

The Bengalees in Assam in the 19th Century

S. C. Sengupta

The Ahoms discouraged all communications with the west ever since their conquest of Assam and the Ahom officers, guarded as sentinels against every possible invasions from Bengal. An iron curtain, though, thus erected, yet it had loopholes through which trade and tidings trickled which defeated the Ahom policy of denying admission to strangers of every description. Assam was inaccessible to the Europeans and the Bengalees alike ¹. Trade and commerce never became considerable ². Only salt merchants and their agents conducted their trade through the Duaria Barua, and settled around the Kandahar chowkey. The Bengalees were never keen to advance further than Rangmati ³. The Ahoms considered it dangerous to allow the 'Bangals' which included the Europeans as well as any Indian from the West, lest they would become too influential. ⁴ Among strangers only craftsman, artisans, accountants etc who severed all relations with their mother country and considered to be of some advantages for Assam were allowed to settle ⁵. Many camp followers of Muslim invaders finally settled in Assam and such were the ancestors of Maniram Dewan and Kanaklal Barua. ⁶ A few European Missionaries and a few Bangalee traders visited the outer fringes of Assam till the 19th century ⁷. These merchants who profited from salt trade in Assam, included Bengalees, Marwaris or Rajasthanis and Europeans or their agents at Gauhati and Goalpara, were the first who forged links between Assam and Bengal as it is found that Jagnaam Phukan had close relations with the Jagat Seths and Haliram Dhekial Phukan employed Bengalee Gomosthas Gourkishore Poddar and others ⁸. Besides, Sikh and Hindusthani sepoys were brought over to Assam by Parsuram and Haliarm Dhekial Phukans and were the connoisseurs of Bengali culture.

Jagnaram was greatly influenced by Raja Rammohan Roy and his religious ideas during his stay at Calcutta. Haliram not only visited Bengal but also frequently published letters, as did Jagnaram, Jaduram Deka Barua in newspapers, viz, 'Samachar Darpan', 'Samachar Chandrika', and published the first history of Assam in Bengali, the Assam Buranji (1829) and Kamakhya Yatra Paddhati. Haliram came in contact with the Bengali, Hindi and Persian speaking people, learnt their languages and composed

books in Bengali to attract educated persons in Assam or trade and employment. Assam in the early 19th century became the district which subscribed, and published letters in, Bengali newspapers and periodicals, in largest number.

With the establishment of educational institutions by the missionaries, in Gauhati, in 1831 and in 1835 by the Government and with the substitution of Bengali in Schools & law-courts in place of Assam since 1836 and because of dearth literacy in Assam, educated persons from Bengal came in large numbers to fill up subordinate positions in government establishments and schools which could draw only those who were not the best in those professions. It was lack of qualified teachers and text books in Assamese, opposition of the Assamese aristocracy to English education and the prospect of easy employment of Assamese students in the tea plantations that hindered the progress of higher education in Assam which fell to 47 per mile⁹.

The East Indian Company's officers like Wade wrongly believed that the Assamese language was a dialect of Bengali and the Assamese people had adopted Bengali as the original Assamese became a dead language, and even Fuller "believed or feigned to believe" that the languages of the Brahmaputra valley was a dialect of Bengali and Cotton thought that every Assamese should know Bengali as any Welshman English¹⁰. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, supported by Danforth demanded Assamese language should be restored in Schools and lawcourts & considered Bengali essential for the completion of the same¹¹. During the period of pre-capitalist economic penetration, the collaborating traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks entered Assam following the British capital and the Assamese people lacked capital necessary for trade and commerce which became a monopoly of Rajasthani merchants¹³. Maniram Dewan, Rosheswar, Jagannath, and Bishnuram Baruas or Radhakanta Handique were exceptions and acted in close cooperation with the British capital as the comprador bourgeoisie.

The Assamese middle class, small though it was, maintained cordial relations with the Bengalees till 1880s but it was embittered thereafter when they became conscious of their own language, and had to compete with the Bengalees for employment, and the teachers from Bengal made derogatory remarks betraying racial arrogance¹⁴. though there was a group of exceptionally brilliant teachers like Chandramohan Goswami, Janmejaya Das and Rameswar sen who taught the Assamese students like Anandaram Barua, Lakshminate Bezbarua and Padmanath Barua and others. From

Bengal, Bihar and Upper India came the indentured labours in plantations and also as clerks, doctors and lawyers¹⁵.

In the 19th century, as before, the Bengalee immigrants married Assamese maidens and their offsprings adopted Assamese surnames. But they were not the illustrious specimens of the Bengal Renaissance and were rent among themselves by the spirit of casteism and regionalism. The Bengalee 'amlahs' represented a character which was not desirable and naturally the Assamese people held a very low opinion of them. Their social life was more than usually slack and often scandalous and the casteism prevalent among the Bengalees infected the Assamese people¹⁶.

The Bengalee intellectuals took a great interest in Assam, as we find the Hindu Patriot criticised the stern government measures taken against Maniram and Madhu Mullick. The Bengal Renaissance and its stalwarts, appreciated the Assamese literature and greater contributions came directly from Bengal rather than from the community settled in Assam, in creating a sense of nationalism in Assam. In Assam, the movement against child marriage, and in favour of widow remarriage, was greatly due to the Bengal's Brahma Samaj movement and the last became popular with the progressive section led by Gunabhiram Barua, a Brahma and leaders of the new awakening, Jaduram Deka Barua and Padmahas Goswami¹⁷.

Brahma Samaj, established in Kamrup, Darrang and Goalpara by the immigrant Bengalees made little progress so far social reforms were concerned¹⁸. Again, the progressive element of Bengal had more active interest in the problems than the Bengalees living in Assam. In 1892 R. B. Ghosh questioned the propriety of raising land tax in the Imperial legislative council, and the 'Indian Nation' was sympathetic towards the peasants' unrest and criticised the government repressive measures¹⁹. Bengal greatly influenced the Assamese educated class in establishing the Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha and Jnan Pradayini Sabha, the Reyot Sabha in imitation of the like associations established in Bengal²⁰.

The greatest social ill in the 19th century Assam was the pitiable condition of the indentured tea garden coolies, the 'beasts of menagerie' in Fuller's words, which attracted the notice of the Bengalees, but not of the Assamese nor of the Bengalees in Assam, and "Cha Kar Darpan" of Dakshina Ranjan Chattopadhyay was published in 1875 and "Cha Kulir Atma Kahini" by Jogendra Nath Chattopadhyay²¹ and Ramkumar Vidyaratna published

“Udashi Satyasrabar Asam Bhraman” and “Kuli Kahini” (1882) which drew the attention of the Governor-General. The Sadharan Brahma Samaj and Indian Association took up the cause of the oppressed coolies and their representatives Ram Kumar Vidyaratna, Dwarakanath Ganguly, and Sibnath Sastri, travelled throughout Assam in 1886 and series of articles were published in the “Sanjibani” and the “Bengalee” depicting the insult, humiliation, torture and molestation which the coolies of both sexes were subjected to and that their lives were far worse than the Negro slaves in America as described by Mrs. Stowe. None among the immigrant Bengalees, even lawyers dared to defend the cases of the coolies nor any among the Assamese except Lakshminath Bezbarua and ‘an unknown gentleman’ showed any interest to ameliorate the condition of the poor coolies the target of lash and lust of the European planters- the lords of the wilderness. It became the subject of the Bengal Provincial Congress (1886) and the Annual conference of the National Congress (1896) initiated by J. C. Ghosh ²².

It was not that the Bengalees in Assam had not contributed in any way to the newly awakened Assamese society. In forming the Assam Association in Sibsagar (1882), Akhoy Kumar Ghose and Mahendra Narain Banerjee acted as the joint secretaries ²³.

Though the social changes were more or less modelled on the immigrant Bengalee Hindu Society of the time yet their influences never became profound or all absorbing as the Assamese intellectuals were often inspired and felt the impact of Bengal’s social, political, cultural and economic movements which were far more progressive than the former. People in Assam were absorbing what was good in the Young Bengal but not their vices ²⁴.

Notes & References

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