

## Matibar Barsenapati - An Assessment

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The 'Matak Rajya' which was established after the third and final 'Moamaria Rebellion' in the present Dibrugarh district of Assam with its capital at Bengmara (present Tinsukia town), could enforce its recognition from the Ahom Government as an autonomous state. It could retain this status till it was annexed by the British imperialists in 1839 A. D. According to the British sources, the Brahmaputra formed the northern and western, the Buri Dihing the southern and "a line extending from the Dihing to a point nearly opposite to the mouth of the Koondil nullah" the eastern boundaries of the Matak kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Infact, it laid in the angle between the Brahmaputra and the Buri Dihing.<sup>2</sup> This kingdom could survive only for 35 years after its recognition. During this short period, practically only two rulers could avail the chance of ruling here, viz. Sarbananda Singha and his son Matibar Barsenapati - the former on an independent capacity and the latter as an autonomous ruler under the Ahom Government.

Sarbananda Singha was the first ruler of the Matak Kingdom who assumed the title 'Swargadeo' (king). Sarbananda Singha's authority was not recognised by the Ahom Government specially by its dominating, energetic, ambitious Premier Purnananda Buragohain, who was resolved to restore the glory and might of the Ahom monarchy, after recovering Rangpur from the Mataks. He sent a strong expedition against Sarbananda Singha, who fled away to the Singpho area after his initial defeat. From there with the active support of the Singphos, he sought Burmese help to recover his lost territory and full authority. Purnananda, being shrewd and practical statesman, in order to avoid more complicacy because of foreign involvement, at last adopted a conciliatory policy to pacify the turbulent Mataks. He started negotiation with Sarbananda, but before it could be accomplished, Sarbananda Singha died in the later part of the year 1805.

The negotiation, therefore, had to be continued with Matibar, the eldest son of Sarbananda Singha, who was already made the

**Bar Senapati** (Supreme Commander) of the Matak army by his father for his capability and efficiency. Finally, an agreement was concluded between the Ahom Government and Matibar Barsenapati sometime towards the last part of the year 1805. By this agreement, the Ahom Government recognised the autonomy of the Matak Kingdom headed by Matibar with his title 'Barsenapati'.<sup>13</sup> Matibar, on his turn, agreed to the following terms :

- a. He would cease using the title 'Swargadeo'.
- b. He would also depart from the policy of his father of minting coins like an independent ruler.
- c. He would pay an annual tribute to the Ahom Government in kind, consistig of articles like elephant, elephants' tusk and silk.

### **Relations with the Ahom Government**

Like Ranjit Singh's faithful loyalty to the Treaty of Amritsar concluded with the British in April 1809, Matibar Barsenapati also recognising the recovery of the Ahom might to a great extent, because of the remodelling of the Ahom force on British model by Purnananda Buragohain, remained loyal and friendly to the agreement made with the Ahom Government. The contemporary records and chronicles do not give us any reference to any conflict between the Matak Chief and the Ahom Government. Later on, the political development in Western or Lower Assam, which became a hotbed of conspiracies against the morbid Ahom Government after the departure of Capt Welsh from Assam in 1794, had however, an effect on the relationship of the Ahom and the Matak rulers. By avoiding reference to the complicated political development of rapid change of Governors in Lower Assam due to intervention of the Barkandazes of Bengal and due to the weakness of the Ahom Government at Rangpur, we may sum up the situation like this :

The strained relationship between Purnananda Buragohain, the overbearing Ahom Premier, and Badan Chandra, the then Governor of Lower Assam, led to conspiracies and counter-conspiracies sometimes with the active connivance of Chandrakanta,<sup>4</sup> the then Ahom King, ultimately led to a series of Burmese invasions on Assam. When Badan Chandra, after escaping the attempt of arrest made by the Ahom Premier, fled away to Burma to seek its help to avenge on the Buragohain, Badawpaya, the then Burmese Emperor, considered it as a God-sent opportunity to invade Assam, for he was keenly interested in territorial aggrandise-

ment towards Assam, with an aim to make it a base to fight the British expansion. This resulted in the Burmese invasion of Assam and the recognition of Chandrakanta as the ruler with Badan Chandra as his Premier with a new designation, *Mantri-Phukan*.<sup>5</sup> Soon after the return of the Burmese, Badan Chandra was killed. Chandra Kanta Singha was arrested by the party led by Ruchinath Buragohain, the son of Purnananda Buragohain, who died just before the Burmese aggression of Assam. Purandar Singha then was placed on the Ahom throne in February 1818.<sup>7</sup> When this news reached the Burmese Emperor, he sent the second expedition to Assam in order to restore Chandrakanta Singha, which it could accomplish after the retreat of Ruchinath and Purandar Singha towards Gauhati.

Chandrakanta Singha decided to bring the rest of Assam under his control. He calculated that the support of the Matak Chief would be of great help in achieving his aim. Matibar also thought it expedient to grasp the hand of friendship extended by the restored Ahom monarch then backed by a mighty power i.e., the Burmese. Accordingly, he sent a force to help the Ahom monarch. The combined Ahom, Burmese and Matak forces then attacked Ruchinath Buragohain at Khagarijan in Nowgong,<sup>7</sup> and compelled him to retreat to the British territory. Purandar Singha too followed Ruchinath's step. The Burmese force after firmly establishing the authority of Chandrakanta Singha in a greater part of Assam, went back to their country. Thus Chandrakanta Singha was practically demoted to a subordinate status under the Burmese regime.

Chandrakanta Singha, being an ambitious and power-loving man, did not like to remain at the mercy of the Burmese. He, therefore, decided to construct fort at Dighalihat near Joypur to prevent future Burmese inroads to Assam, in case they send an expedition when he would try to unshackle from the Burmese control.<sup>8</sup> This time again, he calculated that cementing an alliance with Matibar Barsenapati, would be of immense help in accomplishing his aim. Matbar so long had a good relationship with the Burmese for his own interest of saving his territory from Burmese inroads and oppression. The Burmese also reciprocated the friendship of Matibar by not harassing his people, considering the strategic position occupied by the Matak ruler on the way from the Ahom to the Burmese kingdom. Now perhaps thinking that Chandrakanta, the ally of the Burmese had decided to oppose them and that the Burmese might not come again, he too decided to side with the Ahom monarch. So when Chandrakanta Singha

offered the post of Buragohain to Kalibar, Matibar's brother, he readily accepted the offer.<sup>9</sup> Thus Chandrakanta for the time being could placate the Matak Chief against the Burmese.

The Burmese Emperor Bagyidaw (1819-1837), who succeeded Badawpaya, deputed a Burmese contingent with some valuable presents to Chandrakanta, outwardly as a mark of his apparent friendship,<sup>10</sup> but actually with a design of exercising his sovereignty over the Ahom monarch. At the sight of the fort on approaching Joypur, the Burmese could understand the real motive behind the construction of the fort. After demolishing the fort, the Burmese proceeded to Jorhat. Scared at this, Chandrakanta fled away towards Gauhati, leaving the charge of the country to Kalibar Buragohain. Kalibar faithfully tried to resist the Burmese. But he was defeated and imprisoned. Later on, he was killed by the Burmese.<sup>11</sup> The Burmese then placed one Jogeswar Singha on the Ahom throne, who was but a puppet in the hands of the Burmese. Assam thus practically passed to the control of Burma. It is difficult to understand why the Burmese did not take any step against the Matak Chief, who allied with the Ahom monarch by accepting the Ahom Premiership for his brother. Here again the same strategic situation of the Matak Kingdom, through which the Burmese had to maintain their life-line with their motherland, desisted them to take action against the Matak. Thus Matibar Barsenapati fully utilized the position of a buffer-state, like that of present Nepal milking both India and China. Here the Barsenapati proved to be a shrewd diplomat and an opportunist statesman.

But after Chandrakanta's flight, Matibar realised that the revival of the Ahom monarchy was a distant possibility. He, therefore, after Kalibar's death and Chandrakanta's flight, extended undivided loyalty to the Burmese. To cement the alliance, he kept in his residence a *vakeel* or an agent of the Burmese, named Kaminee Phukan, on regular pay. According to some sources, he even established matrimonial relationship with the Burmese monarch by giving one of his daughters in marriage to him.<sup>12</sup> Further, during the period of the Burmese invasions, it is said, he offered all kinds of help except military to the Burmese soldiers.<sup>13</sup> By thus keeping the Burmese in good humour, Matibar assumed independence and "practically established himself in the position of his father."<sup>14</sup> Even though it is difficult to appreciate his opportunist diplomacy, it must be admitted that by adopting such a policy, he could protect his people from the Burmese depredation. This has been confirmed by British sources, according to which,

the people of the Matak kingdom alone were free from Burmese oppression.<sup>16</sup>

Matibar Barsenapati had certain conditions in his favour that helped him in maintaining his autonomous position with success and to save his people from Burmese ravages.

1. The Ahom Kingdom was at its lowest ebb because of its internecine quarrel, succession of a series of weak rulers, repeated Burmese aggression, etc. Matibar, therefore, could manage his own affairs without caring much to a power that was virtually on the verge of downfall.

2. The advantageous strategic position of the Matak Kingdom, as has been mentioned earlier, which laid on the way between Burma and Assam, being contiguous to the territories of the Khamtis and the Singphos, was of tremendous help to its rulers to exploit the situation if necessary.

3. The Burmese also wanted, on their part, an alliance with the Matak, as they had practical political vision of the indispensibility of Matak friendship to carry on their aggrandisement against the Ahom Government and then the British. The Burmese knew that for the supply of foodstuffs and even manpower in case of need, they would have to depend on the Matak. It was for this reason that the Burmese did not commit any plunder in the Matak Kingdom and maintained good relationship with its ruler.

### **Relation with the British**

The relationship of Matibar Barsenapati with the British started after the First Anglo-Burmese war. Assam along with some other parts of Northeast India passed formally into the hands of the British by the Treaty of Yandaboo (February 24, 1826). The contact of the Barsenapati with the British, friendly or otherwise, then was only a question of time. And that started after the attack of the Singphos on the Matak and the Khamti territories. The Singphos, in alliance with the Matak, fought with the Ahom Government during the Moamaria Rebellion. But later on, at the time of the Burmese rule in Assam, the relationship between the Matak and the Singphos became strained. This was perhaps because the Singphos disfavoured the negotiation of the Matak Chief with the Ahom Government, once their common enemy; and more particularly the acceptance of the office of the Buragohain by Matibar for his brother Kalibar. In the second week of March 1825, about 7500 Singphos, heavily armed, attacked the Matak Kingdom, as well as Sadiya, then under the Khamti Chief known

as the Sadiyakhowagohain. The two Chiefs, considering the formidability of the Singpho-raid, appealed to the British for help.<sup>17</sup>

The British considering it a golden opportunity to win over both the Matak and the Khamtis, whose services, they thought, could be utilised against the Burmese and their allies in future, agreed to help them. The Barsenapati and the Sadiyakhowa Gohain offered all possible help to Lt. Neufville, who was sent to deal with the situation, that could inflict a crushing defeat on the Singphos. After the successful completion of the expedition, Lt. Neufville rewarded the two Chiefs with cash payment for their help in conducting the expedition. This was the first contact of Matibar Barsenapati with the British.<sup>18</sup> Lt. Neufville was highly impressed by the Matak for their strong, sturdy and courageous feats during the Singpho expedition.

The British infact realised that the Matak, along with the Khamtis, were the only people of consequences in Assam, who could be of vital importance in maintaining tranquillity on its borders as it was infested with war-like tribes.<sup>19</sup> David Scott, the Agent to the Governor-General, therefore, suggested to utilise the territories of the Matak and the Khamtis as a Political Screen between the Burmese and the newly acquired possession of the Company i.e., Assam. He further recommended that the territory of the Matak, along with those of the Khamtis and the Singphos, should be handed over to their own control, after their 'nominal annexation'.<sup>20</sup> The Calcutta Council, of course, feared that in case of restoration of Upper Assam to an Ahom Prince, there might be constant feuds between him and these Chiefs. This apprehension, Scott tried to remove by his suggestion that a 'clear definition and demarcation of the boundaries among them would solve that problem.'<sup>21</sup> As per suggestion of David Scott, the Barsenapati was placed in 'a semi-independent possession of the Matak country'; and Scott entered into an agreement with him on May 13, 1826.<sup>22</sup> The terms of the agreement were as follows :

1. The Barsenapati would provide an armed contingent of 300 *gots*\* of *Paiks*\*\*.

2. He had to supply provisions to any British expeditions

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\**Four Paiks used to form a Got, which was reduced to three later on.*

\*\**an adult male-subject of the Ahom Kingdom, who had to render specific services to the State or the Satra (Vaisnava monasteries) in rotation.*

passing through his territory.

3. His criminal and judicial powers were reduced. He was to send reports to the British Agent in cases of murder, dacoity, grave wounds, and thefts above rupees fifty. The papers and the person or persons concerned would be produced before a court instituted for that purpose. The proceedings, however, were to be submitted to a Chief and under his orders, sentences would be carried out.

4. He was not to pay any revenue. But he was held responsible for the collection of poll-tax of the British subjects migrating to his territory.

A similar agreement was made with the Khamtis also. The British Government considered the agreements with the Barsenapati and the Khamti Chief as the soundest policy for the pacification of these people.<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, the delay in restoring an Ahom Prince to the rest of Assam, on whose restoration the old aristocracy pinned great hopes of restoration of their powers and privileges, caused discontentment and led to a series of attempts to overthrow the British regime. One of the sons of the Barsenapati also joined in such an attempt made by one Dhanjay Peolia Buragohain, who was inflicted death punishment for attempting to make one Gomdhar the king.<sup>24</sup> Dhanjay fled away to the Matak Kingdom. It is said that a number of Matak people also extended their help to Dhanjay.<sup>25</sup> It was towards the close of the year 1829. The Barsenapati was also doubted by the British authority of abetting some of the anti-British movements, but no conclusive proof could be traced.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of the anti-British movements in several parts of the north-eastern region, the British in order to pacify the Ahom aristocracy, restored Upper Assam to an Ahom Prince Purandar Singha, who to get an upperhand over the claim of his rivals to the Ahom throne, agreed to some very harsh terms. Later on, on charges of default of payment and mal-administration, Purandar Singha was deposed in October 1838, and his territory was annexed to the British Indian Empire.

This changed political situation naturally had an impact on the fortune of the Barsenapati. Now that the Ahom Kingdom had been annexed and the Burmophobia had gradually receded to a reasonable distance, the British no longer wanted the whole-hearted support of the Barsenapati. The local British authority, therefore, wanted to revise the liberal conditions of the agreement

extended to the Barsenapati. And so it had given an impression to the Supreme Authority that it suspected the Barsenapati on concealing the actual number of the *Paiks* in his territory. So the local British authority insisted on commuting the *Paik* service into money-payment.<sup>27</sup> Capt. White, the Political Agent, therefore, made a proposal to the Barsenapati to commute the services of the contingent he supplied to the British Government for an amount of rupees ten thousand. He further extended a 'tempting allurement' of conferring the title *Raja* on the Barsenapati with another assurance of safe succession to his heirs.<sup>28</sup> The Barsenapati here deserves a word of praise, for, unlike many other Indian rulers who became prey to such allurement, emphatically turned down the proposal. His words that "if the Government was prepared to tax his subjects, they must take the country into their own hands; he would rather go out of the country than raise such a tax,"<sup>29</sup> shows his concern for his own people. The British then slowed down the process of revising the agreement seeing the determination of the Barsenapati. This was in the early part of 1835.

But unfortunately in the meantime a serious dispute developed between the Barsenapati and the Khamti Chief on the question of exercising authority over certain refugees of Upper Assam, who settled near Saikhowa. The British officer, who was stationed there, to avert the clash, asked the two Chiefs to appear before him to find out a solution. The Khamti Chief defied the order and forcibly occupied the disputed area. The British authority took action against the Khamti Chief, who was removed from his office and then was taken as an internee to Gauhati.<sup>30</sup>

After dealing sternly with the Khamti Chief, the British Agent again proposed a revision of the agreement with the Barsenapati. This time the Barsenapati wisely read the writings on the wall. Seeing the fate of the Khamti Chief on defiance of British order he had now agreed to the proposal. Consequently, a revised agreement was signed on January 23, 1835, by which, the Barsenapati agreed to give up his claim on the disputed area in Saikhowa, and to pay capitation tax for the contingent of 300 men he used to supply to the British Government @ Rs.6/- per man i.e., Rs.-1800/- per year.<sup>31</sup>

After the annexation of Purandar Singha's territory, the British Government now faced the problem of exodus from Upper Assam to the Matak Kingdom, because of its low rate of assessment, which had so long been faced by that unfortunate ruler. The British Government therefore wanted to revise the agreement

with the Barsenapati raising the amount to be paid by him to the British Government, which would compell him, they thought, to impose more taxes on his people. In that case, the difference in rates of taxes in the British and Matak territories would be negligible, which would discourage people migrating from British to the Matak territory. The British Government further calculated that the Barsenapati or his sons would not agree to accept such harsh terms, and it then would get a pretext of annexing the Matak Kingdom. For, certain other factors had already allured the British to hatch such a plan :

1. The Matak area had already attracted the attention of the British officials as the best tea-growing area of Upper Assam.

2. The sturdy Matak people, the British thought, could be profitably engaged in tea-cultivation.

3. The war-like tribes on the border had been dealt with effectively one by one.

4. The political danger from Burma had considerably receded, and the existence of the Matak Kingdom as a buffer state was no longer required.

5. They had firmly consolidated their position in the rest of Assam. And so they could now easily stretch their tentacles of imperialism further to grab more territories.

In the circumstances, it appeared, the Matak Chief would soon suffer the fate of Purandar Singha. The Barsenapati in the meantime had been ailing and his health had rapidly deteriorated. He, therefore, divided his kingdom into seven divisions and placed each one of them under seven of his older sons for ensuring administrative efficiency. The British authority, the exponent of 'Divide and Rule' policy, thought this arrangement a fitting chance for creating division among the seven sons of the Barsenapati. The local authority now taking advantage of Barsenapati's ill-health, sent several proposals to the Supreme Government to raise the amount of taxes to be paid by the Barsenapati to the British Government. But the Supreme Government refused to comply with these proposals, for it thought, that this uncalled for interference would create unrest amongst the Matak, who had been remaining 'otherwise peaceful'.<sup>32</sup>

As the health condition of the Barsenapati further deteriorated, he with the consent of the Council of Elders and all his sons, selected his second son Bhagirath alias Maju Gohain, as his successor, and handed over the charge of the administration to him. He sent this proposal to the British Government for approval, which

was accorded provisionally with a caution that the Chief must not make permanent assignment to any of his sons without referring the matter to the British Government.<sup>33</sup> Anyhow, on January 2, 1839, Matibar Barsenapati breathed his last. He could die with this satisfaction atleast that his kingdom could somehow survive from the British imperialists during his life time. But he could clearly visualise the evil days of its annexation, which had actually come during the days of his sons in 1839 A. D.

To most of the British officers, Matibar Barsenapati was a very capable, vigorous and courageous man, 'plain in his apparel, simple in his habits and possessed of great talent for buisness.'<sup>34</sup> They were also almost unanimous in their opinion regarding his diplomatic ability to protect his people from the inroads of the Burmese and the neighbouring hill-tribes.<sup>35</sup> This unstinted praise for the Barsenapati continued upto the out break of the anti-British movements in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The situation of the Matak Kingdom on the Assam-Burma route and on the neighbourhood of the hill tribes, created suspicion in the mind of some British officials as regards the bonafide of the Barsenapati. Mr. Bruce, who was incharge of gun-boats stationed at Sadiya, doubted him as 'one always dissatisfied and always ready to enter into any secret plot.'<sup>36</sup> Pemberton too wrote in the same vein, "No reliance can I think be placed upon the fidelity of this Chieftain, except it is insured by the continued presence of a superior force at Sadiya".<sup>37</sup> M. Cosh also echoed such an opinion.<sup>38</sup>

Such doubt on the fidelity of the Barsenapati developed gradually perhaps because a part of his territory was used by the anti-British elements as their rendezvous. There was sufficient ground on the part of the Government to suspect that the Barsenapati had atleast extended his moral support to the rebels. But it was difficult for the British officers to prove his involvement, so that even a man like Capt. White had to comment that "the Barsenapati was decidedly faithful to his agreements",<sup>39</sup> and opposed the remark that he was 'brusque in his manners,'<sup>40</sup> by observing that "accustomed to act as an independent Chief for 50 years and his territory unoccupied either by the Burmese or by the British, he is, naturally, independent and somewhat harsh in his manners which, combined with a . . . . dislike of innovations, too natural to that period of life, has occasionally given rise to impropriety of expression and acts of seeming disobedience, apt to give offence to young militarymen trained in the habits of rigid subordination". An illiterate man by British standard<sup>42</sup> and with his tribal upbringing

ing, it could not be expected of the Barsenapati to behave in a polished way, that was expected of him by the British officials. He, therefore, failed to impress them as a polished gentleman. But that could be no ground to conclude that his administration was not beneficial to the people."

The democratic functioning of the Government of Barsenapati was acknowledged by the British sources like 'there existed a greater spirit of equality in the community, than to be found elsewhere in Astam.'<sup>43</sup> Hannay has also mentioned, "the Moa-Mureahs seem to have a good deal of republican feeling, with regard to equality and free will."<sup>44</sup> Barsenapati was the nominal head of the state, actual power being vested in the Council of Elders, which consisted of representatives of all the clans.<sup>45</sup> Heads of the villages and *Khels* (clans) were invited to attend the Council, when any question of general interest was taken up. Infact, there was no charge of misgovernment, exactions or incapacity in the Matak Kingdom. The liberal and efficient administration of the kingdom bestowed peace and economic prosperity on the people.<sup>46</sup> "With luxuriant crops of rice intermixed with mustard, sugarcane, cotton and mulburies, the Moamoria territory under the Barsenapati became the granary of the North-East Frontier."<sup>47</sup>

Though slightly far-fetched, it will not be out of place to have a comparison of one aspect of Barsenapati's policy with that of Tipu Sultan of Mysore and Ranjit Singh of the Punjab.

Tipu's boldness and spirit of innovation have been described by some as great negative points. The imperialist writers' depiction of Tipu as a 'monster pure and simple' is the result of his non-compromise with the British imperialists. Brave and daring, he stuck to his self-respect and spurned Wellesley's offer of a Subsidiary Alliance. Some assert that he lacked practical political insight and diplomatic ability by going against the instinct which had warned the ablest and strongest Asiatic Chiefs, to avoid collision with Europeans. But Tipu wilfully refused to toe the line of these 'ablest and strongest Asiatic Chiefs' to cowardly submit to the British imperialists with the sole aim of keeping their nominal rule by adopting a policy of 'half a loaf is better than no loaf.' They preferred to stick to the 'most comfortable chairs of the world', viz. their thrones, even by compromising their honour. For, Tipu preferred a hero's death to the tame existence of a bandwagon of western imperialism. His only great misfortune was that he was pitted against the imperial giant who had both the will and capacity to bulldoze the whole of India.

Unlike that of Tipu, the 'Lion of the Punjab' i.e. Ranjit Singh's relations with the English Company were characterised by an inferiority complex. So long the Afghan fear and the Russophobia acted as the bugbear in the minds of the British Government in India, they treated Ranjit Singh at par. But as soon as those dangers were over, the British imperialists displayed their authority. Ranjit Singh then had to postpone the evil days by grudgingly yielding at every step. He proved to be a poor statesman in this respect. And for this yielding, the English writers, unlike in the case of Tipu Sultan, have praised the Sikh ruler for his 'statesman like recognition of the strength of the East India Company, the reliance he placed upon British promises and his loyalty to his plighted word,' in which he differed from Tipu Sultan of Mysore. But some critics have correctly noted that he displayed a lack of intrepidity and bold statesmanship in his dealings with the English. He chose the line of least resistance.

Matibar's strategic position could yield better terms from the British, like in the case of Ranjit Singh before the Russian apprehension died down from the Indian political scene for the British. As soon as the Burmese fear receded to a considerable distance and the turbulent border tribes were subjugated, the British Government became demanding, and began to impose heavier terms on the Barsenapati. Like Ranjit Singh and unlike Tipu Sultan, Matibar Barsenapati also in the late part of his reign followed a policy of least resistance. He too yielded and yielded and preferred to rule than to defy. Mysore was annexed ; and so too the Punjab and the Matak Kingdom. The only difference is, Ranjit Singh and Matibar could delay the eventuality.

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