. Assam was a land singularly free from the inhuman and anti-social practices like 'Suttee' and infanticide and was also free from the clutches of professional criminals like 'Thugs'. Therefore sometimes the general legislation made for the other parts of British India was not applicable to this province.

This book aims to give a descriptive analysis and a critical survey of the various social problems that arose and policies adopted to solve them by the British rulers, in North East India. The guiding principles of their educational policy, relation with the missionaries who were brought to this land for the upliftment of the downtrodden and for the spread of Christianity, emancipation of the slaves and the attempts made for their gradual absorption in the general mainstream of society, dealings with the nobility as well as the forces of nationalism, have been brought into light in this work from a different point of view. The utility and usefulness of the present volume has been further heightened by the addition of maps, illustrations, documentation of relevant primary and secondary sources, footnotes, glossary and bibliography which have provided a new horizon and new dimension to the historical contributions made by the authoress on modern India.

This is a new addition to the scarce source material available on the strategic region of the North Eastern part of India which is likely to prove of inestimable value not only to the research scholars engaged with the study of this part of India but also to all the private and public libraries in the country as a reference tool.

Dr. (Mrs) Meena Sharma Barkataki received her early school education at Shillong. Thereafter she graduated with Honours (History), obtained Bachelor's degree in Teaching and also did Post-Graduation from the Gauhati University. She obtained her Ph. D. degree from the University of Poona in 1984.

She has several publications which appeared in a number of journals and newspapers mostly in Assamese. They comprise poems, stories and articles on various subjects. She had her first publication when she was a student of class eight.

At present she is serving as Lecturer in History in ADP College, Nowgong, Assam which she joined in 1977.

British Administration in  
North East India  
(1826-1874)

A STUDY OF THEIR SOCIAL POLICY



MEENA SHARMA BARKATAKI



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*Dedicated to my respected parents  
Srijt. Basu Kanta Sharma  
and  
Srimati Gunada Devi*

## Foreword

History of North-East India of late has been engaging the attention of scholars to dive deep into the available records and unearth material of historical and political importance to make a proper and scientific study of its political and cultural history. The efforts of quite a few scholars have been crowned with success and their monographs are worth reading for the sake of knowledge and understanding of this part of our country.

The present work of Smt. Meena Sharma Barkataki entitled **BRITISH ADMINISTRATION IN NORTH EAST INDIA (1826-1874) : A STUDY OF THEIR SOCIAL POLICY**, is in the same line. It is a valuable and original contribution for the study of the history of North-East India under the British from 1826 to 1874, with an accent on their social policy.

I commend this work to all readers and particularly to those who are engaged in researches in the manifold aspects of North-East India.

V. B. MISHRA

*Prof. & Head of the Post-Graduate  
Department of History, and  
Ex-Dean, Faculty of Arts,  
Gauhati University.*

The accomplishment of this work was possible only because of the kind co-operation and invaluable suggestions of some people I met in different places. I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Dr. A.R. Kulkarni, Head of the Department, History, University of Poona, who was also the former Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research, for his kind supervision of this work. I am equally indebted to Prof. V.B. Mishra, Head of the Post Graduate Department of History, Gauhati University for writing the Foreword of the book. My gratitudes are also due to Professor Md. Abdul Hye, Principal, A.D.P. College, Nowgong, Assam, for encouraging me to undertake this work. Besides, I shall always remember with respectful regard Dr. Amba Prasad, ex-Professor of Delhi University, Dr. M.L. Bhargava, Fellow of I.C.H.R., New Delhi and Dr. (Mrs.) Shiva S. Dua, ex-Principal, Miranda House, Delhi, for their kind advice and constructive suggestions whenever I sought from them. I am grateful to the Faculty Members of the History Department, University of Poona, for the fruitful discussions held with them.

I also wish to express my grateful thanks to the staff of the National Archives of India, New Delhi; West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta; Assam Record Office, Shillong; N.M.M. Library, New Delhi; National Library, Calcutta, Baptist Church Library, Gauhati; D.H.A.S., Gauhati and The Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics, Poona, for their unforgettable assistance in providing materials for this work. Finally I convey my cordial thanks to my publishers, Mittal Publications, Delhi-35, for undertaking the publication of this book.

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I take this opportunity to acknowledge my thanks to the staffs of the National Archives of India, New Delhi; West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta; Assam Record Office; N.M.M. Library, New Delhi; Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi; National Library, Calcutta; Baptist Church Library, Gauhati; D.H.A.S., Gauhati and The Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics, Poona, for their kind co-operation and help in the accomplishment of this work.

MEENA S. BARKATAKI

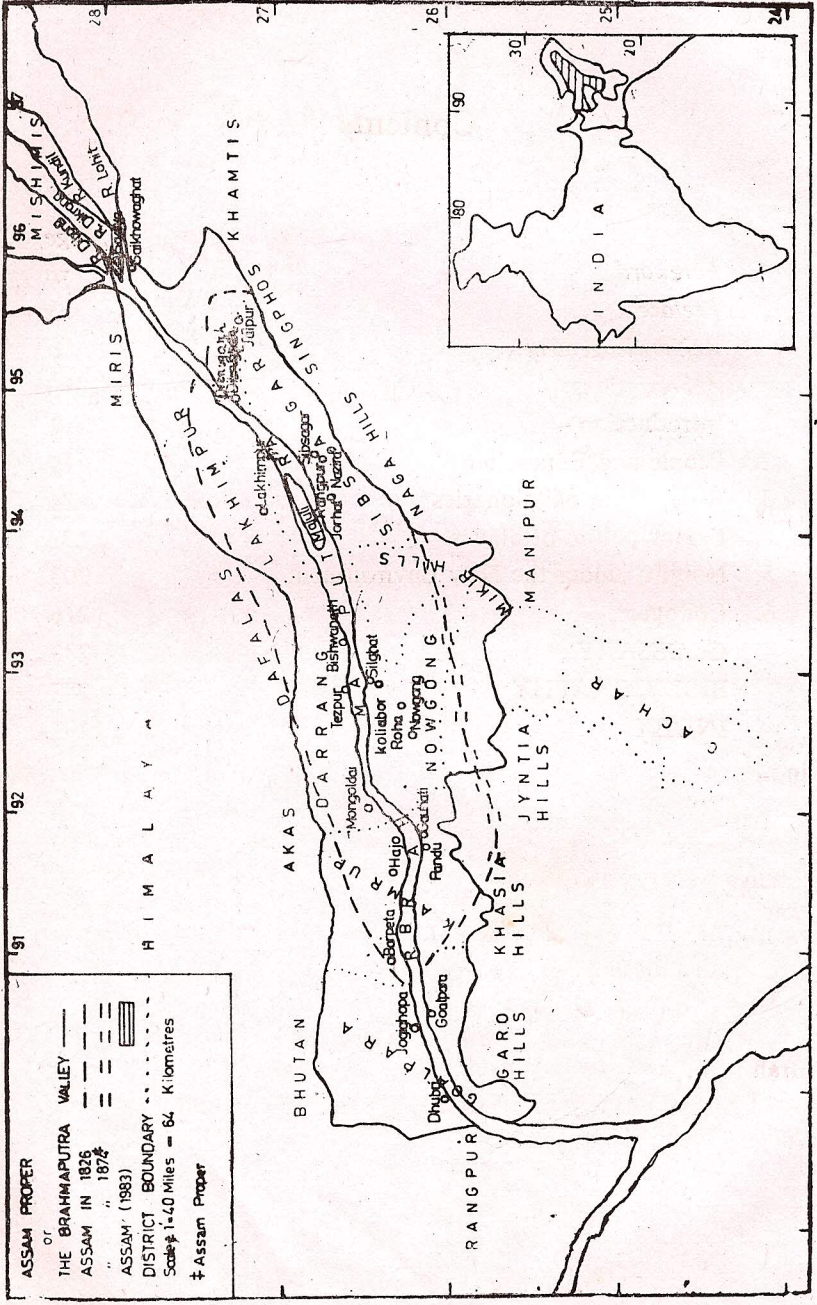
## Abbreviations

B.M.S.	British Missionary Society
Cons.	Consultations
E.I.C.	East India Company
Ednl.	Educational
F.P., P.C.	Foreign Proceedings, Political Consultations
F.P., S.C.	Foreign Proceedings, Secret Consultations
Genl.	General
H.C.	House of Commons
H.L.	House of Lords
Judl.	Judicial
P.P.	Parliamentary Papers
P. No.	Paper No.
Pol.	Political
Progs.	Proceedings
R.I.L.C.	Report of Indian Law Commission
R.P.I.B.	Report of the Public Instruction of Bengal

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**ASSAM PROPER**  
 or  
**THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY**  
 ASSAM IN 1826  
 " " 1872  
 " " (1983)  
 DISTRICT BOUNDARY  
 Scale: 1:40 Miles = 64 Kilometres  
 † Assam Proper



## Introduction

Relatively less in contact with the other parts of India during the time of Mughal and British dominancy, Assam, from 1228 to 1819, for about a period of six centuries was ruled by the Ahoms, members of the Shan branch of the Tai family.<sup>1</sup> Very probably they came from the mountainous region between Assam and China.<sup>2</sup> The migration of the Ahoms to Assam started in the early part of the 13th century. After a gradual extension of their occupation as a conquering race from the eastern frontier of Assam, they brought the whole Brahmaputra valley under their control by a consecutive subjugation of the indigenous Hindoo rulers and the aboriginal tribes.

Assam, the north-eastern province of the Republic of India, occupies the entire Brahmaputra valley from Goalpara to Sadiya and is situated between 24° and 28° of north latitudes and 89° and 96° of east longitudes. Assam proper or the Brahmaputra valley with which the present work is concerned, stretching from Goalpara to Sadiya is approximately 500 miles in length with an average breadth of 60 miles throughout. The entire valley is intersected by a number of tributaries of the Brahmaputra both in the north and in the south, and surrounded by hills. On the north it is bounded by some lower ranges connected with the Himalayas and on the south by the Garo, Khasi and Jyntia hills. The eastern part is bounded by the Patkai and Naga hills.

The mountainous region is inhabited by some more or less uncivilized tribes, on the north by the Bhutanese, Akas, Dafalas,

Miris and Abors, on the east by the Mishimis, Khamtis and Singphos, and on the south by the Garo, Khasia, Mikir and the Nagas. They were different from each other in face, figure, language, dress and customs. Intercourse between the hill tribes and the Ahom country was done through the Duars or mountain passes scattered in the northern hills. In the southern ranges also there were some Duars. The ferocious tribes used these Duars to descend to the villages of the plains to plunder and earn their livelihood.

Politically, the Brahmaputra valley was divided into three parts, Lower Assam, Upper Assam and the Sadiya country.<sup>3</sup> Lower Assam extended from Goalpara to the confluence of the Dhansiri and the Brahmaputra river above the town of Bishwanath. Upper Assam covered the area from Dhansiri river to the plains of Sadiya, and Sadiya was the spacious plain land where the valley of Assam was terminated. Upper Assam and Lower Assam constituted the kingdom of Assam proper, and Sadiya was occupied by various tribes who acknowledged their allegiance to the king of Assam. But while Upper Assam was directly administered by the monarch, Lower Assam was administered through a viceroy called Barphukan.

With the process of extension, the rulers of Assam were slowly influenced by Hinduism, the prevailing religion of the country. Later on, royal patronage to this religion was extended and the kings also embraced Hinduism. Thus, a gradual abandonment of their tribal belief and rituals took place and by the end of 17th century, from the regime of Gadadhar Singha, the 32nd Ahom monarch, the ruling family again became Hindoo.

Though the integrity of Assam was never broken during the Ahom administration for nearly six centuries, Lower Assam was subjected to the Muslim and Mughal invaders for several times. Even after being repeatedly pushed back, these invaders were successful in introducing their own fiscal administration within the confines of the subjugated territory.

From 1826 to 1947, the year of India's attainment of independence Assam was under British rule. This entire period of European administration was a process of introduction and expansion of western ideas and thoughts. But the intervening

years between 1826 and 1874 (in this year Assam was made a separate province from Bengal and placed under a Chief Commissioner) appears to be a significantly formative period through the events of which some important administrative developments took place. This period coincides with the administration of Lord Amherst, Bentinck, Auckland, Ellenborough, Hardinge, Canning, Elgin, Lawrence, Mayo and Northbrook, the Governor-Generals of India, and was greatly influenced by the utilitarian and liberal ideas of England. Under the utilitarian principle of "greatest good of the greatest number" some important social reforms, such as anglicization of the subjects through education, enlightenment and evangelization through missionary agencies, emancipation of the slaves, release of the common people from the customary despotism of the nobility and priestly classes, were attempted in the different British colonies. It was the period when the humanitarian reform movements demanded women's right.

The present study limits its scope to the social aspects of British administration in Assam. The Assamese society inherited by the British, bore some peculiarities in the history of India. Unlike some other parts of this sub-continent, the social leadership of Assam was not divided among the Hindoos and the Muslims. Except for certain gaps in the long history of this country, she was dominated by the Hindoos. Muslims in Assam were very few in number,\* and were considered as outcastes.

Another interesting factor of the society was, the ruling race, instead of imposing their own culture, religion and language on the subjects, merged into the social behaviour of the ruled which is rare in history.\*\*

The Ahom conquerors did not bring their women folk to Assam. Owing to the small number of followers,+ the Ahoms

\* The Muhammedans formed a very small portion of the population of Assam, probably not more than 1 to 25.—F.P., P.C., 10 July, 1834, No. 211, Matthie to Jenkins, 9 June, 1834, para 3.

\*\* The Ahoms were Buddhist Shans, by religion pagans and demon worshippers.—Shakespeare, L.W., *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burma and North East Frontier*, p. 28.

+ It is said that Sukapha, the first-Ahom monarch was accompanied by only 1080 persons, when he came to Assam in 1228.—Barua, *Harakanta, Assam Buranji*, p. 11.

were compelled to increase their population by marrying the local non-Ahom tribes to administer a gradually extending country. To maintain superiority of the ruling race, they used to confer upon these people with whom they had matrimonial relations, privileges and status of the aristocracy.<sup>4</sup> These non-Ahom tribes and communities such as the Barahi, Chutia, Koch, Kachari, Moran, Miri, etc. having relation with the royal family, were considered qualified with their descendants, to hold high office in the Ahom administration.<sup>5</sup>

The non-Ahoms in Assam could be broadly divided into two classes, orthodox and professional. Among the orthodox, the Brahmins were the highest in position and were mainly religious instructors. The Kayasthas were next to the Brahmins in grade, but the Kalitas were the numerically prominent caste of the province. Another popular caste was the Koch. The professional classes were generally of inferior castes. Among them the Kaivartas were prominent in the population, they lived on agriculture. The others were the Kumara (Potter), Tati (Weaver), Kamar (Blacksmith), Sonari (Goldsmith), Kahar (Bellmetal worker), Mali (Gardener), Natis (Dancer), Dhobi (Washerman), Hari (Man of the sweeper caste) and Chandal (a caste who helped in the cremation of a dead body).<sup>\*6</sup>

Under the Ahom government, the land and the subjects were equally the property of the king, and the revenue was chiefly derived from personal labour or articles of produce. The payment of revenue by direct personal service was known as the 'pyke system'. According to this system, with the exception of the nobles, persons of high-castes and those engaged in respectable occupations, the whole male population (except the slaves) between the age of 15 and 50 years, was liable to perform services to the state as labourers. They were known as pykes. Three pykes were grouped into one 'gote'. One pyke of each 'gote' had to work for the royal house and during his absence, the remaining two pykes had to work for his subsistence. In return for his work in the royal house, each pyke was

\* There was lack of indigenous skilled labourers such as carpenters, potters, masons, blacksmiths, etc. in Assam.—Letters issued to the Government, Vol. 36, 1868, Hopkinson to Secretary to the Government, 24 July, 1868, para 3.

entitled to eight Bighas of best rice land rent-free. The pykes were further arranged into some broader divisions known as 'khels'. These khels were placed under a regular gradation of officers, for example, a group of twenty pykes was commanded by a Bora, one hundred by a Saikia, one thousand by a Hazarika, three thousand by a Rajkhowa and six thousand by a Phukan. These revenue officers or the owners of the khels, were known as Kheldars. The Kheldars belonged to the Ahom official aristocracy.

The Ahom rulers did not have any regular army and during the time of war, the Kheldars were obliged to take men from their own khels as soldiers to the battlefield. It was only from the time of Gaurinath Singha (1780-1785) that a regular and trained army as those of the Europeans was kept. During the time of peace pykes were employed in public works like digging tanks, construction of roads and causeways etc. It appears that the pykes were grouped on occasional or territorial basis; they were employed in the khels as bow-makers, bow-shooters, musketeers, gold-washers, weavers, fishermen, farmers etc.\*†.

A still more remarkable factor of the Assamese society was that it was free from the inhuman practices of infanticide<sup>7</sup> and Suttee<sup>\*\*</sup>, the ritual suicide of the widow by burning herself

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\* For details see M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, pp. 119-120; Gait, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-248; Devi, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-271.

† The pyke system was in vogue at the time of the British occupation of Assam, except in Kamrup where the Pargana system or the system of collecting revenue according to local division was introduced by the Mughal invaders. Here each Pargana was placed under the charge of a Chaudhury and he collected the revenue with the help of other revenue officials like Talukdars (owner of a Taluk), Thakuria (subordinate collector) and Patwaris (accountants). The idea of collection of revenue from personal labour was not liked by the British administrators and the pyke system was abolished during the time of Mr. T.C. Robertson, the Commissioner of Assam in 1832.—F.P., P.C., 30 May, 1833, Nos. 86-111.

\*\* Female murders were not absent in Assam. Instances are there when a husband murdered his wife or a widow was killed by her relatives. But the cause of such murder was generally illicit relationship between a man and a woman. Letters issued to Govt. Vol. 44, 1872, January-April, Hopkinson H. to Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, 4 February, 1872.

alive in her husband's pyre. The notorious 'Thugs'\* or the professional criminals were also absent here.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, sometimes, the general legislation made for India as a whole lost their effectiveness in this country.

However, it cannot be said that the Assamese society was free from evil practices and explosive thoughts. It was a society where custom was the law and it was above any reasoning. For instance the essential qualifications of a candidate for kingship according to custom was that he should not have any scar or blemish even a scratch received in play, mark of small pox or wound received in action.<sup>9</sup> This condition naturally encouraged the candidate to mutilate their rivals to secure the throne. Incapacitation was done by extracting eyes, cutting their ears, noses or any part of the body like finger, hand, foot, etc.

Notwithstanding the absence of the Thugs, the country was not free from criminals; convicts were punished severely. The capital offence were treason, arson and voluntary abortion.<sup>10</sup> Rebels were never excused and capital punishment was extended to the whole family of a rebel, parents, brothers, sisters, wives and children. "Offenders were put to death by various manners, by cutting their throats, by impaling them, by grinding them between two wooden cylinders, by sawing them asunder between two planks, by beating them with hammers and by applying burning hoes to different parts until they die." Robbers, even the petty thieves were punished by extracting eyes, cutting off the knee pans or other parts of the body. Due to the severity of punishment, public crimes were less.<sup>11</sup>

The habits of domestic life were also offensive to the morality of the new rulers. Here, the public energy was wasted in two ways, enjoyment of extreme leisure by the upper classes and heavy exploitation of the labour of the voiceless section of slaves. The owner of the slaves could purchase and sell them like animals.

Business was conducted almost without any written documents. The orders of the kings and even the grants of lands were promulgated by heralds and in case of a gift of land, marks to denote the boundaries were set up in their presence.<sup>12</sup>

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\* For detail, see Kaye J.W., *The Administration of the East India Company*, pp. 354-379,

Use of writing was little known to the public functionaries. As there were few among the public who could read, the process of recording the evidence in writing discontented them, and they were disgusted with the delay attended upon written pleadings.<sup>13</sup> The administrators were illiterate and no record of the daily happenings concerning the administration was kept. Hearing of complaints of the witness was done by *viva-voce*. The British immediately after the commencement of their administration, introduced the system of keeping written records of the depositions. Feeling it absurd, once Raja Purandar Sinha enquired about the necessity of recording them. Scott, the Commissioner of Assam replied, "Swargadeo\*, you are of celestial origin, and recollect everything. We are earth-born, and when we go to dinner, we forget what has been said during the day, therefore we write down what we hear."<sup>14</sup>

The new administrators conquered the country, but declined to become the guardian of every monstrous principle and practices revolting to reason and morality but contained by the Assamese society. A sudden jump from faith to reason in a society, strong with tradition and subordinate to the claims of custom was not possible. The administrators realised, "Force, instead of convincing them their error, would fortify them in the possession of being right; and the use of it, even if it promised happier consequences would be altogether unjust."

Much concentration has already been given by different research workers on the various aspects of the British administration in Assam covering completely or partially the period under purview. *Anglo-Assamese Relations (1771-1826)* by Dr. S.K. Bhuyan gives a detail account of the social, economic and political conditions of the Ahom age and discusses the initial stage of British administration in Assam. *Assam in the Days of the Company (1826-1858)* by Dr. H.K. Barpujari deals with the British administration in Assam. *David Scott in North East India* by Dr. N.K. Barooah reveals an elaborate study of the administration of David Scott, the first Commissioner of Assam; it deals with some social aspects of the administration during the period from 1824 to 1830. *The Eastern Frontier of*

\* Swarga—Heaven, Deo—God, i.e., a person of divine origin. Swargadeo was the title of the Ahom kings,

*British India* by A.C. Banerjee and *The Annexation of Assam (1824-1854)* by R.M. Lahiri are confined to the political and administrative aspects. Extensive study on some other aspects of history such as education, revenue administration, etc. has also been done in Assam. But in the present work emphasis is given on the various social policies adopted by the British and their effects on the life of the people of Assam. It does not profess to be a comprehensive one and is confined to a few aspects of universal applicability. A detailed analysis of all aspects is not possible for two reasons, lack of enough material and strict limitation of the period of work. Within these restrictions an attempt has been made to find out the guiding principles of the policies made for the amelioration of the society and the circumstances under which they were enacted.

As the conquest of Assam resulted a denial of liberty to the former native ruling authority and loss of privileges to the higher section of the society including the Brahmins and other priestly classes, the application of the utilitarian principle could not satisfy all sections of the people. As a result the whole process of reform had to go through a passage of challenge from different disappointed sections.

Another obstacle to execute the policies for social amelioration was lack of finance. The Company's exchequer which had already suffered from a heavy drainage owing to the Gorkha (1814-15), Pindari (1817) and Maratha (1817-18) Wars, faced a further detriment by the Burmese confrontation.

The principle of social policies was based on the discussions and resolutions taken from time to time by the paramount power, customs of the locality and religious toleration. Sometimes the officials in India were consulted and sometimes the policies were enacted by the Home Government. Cooperation and contradiction on different view points among the policy makers was not unusual; on some aspects emphasis on native opinion was also given.

It may be noted that British social policies were not formulated separately. They were a part of the general legislations and of the treaties and agreements concluded between the alien authority and the native rulers. Therefore, there is no favourable way to enter into the subject of survey without

going through the same documents used by the other workers for different studies. The bibliography would depict a detailed account of the materials used for the present study.

Two kinds of sources have been used for the preparation of the work, primary (unpublished and published) and secondary. The unpublished sources were collected from the National Archives of India, New Delhi, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta, and Assam Record Office, Shillong. The published primary and secondary sources were collected from National Library, Calcutta, N. M. M. Library, New Delhi, National Archives of India Library, Libraries of Delhi University, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona, Gauhati University, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati and The Baptist Church Library, Gauhati.

Besides the Foreign, Political, Revenue, Educational and Judicial Proceedings, which provided the unpublished sources, the Gazetteers, Parliamentary Papers, Memoirs, contemporary newspapers, journals and various reports of the British administrators in the form of books and microfilms rendered invaluable informations on which a large section of the study is based. The different proceedings were helpful in studying the policies initiated by the British administrators for the entire period of the work. While the Foreign and Political proceedings throw much light on the early period, the Judicial, Educational and Revenue proceedings were useful to discuss the policies of the later part.

Among the contemporary indigenous writings Sadaraminar Atmajivani (autobiography of a Sadaramin) written by Harakanta Barua, a Sadaramin under the British Government has given much information about the Assamese society of the 19th century. Born in 1815, a year before the first Burmese invasion, during the regime of Chandrakanta Singha, Harakanta Barua died presumably around 1902-1903. He joined the East India Company as a copyist and later on worked in the capacity of Seristadar, Munsif and Deputy Collector. Harakanta retired from service about 1877-78. Besides depicting the political happenings of his life-time and their impact on the society, this book shows how polygamy was encouraged in Assam and the

author himself, being a Brahmin, had to marry thrice to relieve the burdened fathers.<sup>15</sup>

Another important contemporary source for the present study is *Asamar Padya Buranji* (the metrical history of Assam). It is a combination of two books, *Buranji Kali Bharat* by Duti-ram Hazarika and *Belimarrar Buranji* by Bishweswar Vaidya-dipa. This book covers the political history of Assam from the reign of Gaurinath Singha (1780-1794), the suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny and its historical and social value to frame future history cannot be denied.

The discussion on the educational policies of the British has been mainly based on the Reports of Public Instruction of Bengal and unpublished official documents, mentioned above. These documents were helpful in analysing the British Policies towards the emancipation of the slaves. But the materials for the slavery section have been mainly collected from the Parliamentary Papers. As the official proceedings scarcely mention the Government's relation with the missionaries in Assam, this part of the study is based on the contemporary and semi-contemporary missionary magazines and books. The same proceedings have, on the other hand, helped to show the relation between the administrators and the Assamese nobility.

Deliberate abandonment of datas is avoided as far as possible. Sometimes this kind of avoidance is caused by the non-possession of the documents by the concerned authority, or non-supply of them due to their brittle condition.

Six chapters have been introduced in the present work according to the subjects of discussion. Assam lagged behind the rest of India in educating its people and it was the British who took initiative in this field. A chapter of the work is devoted to describe the guiding principles of the British educational policy and how education was made profitable in the practical life so as to make an apathetic race enthusiastic towards it. The same chapter deals with the transformation of the religion oriented educational system of the previous regime to one of social values, by impartation of 'useful knowledge'. The language policy of the government and the method of embracing all sections of people to the sphere of education also have formed a part of it,

Assam is well known in Indian history for the activities of the missionaries. How the missionaries figured in the social policies of the Government, their co-operation and contradiction with the authority on the measures to uplift the society, success and failure in evangelization, etc. need some special attention. This has been done in a separate chapter.

Existence of slavery even in modern period was a disgraceful social phenomenon. The history is worth, therefore, studying, of slavery in Assam, rules gradually imposed to its abolition and how the emancipated slaves were helped by the Government to be absorbed into the common society. An attempt has been made in a different chapter to analyse these factors.

Assam was a land which was continuously reigned by the same ruling race for nearly a period of six centuries. The difficulty of the European authority to secure the subjugation of this former governing class and the relation between the two in the post-annexation era of Assam, deserves some attention. An effort has been made in another chapter to show how the sullen political submission and curtailment of privileges of the nobility of the province was tried to be conciliated by some uncomplimentary titles and other measures. It is further tried to discuss how the lack of other avenue of employment and other way of living made the nobility to seek government service and assistance, and to accept their control in an indirect way.

Lastly, a general assessment has been made of the social policies of the British administrators, their impact on the society, achievements and failure.

**Political Background :** The century long integrity of the Ahom monarchy began to fall from the end of the 18th century. The first severe blow came from the Moamarias\* who

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\* The Moamaria country comprised of about 1800 square miles spread on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. It was bounded on the south by the Buri Dihing river, on the west and north by the Brahmaputra and on the east by a line extending from the Dihing to a point nearly opposite to the mouth of the Kundil nullah. The inhabitants of this territory were known as the Moamaria or Muttock. The head of the Moamaria tribe was known as Barsenapati.—Pemberton Capt. R.B., *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, p. 70, para 18,

broke into rebellion against the ruling authority consecutively in 1769, 1782 and 1786, and were successful to capture the Ahom capital of Rangpur ; they occupied the Ahom throne for several months.\* The Moamaria outbreak was accompanied by a simultaneous rebellion in Darrang against the Ahom authority on the question of Succession of the Darangiraja, a tributary to the Ahom king.\*\*' Here, Krishna Narayan, the legal candidate to the throne, deposed the present Raja who was a nominee of the Ahom king with the help of the Barkandaz, a force of Bengalee and Hindustani people collected from Bengal, and installed himself in the throne. The Barkandaz afterwards proceeded towards Kamrup and occupied North Gauhati.

At this juncture, Gaurinath Singha, the helpless Ahom monarch appealed to the East India Company to relieve his country from the Barkandaz, who were subjects of the British Government. Accordingly, Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General of India despatched a British force in 1793 under Captain Welsh. It soon suppressed the Barkandaz and secured the allegiance of Krish nanarayan to the Ahom king. Rangpur was restored from the Moamarias in 1794 and Gaurinath Singha reoccupied the throne.

During this time, the policy of the British Government towards the neighbouring states was changed due to the change of the Governor-General. Sir John Shore, the successor of Cornwallis, was a follower of the principle of non-interference. With his adherence to it he called back Captain Welsh to Bengal.<sup>16</sup> Soon after the departure of Welsh, Gaurinath Singha shifted his capital from Rangpur to Jorhat,<sup>17</sup> to avoid the former's immediate vicinity to the Moamaria territory. But peace could not be restored. Gaurinath Singha died in 1795 and the regime of anarchy and rebellion was passed to his two consecutive successors Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) and Chandrakanta Singha respectively. Kamaleswar was however, successful in subduing the rebellions scattered both in the hills and in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley; but Chandrakanta, his brother, being immature in age, at the time of accession, had to depend on his ministerial staff for administration. Purna-

\* For details see Devi L., *Assam Buranji*, pp. 234-244.

\*\* For details see Gait, *op cit*, pp. 206-214.

nanda Buragohain, the Prime Minister, concentrated all administrative powers in his hands and became the *de facto* ruler of the country. It naturally gave rise to a quest for power among the other high officials; Badanchandra, the Barphukan (viceroy) of Gauhati was the most prominent among them.

Detecting Badan's involvement in a plot to assassinate the Buragohain, Purnananda made an attempt to apprehend him in Gauhati. But before Purnananda's men reached Badan, the latter came to know about it and escaped to Calcutta.<sup>18</sup> There, Badan sought British help alleging that Purnananda's authority had brought turmoil to the country. In view of their continuance of the policy of non-interference, the British Government showed their inability to offer any help and advised Badan to proceed to Burma for assistance.<sup>19</sup> Badan struck up friendship with the Calcutta Agent of the Burmese Government and went to Burma with him. Bodawpaya, the king of Burma (1782-1819) was convinced about Purnananda's capture of power and the prevailing anarchy in Assam due to his high-handedness. Rangili,\* the Assamese queen of Bodawpaya, also instigated him to intervene. The king agreed and sent a Burmese force to Assam towards the end of 1816. It reached the land in March 1817. The Ahom force sent by Purnananda to push them back, suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the enemy. During this critical time Purnananda passed away and his son Ruchinath became the Buragohain.

Being unable to bear the strength of the Burmese force, Ruchinath fled to Gauhati. Jorhat fell into the hands of the enemy. The invaders kept Chandrakanta as the king and made Badan the Buragohain in place of Ruchinath.<sup>20</sup> In April 1817 the Burmese force left Assam with a huge indemnity and an Ahom princess Hemo Aideu for Bodawpaya.

In 1818 Badan was assassinated and circumstances favoured Ruchinath to return to Jorhat. Brajanath Kanwar, a scion of the royal family, accompanied him as a nominee for the throne.

\* Rangili was an Ahom girl presented to the Singpho leader Bichanong by Purnananda Buragohain to forbid the former from offering help to the Moamarias. But Bichanong gave her to Bodawpaya to strengthen friendship with the Burmese king.— Bhuyan S.K., *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 202; see also Bhuyan, *Asamar Padya Buranji*, p. 239.

Understanding the gravity of the situation Chandrakanta became fugitive. But Brajanath being found to be a mutilated person\* and therefore, inefficient for the throne, Purandar Singha, his son was made the king. Chandrakanta was captured by the new royal force and was incapacitated by piercing his ear.

Disappointed Chandrakanta, in order to take revenge, again sent some messengers to the Burmese king seeking assistance. In response to it a Burmese troop under the leadership of Alumingi reached Assam in February 1819. This was the second Burmese invasion. In their first engagement the Ahom force was defeated. Purandar and Ruchinath fled to Gauhati and ultimately took shelter in Chilimari in Rangpur district of Bengal.<sup>21</sup> In September, Purandar appealed to the East India Company soliciting help to be restored to the kingship of Assam, and agreed to become a British tributary and to pay the expenses of the detachment that might be needed to accomplish it. Ruchinath too sought British interference for the same cause. But they were refused under the Government principle of non-interference which aimed to maintain friendly relation with the reigning princes and aloofness from intervention in the internal affairs of foreign countries.<sup>22</sup>

Chandrakanta, who was again elevated to the throne by the Burmese, also sent several applications to the Company for the seizure of the ex-Raja and the Buragohain. He too, received a similar reply that the British Government would not deny asylum to political refugees, and it was not their practice to apprehend them "so long as they conduct themselves in a quiet and peaceful manner."<sup>23</sup>

This time Chandrakanta was a nominal king and from 1819 to 1824 the Burmese were the actual authority of Assam. Their high-handedness and oppression made it no more secret to Chandrakanta that instead of recovering independence to Assam, the Burmese authority had determined to make this country a dependency of Ava. During this time Alumingi returned to Burma keeping a Burmese force at Jorhat. Chandrakanta did not fail to avail this opportunity and at his instance

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\* He was mutilated by one of his sons.—F.P., S.C., 14 July, 1826, No. 4, p. 127.

a fort was constructed at Jaipur,\* the gateway of the enemy, to check their further infiltration.

Meanwhile the Burmese kingdom also went through some political changes. Bodawpaya died and Bagyidaw, his grandson became the king. The new king was not unaware of the recent happenings in Assam and in the early part of 1821, on pretension of sending presentations to Chandrakanta on the occasion of his accession, he sent a fresh force to Assam under Mingimaha Tilwa. In March they reached Assam, captured the Jaipur fort and proceeded towards Jorhat, commencing the third Burmese invasion.

Chandrakanta at once sensed the intention of the Burmese and fled to Gauhati and then escaped to the British territory. The enemy entered Jorhat and in November of the same year installed Jogeswar Singha, brother of Hema Aideu, on the throne.<sup>24</sup> The new king became a puppet in their hands.

Thus, except the Muttock or the Moamaria territory, the entire Brahmaputra valley came under the authority of the Burmese. The Burmese General, Mingimaha Tilwa sent one letter to the Governor-General requesting him to surrender Chadrakanta along with the other refugees who might have taken shelter in the British territory, to the Burmese. David Scott, the Commissioner of Rangpur to whom a similar letter was sent, replied, it was not the custom of the British Government to deliver up persons who had sought refuge in their territories on account of political disturbances.

During his self-exile in the British territory, Chandrakanta managed to collect some Hindustani and Sikh soldiers to fight against the remaining Burmese force in Assam. Due to the difficulty of maintenance this force was scattered in small groups throughout the province. Overcoming the oppositions of the enemy force at different places Chandrakanta approached the vicinity of Jorhat in 1822. But in the meantime, the Burmese army was reinforced by the arrival of a fresh troop under Mingimaha Bandula. It caused a severe defeat to Chandrakanta and he retreated to Goalpara.

The Burmese victory was followed by a revengeful reign of terror on the Assamese which surpassed all kinds of vulgarity

\* Situated on the bank of Dihong river.

and brutality.\* In July 1822 David Scott, the Commissioner of Rangpur declared, "The Burmese having obtained complete mastery of Assam and a person of that nation having been appointed to the supreme authority, the country may now be considered as a province of the Burmese Empire."<sup>25</sup>

Winning victory everywhere, the Burmese now started ransacking the British territories through Goalpara, Sylhet and Chittagong the protest against it by the Company went unheeded. Under these circumstances, the continuation of refusal to interfere in the affairs of Assam and alienation from active hostility was no more possible. On 31st July 1823, in a Despatch to the Court of Directors, Lord Amherst, the Governor General-in-Council conveyed, "... our continued refusal to interfere in the affairs of Assam, has by no means prevented the troubled and distracted state of that country from proving a source of embarrassment to the British Government; ... ".\* Open war against the Burmese was declared on 5th March, 1824.<sup>26</sup>

The British force under Colonel Richards advanced towards Assam and occupied Hadirachoki and Gauhati subsequently. Simultaneous wars were going on between the two forces in Arakan and Rangoon. Recurring defeats in their confrontations with the British, compelled the Burmese to retreat from Western Assam. On 31st January, 1825 they surrendered Rangpur, the former Ahom capital, to the British and with it the entire Brahmaputra valley came under authority of the Company. But the victors soon found that the members of the royal family to whom Assam should be restored were "divided" and "obnoxious" to the people and therefore not in a position to shoulder the responsibility of the country. To meet the situation, the Governor General-in-Council decided to retain the territory under military occupation till some permanent arrangement to it could be done. As a temporary measure, a joint-commissionership was established in Assam under Colonel Richards and David Scott. The former was to hold the civil charges of the area east to Bishwanath, commonly known as Upper Assam, and the Western division or Lower Assam, was entrusted on

\* For details see Bhuyan, *Asamar Padaya Buranji*, pp. 172-180.

\*\* See p.p , 1825, H.C., Vol. 24, P. No. 360, p. 122.

the latter. During this provisional occupation, David Scott was the in-charge of the general management of the whole territory.<sup>27</sup>

In their encounters in the Burmese country also the British won victory. On 20th February, 1826 the vanquished government was compelled to sign a treaty of peace at Yandaboo.<sup>28</sup> According to the treaty provisions the British secured Assam, Tenasserim and Arakan from the Burmese authority.<sup>29</sup> It is significant to note that the right of occupation of Assam was taken from the Burmese Government, a foreign power, and not from the king of Assam, the indigenous authority of the land.

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