



**SOCIO-CULTURAL  
ASPECTS  
OF ASSAM  
IN THE  
19TH CENTURY**

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**PROSENJIT CHOWDHURY**

The present volume is an attempt at understanding the social history of nineteenth century Assam. The socio-historical roots of Assamese nationalism and its impact on historiography, the colonial character of the elite's political loyalty, the effects of rationalism and its manifestations, intra-familial conflicts caused by the modernisation process, the sources, nature and result of Bengal's impact on the educated Assamese and its reaction towards the end of the nineteenth century—such are the themes discussed in the present book. The studies are objective and based on primary and secondary sources. It is hoped that this volume will provoke serious students of history to study dispassionately the recent past of Assam.

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**Socio-Cultural Aspects of Assam  
in the Nineteenth Century**

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# Socio-Cultural Aspects of Assam in the Nineteenth Century



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PROSENJIT CHOWDHURY



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*With grateful regards  
to  
Pavlovian Psychiatrist and Sociologist  
Dhirendranath Ganguli  
whose concern for man's future is inspiring and  
illuminating*

## Preface

The present collection is an attempt to study objectively different significant aspects of nineteenth century Assam. Though not comprehensive, the present work attempts to reconstruct the main socio-cultural trends of Assam's recent past. The socio-historical roots of linguistic nationalism that has dominated the socio-political scene of Assam for many decades have been analysed objectively. An attempt is also made to comprehend and analyse how the modernisation process, in the colonial context, has affected the Assamese middle class.

Three of the articles compiled in this collection have been translated from Assamese by Abul Ahmed, Pratik Chowdhury and Santanu Sengupta. The articles translated by them are: *Victoria-Veneration* (tr. P. Chowdhury), *Assamese Neo-Elite and Generation-Conflict* (tr. A. Ahmed) and *Bengalisation and De-Bengalisation* (tr. S. Sengupta). The author would like to acknowledge, with thanks, the help he got from them. The author owes a special word of thanks to his friends Munin Sarma and Sandhya Devi for having taken the pain to go through the articles and help him in many other ways. He is also very much grateful to his friend Parthasarathi Datta for his warm inspiration. Others to whom the author would like to offer his thanks are: Indibar Dewri, Mahtabuddin Ahmed, Sivanath Barman and Paramananda Mazumdar.

Prosenjit Chowdhury

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## Chapter 1

# Victoria-Veneration

*Thou art the all giving One  
We thine domesticated cattle  
Have not learnt the gesture of defiance.*

**T**his was the manner in which a poet of Bengal eulogised Her Majesty Queen Victoria. Such apostrophe was certainly not an individual's euphoric adoration, for Bengal in those days happened to be the prime pasture of the loyal "domesticated cattle". Hence such self-derogatory naked praise of the British was quite natural. An analysis of Indian history from a broader objective perspective will certainly reveal that the Indian middle class, born and brought up by the British rulers, was singularly loyal to it. This particular class, almost to the end of nineteenth century, was vociferous in its support of the British administration as its very existence depended upon the colonial authority. Moreover, there was a widespread belief among the neo-elite that India's socio-cultural salvation was only possible with British assistance. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that the nineteenth century Bengali intelligentsia should be distinctly inclined to the British empire. The apostrophe to the Queen, seen against this background, is a reaffirmation of this unconditional loyalty.

It must be mentioned that even before the Queen took over the reins of India, there was no dearth of leading people who supported the British rule and openly admired the Queen. When Dwarakanath Tagore went on his maiden visit to England in 1842, "he offered to the ever-remembered Queen, among other precious gifts, Chinese silk as rare articles".<sup>1</sup> This form of veneration later took on a new dimension, when it began to influence even matters of religion. At the behest of some organisers of Durga puja, some idols were made to resemble the Queen.<sup>2</sup>

Such instances of veneration were absent in Assam. However, where the royal visage of the Queen failed, the royal crown did succeed in shaping the design of the divine tiara. After his return from Calcutta, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan had a golden tiara made by the goldsmiths, to adore his family deity *gopala*. This crown bore a semblance to "the crown of her Royal Majesty the Queen."<sup>3</sup> The incident may appear trivial, yet its significance was immense, for in those days it was near blasphemy to crown a Hindu deity after the fashion of a non-Hindu queen. This is another example of the profound veneration and allegiance to the Queen. It was an indirect and unconscious manifestation of the acceptance of the British empire as the omnipotent and omnipresent force in the world. Incidentally, this incident was about the same time when Dwarakanath offered gifts to the Queen in England. The Queen had yet to take over the reins of India.

After the war of independence in 1857, the imperial policy was altered. The rule of the East India Company came to an end and the queen herself took over the charge of India.<sup>4</sup> On this occasion the Queen issued a royal proclamation announcing certain projects and promises. This proclamation was read out at various public gatherings with the primary intention of retaining allegiance of the masses to the throne. Harakanta Baruah refers to this royal proclamation in his autobiography. He writes: "Thus, after the Indian uprising came to an end, Her Royal Majesty the

Queen herself took over the reins of India and issued a proclamation mentioning the cessation of further annexations and non-interference with Hinduism.”<sup>5</sup> This widely circulated proclamation also contained another important reassurance, which alluded to the abrogation of racial and other discriminations in matters of government service. It needs no insight to realise that these promises were nothing more than political deceptions. This diplomatic manoeuvre later became exposed in a confidential letter by Lord Lytton:

We all know that these claims and expectations never can or will be fulfilled. We had the choice between prohibiting them and cheating them and we have chosen the least straight forward course ... This I am writing confidentially.<sup>6</sup>

There was no dearth of well-to-do sympathetic Indians who considered the British *raj* as a providential gift. In fact the Queen's taking over the governance was euphorically celebrated. The event was recorded in *Sambad Prabhakar* which graphically described the festive mood that pervaded Calcutta, the nerve centre of the colonial authority. A few lines from the said periodical merits quotation:

On Monday 1st November, 1858, on the occasion of the royal festival given in honour of Her Royal Majesty the Queen, the city of Calcutta surpassed itself in grandeur. When the Royal Mother the Queen's proclamation was read out in the Government House, the populace assembled there in long queues as ants, along with many other royal officers and leading native personalities...<sup>7</sup>

On that day “great celebrations went on in and around Calcutta throughout the night”; in many residences “there was singing and dancing along with feasting,” and the young students too “wrote on their doors with their little hands ‘Hail Queen Victoria’.” In short, “none of the fortunate Bengalis restrained their spontaneous joy to express their fealty to the Crown.” This

voluntary manifestation of allegiance escalated the cost of earthen lamps from a mere Rs. two one thousand for of to Rs. twenty for the same.

Such funfare and festivities were conspicuous by their absence in Assam. Calcutta's case, however, was different, for it happened to be the point of concentration of those well-to-do Indians who used to get a share of the "harvest" of the British *raj*. Due to certain historical reasons, the number of such "fortunate" people in Assam was rather limited. Yet it can not be denied that the said occasion did not trigger off any "spontaneous joy" among the Assamese. Gunabhiram Baruah, in his *Assam Buronji* writes:

In November 1858, Her Royal Majesty the Queen herself took over the governance of India from the East India Company. This pleased the masses as in other provinces, for they all hoped that it would help their nation prosper.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident that Gunabhiram himself welcomed the *raj* under the Queen. In another section of the same book he refers to Prince Edwards as "the eldest son of our Royal Highness, Her Majesty the Queen."<sup>9</sup> This word "our" is a distinct indication of his political prejudice. It is possible that, under the given circumstances, the said term could have been unconsciously used, yet it should not be forgotten that such sense of oneness is often the product of a psyche motivated by unquestioning allegiance.

Gunabhiram, in his biography of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, again refers to the Queen's accession ceremony as celebrated in Nowgong. On 19th November there was a huge gathering at the court, where the Queen's proclamation was read out in English, Assamese, Bengali, and Urdu. Anandaram himself read out the English version, and was also instrumental in translating the same into Assamese. Gunabhiram adds that at the conclusion of the said announcement—

... the soldiers fired volleys. The night was illuminated and earthen lamps were arranged in such a way as to form the words 'Hail the

Queen'. The same night witnessed the performance of a *Bhauna* [a traditional play with themes from the scriptures] by the Mohantas of Salguri and Narowa ... There was a great tussle among the Mahantas as to who was superior in status. Dhekiyal Phukan amicably settled the matter.<sup>10</sup>

It is quite clear that Anandaram showed excessive enthusiasm in celebrating the said occasion. Apart from his profound loyalty to the throne, there was another important factor in operation behind his exuberance. It was his concern for self-preservation. In his biography of Anandaram, Gunabhiram reveals that during the War of Independence of 1857, a Calcutta newspaper carried a report suspecting Anandaram's loyalty to the throne and that "spies were employed to gauge his allegiance."<sup>11</sup> Hence it was quite natural that Anandaram should show his excessive loyalty to the colonial authority. It is also possible that the Queen's proclamation had aroused expectations optimistic in the neo-educated Anandaram.

On the completion of the Queen's 50th year on throne in 1887, preparations were set in motion to celebrate the occasion. About that time Bolinarayan Bora, the first Assamese to get a degree in engineering from England, published a periodical named *Mau*. Its February issue of the same year carried an intensely devoted article "The Great Festival of the Empress" noting that: "If any nation should surpass another in participation, then it should be India. It is doubtful if any other nation has witnessed such progress under the Queen and the British during the last fifty years."<sup>12</sup>

The article then urges the government to conduct a *Rajsuya Yajna* and invite the people to the said ceremony so that a substantial amount can be collected from the people "expressing their gratitude to the Queen" which can be spent in such a manner that it may remain fresh in the memory of the people for ever.<sup>13</sup> Such enthusiasm is self-explanatory. The March issue of the same journal offers a glimpse into the kind of celebrations that took place in Assam:

There were many celebrations in Assam commemorating the Golden Jubilee of the Queen. However, we are not yet aware of any other sort of celebration except illumination, firework and dancing accompanied by drums. So far as our knowledge goes, it was only in Nowgong that the jubilee was celebrated in the most befitting manner.<sup>14</sup>

This regret of *Mau* is clearly because of the inadequate celebrations on the occasion which could not impart permanence to the jubilee in the people's memory. The periodical, however, refrains from commenting upon any adverse political effect of this colonial loyalty.

Harakanta Baruah's autobiography also briefly refers to the half-centenary celebrations. "For the successful completion of the fifty years of her Majesty's reign" the people of Guwahati celebrated with "fire works at night, and by lighting up roads, churches and schools."<sup>15</sup> Harakanta Baruah was himself involved in these celebrations. He took an active part in arranging the arena for a wrestling match on the occasion. On the same day a general meeting was organised at Guwahati, where the British Government bestowed on Gunabhiram Baruah the title of *Rai Sahib* and the audience was immensely delighted as Navakumar Bhattacharya, in his lecture, blessed the Queen and the British Government.<sup>16</sup> On his return from Guwahati, the next day, Harakanta recelebrated the occasion in private. "On our reaching home at 6 O'Clock, we arranged *baigan* and lit up the house with lamps."<sup>17</sup> It may be mentioned here that Harakanta Baruah, who served the British administration for many years, was not western educated. While it is true that western education did augment the number of the native loyalists, it was certainly not the chief cause of colonial loyalty. Examples of Harakanta Baruah and Dinanath Bezbaruah amply validate the above statement.<sup>18</sup> In reality, the primary motivating force behind such allegiance was the socio-economic interest.

The colonial legacy of this Victoria-veneration is later manifested in Padmanath Gohain Baruah, the first Assamese literateur to be awarded a pension for literature from the British Government. In his autobiography, Padmanath makes no pretense whatsoever, to conceal his deep-seated dependence and veneration:

Ever since my childhood I had always associated the term *Maharani* to mother-worship. I had firm veneration for the late Queen. It is all sweet sound of music when the word "Maharani" is pronounced by the simple villagers. Even today I do feel tremendously exhilarated to swear an oath, like the simple Assamese village folk, in the name of the *Maharani*.<sup>19</sup>

The most significant event to have occurred in the year 1900, according to Padmanath, was "the sad demise of the universal mother Queen Victoria" and the least was the publication of *Assam Bonti*, an Assamese periodical. This coincidence resulted in the creation of *Maharani Charita* by Padmanath, who, intending to "retain the greatness of the Queen forever" serialised it in the editorials of *Bonti*.<sup>20</sup> These extracts were later published in book form under the title *The Biography of the Queen*. Incidentally, this "most venerable book" of Padmanath was later introduced as a textbook in the Assamese Girls' Schools.<sup>21</sup>

*Mor Katha*, a memoir by Jnanadabhiram Baruah, the son of Gunabhiram Baruah, contains an interesting episode concerning Victoria-veneration. The incident occurred when Jnanadabhiram was in England. One day, while on his walk, he came to know that the Queen would shortly arrive at Buckingham Palace. In due course the Queen arrived and the people greeted her by doffing their hats. Jnanadabhiram was so overcome that he broke through the lines and went straight upto the royal carriage and shouted "Hail to Queen". The Queen, it seems, politely acknowledged his presence.<sup>22</sup> After this graphic detail, Jnanadabhiram writes:

Obviously every Indian would be overcome by such excitement especially at the sight of the Queen in person. You can just imagine the attitude of the majority of Indians at that time.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly it would be preposterous to assume that the above statement was applicable to "majority of Indians". Whatever be the extent of Jnanadabhiram's emotions at the sight of the Queen, there is no historical evidence substantiating the statement. In reality, psychology of Victoria-veneration never significantly transcended beyond a certain class, for, had this been the case, Indian history would never have witnessed the uprisings against the British in the nineteenth century. Jnanadabhiram's statement can be comprehended as an unconscious manifestation of superimposing his class psyche upon that of his fellow countrymen.

Again, on the other hand, it would be a complete negation of truth to pretend that the populace remained entirely uninfluenced by this Victoria-veneration. Janandabhiram's memoirs show that during the days of the East India Company the people preferred taking an "oath on the company". After the Queen took over the reins of the country, she gradually replaced the company in the people's oath. He further mentions that during his childhood he remembered "people treasuring the portrait of the Queen." Some people even proudly flaunted the portrait of the royal family. In fact, "the queen did receive the love and adoration of our people."<sup>24</sup> It can be safely assumed here that Jnanadabhiram has merely recorded what he had seen and heard around him. It is possible that a section of the common people came in close contact with the middle class from whom they imbibed the spirit of royal adoration. In this context, two stories, having wide currency at that time, are worth mentioning. The stories were almost autochthonous in nature and they bear strong resemblance to primitive myth. Both are Queen-centric. The first one, like a primitive myth, relates to the cycles of change, of birth and death. According to this story the Queen is immortal. Every day begins

with her birth and ends with her death. She is said to age gradually as the day passes on to night.<sup>25</sup> The second tale ascribes an epic dimension to her personality. During Sita's stay at *Ashok Vana*, she was looked after by Vibhishana's wife. Sita is then supposed to have blessed the latter with a boon saying that in the *Kali yuga* "Thou shalt possess the earth." Queen Victoria, accordingly, is the manifestation of that boon.<sup>26</sup>

It is obvious that the politically unorganised and unconscious populace could very easily conceive of such a grand person of the Queen by the sheer strength of their imagination. A closer inspection of the above tales, however, uncovers a very important psychological characteristic at work: it is the tendency to emphasize the Queen's divinity or immortality rather than one's self-interest or loyalty. It is perhaps here that the nature of devotion of the simple village folk for the Queen drastically differs from that of the nobility and the self-centred educated elite. In conclusion, it is worth remembering that it was the common masses—in spite of their faith in the Queen's divinity and eternity—who was instrumental, in later years, in bringing about the end of the British *raj*, which the Queen had represented.

#### Notes

1. K.N. Thakur, *Dwarakanath Thakurer Jiboni*, Calcutta, 1376, B.S., p. 105.
2. R.N. Gupta, 'Baroiyarer Puja: Durgatsav', *Bangladesh*, 1381 B.S. (Sp. issue) It was as a result of the tendency for imitation that there is evidently some influence of architectural designs of the churches upon a number of temples in Calcutta. (B. Ghosh, 'Devaganer Kolkatay Aagaman', *Ekkhon*(annual issue), 1975.
3. G. Baruah, *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukanor Jibon Charitra*, Guwahati, 1971, p. 50.
4. The monopolistic character of East India Company was disliked by the British industrialists, who were on the look out for an

open market. In this context Cobden says: "We all know the motive which took East India Company to Asia—monopoly, not merely as towards foreigners, but against the rest of their own countrymen." (Quoted by J. Bryne, 'British Opinion and the Indian Revolt,' *Rebellion 1857: A Symposium*, Delhi, 1957, p. 294) By "rest of their own countrymen" Cobden certainly meant the British industrialists and the businessmen who were in search of an open market.

5. K.G. Bardoloi (Ed.), *Sadarameenar Atmajiboni*, Guwahati, 1960, p. 122. The sympathy of the crown with the native states and princes bears an important political significance: "Thus, Britain became not a foe of Indian feudalism but its defender, not only from external danger but also from the rising progressive forces within the states." (A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay 1976, p. 312).
6. Quoted by M. Moitra. *A History of Indian Journalism*, Calcutta, 1969, pp. 131-32. The royal proclamation of the queen that there will be no discrimination in matters of appointments on the basis of caste, creed and religion certainly brought a sense of relief to the Indian middle class and this optimism was echoed in one of the editorials of the Bengali periodical *Sambad Prabhakar*: "We the people, in spite of our loyalties to the government, have not been reciprocated in the expected manner, for which there is remorse within us; now that her Royal Majesty the Queen of England has assumed the title of the Queen of India as well, we can hope to rest assured of attaining prosperity, because her Royal Majesty has herself proclaimed that 'administrative appointment will be made irrespective of caste, creed and religion' and when the Mother herself assures thus we need not bother ourselves any longer ..." (B. Ghose, *Samayik Patre Banglar Samajchitra*, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1978, p. 240). The above is an apt illustration of middle class loyalty and expectations.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-38.
8. G. Baruah, *Assam Buranji*, Guwahati, 1972, pp. 167-68. Gunabhiram's definition of "masses" was not broad-based, else he would not have preferred to remain blind to the imperial

- exploitation and remark: "The British rule brought all-round peace and happiness to the people." (*Ibid.*, p. 170). In later years, however, this opinion of Gunabhiram's underwent some change. In *Soumar Bhraman* he writes: "Since 1824 [Assam] has been under the British. Within this period there have been many instances of progress (and some of regress) in this country." (H.C. Goswami, ed.), *Assamiya Sahityar Chaneki*, Vol. III, Part I, Calcutta, 1923, p. 193).
9. G. Baruah, *Assam Buranji*, *op. cit.*, p. 173. The loyalist character of the middle class was well evident in the first convention of the Indian National Congress: "Hume, on behalf of the Congress, at the close of the session proposed cheers for Victoria, the Queen—Empress," thereby stressing the loyalist character of the Congress. (A.R. Desai, *op. cit.*, p. 321).
  10. G. Baruah, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukanar Jibon Charitra*, *op. cit.*, p. 142. In later years too controversy arose among the *Satriya Gosains* or Vaishnavite spiritual leaders relating to the allocation of places of honour in the *Darbar*. Then, as Anandaram had done earlier, Gangagovinda Phukan settled the dispute diplomatically. (B. Sarma, *Gangagovinda Phukan*, Guwahati, 1870 (Saka), pp. 56-57).
  11. G. Baruah, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
  12. S. Sarma (Ed.), *Mau*, Guwahati, 1980, p. 89. S. Sarma writes that one may not concur with all that Balinarayan Bora says, yet "the man's love for Assam and the Assamese is beyond doubt." (*Ibid.*, p. 15). Such assertions may be misleading. An impartial analysis against the backdrop of political subjugation and economic exploitation would certainly reveal that Bora's love for his people was not beyond question.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
  15. K.C. Bordoloi (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 259.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
  18. The leading personalities of the old society were very much loyal to the crown. Thus Lakshminath Bezbaruah writes about his father Dinanath Bezbaruah: "He was enthusiastic in joining

- even the political movements, but always desisted from joining or supporting anti-government activities; rather he would advise others to regard the king as the representative of God." (L.N. Bezbaruah, 'Dinanath Bezbaruah', in P.N. Gohain Baruah (ed.), *Jiboni Sangraha*, Tezpur, 1939, pp. 20-21).
19. P.N. Gohain Baruah, *Mor Sowarani*, Guwahati, 1972, p. 108.
  20. *Ibid.*, P. 108.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
  22. J.N. Bhuyan (compiler/editor), *Jnanadabhiram Baruah Rachanavali*, Jorhat, 1981, p. 130.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. 131. According to J.N. Bhuyan Jnanadabhiram's loyalty "has originated from his contemporary society and family tradition". (*Ibid.*, p. 34). It is worth mentioning here that even though Bhuyan takes into account the micro and macro perspectives, he overlooks the most important historical factor—that of class perspective.
  24. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29.
  25. P.N. Gohain Baruah, *op. cit.*, p. 108. This story is also referred to in Jnanadabhiram's accounts.
  26. J.N. Bhuyan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 129. In Benudhar Rajkhowa's autobiography, there is an account of the unshakable faith of the people in the Queen's supernatural power. When the postal couriers crossing the wilderness were once questioned 'Aren't you afraid?' they replied, 'We are the servants of the Great Queen, what is there to fear? Even the tigers give way when they learn that we bear the Queen's post.' In this context, Rajkhowa's comment is also interesting to note: "In reality, our people worshipped the Queen to such an extent that it was a common belief among the people that a mere mention of her name would keep adversity away." (B. Rajkhowa, *Mor Jibon Dapon*, Guwahati, 1969, p. 21).

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