

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

NINTH SESSION

GUWAHATI ; 1988

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Edited & Published by
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on behalf of
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PREFACE

The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.

Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.

The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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Anglo - Dafla Unrest :

A Cause and Factor Analysis

S. Panda

Captain G.A. Nevill, the Assistant Political Officer of the Western Section of the North-Eastern Frontier Hills observed from his experience in 1913 that the Daflas as a tribe had not yet recognised the British Political authority, which was evident from their trecherous attacks and petty aggression on the plains of Assam². The Administrative Report of North-Eastern Frontier Hills for the year 1927-28 also referred to the continued hostility of the Daflas to the extension of British authority into their hills, inspite of a growing sense of confidence on and the appreciation of the new order under British rule. Furthermore the Administrative Report for the year 1938-39 aslo continued reference to the raid undertaken by the Kabeng Dafla on Pinji Dafla, leading to a punitive expedition by the British into the hills. The first encounter of the Dafla tribes with the British took place as early as 1825. During the Anglo-Burmese War, 1824-6, in the process of clearing the Burmese invaders from the plains of Assam, British military officer took note of the Dafla tribe and their territorial extension into the Assam plains. After the British takeover of Assam in 1826, souring the entire history of the British relationship with the Daflas, till their departure from India in 1947. Compared to the Pathan tribes of the North-Western Frontier Province, the Daflas were not really warlike. There were only casual raids, the root of which lay in the incapacity of the Ahom rulers in keeping the tribes in check into their hills³. But during the British period it had so increased that the Daflas remained a constant headache for the British Administration in NEFA.

Close observation into the aforesaid facts raises many a query. Was not the British military might enough to subdue the Daflas ? Were the raiders too powerful to escape the vigilant eye of the British Administration ? Were the British responsible ? Or what else was there in the crux of the matter ? Hardly any analytical probe has been done into this issue except the accusations and counter accusations by both the parties. To the British the Daflas were, savages and uncultured people to whom fighting, raiding and thieving were not merely the second nature, but the only nature they knew. The Daflas on their part were highly aggrieved of the British infringement into their freedom and their economic rights in the plains of Assam. A modest effort has been made in the following pages to study the whole issue from its grassroot level.

The Daflas inhabit the hills north of Darang and Lakhimpur districts of present Assam. In the immediate vicinity of their hills lay the Naoduar and Charduar⁴. Surrounded on the west by Bhorali river and by Sundri on the east, the Daflas were migrants to their present home from the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock. As a tribe they were divided among themselves, into innumerable clans independent of each other. The am or chief of the village was considered the most powerful at the village level under whose direction the village works as a cogent unit. The clan is still a greater unit, which sometimes consists of thirty or forty chiefs⁵. But beyond the clan the tribe was practically divided and was confined to isolated hill pockets. A primitive form of oligarchy was visible⁶ in the organisational structure of the tribes⁶. But practically for all purpose they were a divided whole and as such incapable of combined action.

The absence of any distinct form of political organisation and the lack of a united political leadership among the Daflas stood as a thorn

in the way of improved relationship between them. The Dafla's political organisation was primitive and archaic and its extent was limited to a clan or sometimes even to a single village. A type of oligarchy which was the chief forum of administration was also crude and was composed of a number of village chiefs. The tribes had no unity of organisation, every village is separate and sometimes hostile to each other. As a matter of fact they remained a weak force in the impression of the British administration. Moreover the microscopic self-imposed divisions among the tribes made any negotiations with the British a politically difficult question.

After the British takeover of Assam the Dafla tribes came in direct contact of the British over the issue of collection of posa. Dafla's right to posa was recognised since the Ahom times and therefore the British administration in the initial stages allowed them to collect posa. Till 1835 they were not at all interfered but their parallel jurisdiction in the plains created much administrative problems for the local administration, amounting to raids and counter-raids. To solve the deadlock negotiations were opened with the Daflas. a large number of Dafla chiefs came down to sign a sort of agreement with captain Matthie, the officer in charge of Darrang. By 1836, of the thirteen Dafla clans north of Char-Duar eight turned up. In due course of time the rest of the five clans signed the agreement. By 1838-39 the Dafla Clans of Naoduar also signed the agreement, by which direct collection of posa was stopped and the chiefs were asked to receive their posa amount from the mulguzars or the revenue officer of the concerned villages. In 1852, their posa was finally commuted for a money payment, which was extended to some two hundred and thirty eight gams or chiefs of Daflas.

In spite of these engagements the Anglo-Dafla relationship remained soured. In 1870's a series of raids were undertaken by the Daflas

on the plains of Assam. Most of these raids were intra-tribal in nature, and sometimes the Daflas verses their slaves only. Issues dominating the raids were personal, local and pertaining to clan only. Hardly was there any organised raid in which the whole tribe was involved. Still for the British administration they remained a permanent headache. Daflas had their grievances against the British rule on mostly local issues. But the British administration failed to solve the local issues because of the distinct absence of an organised leadership among the Daflas, with whom negotiations could be held in a firm basis. Adherence to treaties and engagements also remained isolated as the chiefs were divided among themselves and were independent from others. Violation of the treaties by a single chief or clan amounted to blockade or punitive expedition in which more than one chief or clan were affected adversely for no fault of theirs, thus catering towards the succession of raids. Throughout their relationship a single British administrator has had to deal with hundreds of independent chiefs and clans. In the political parlance such a deal is bound to have minor lapses on both sides which remained the crux of a continued bitter relationship of the Daflas with the British.

In the Dafla social system slavery as a practice was highly esteemed. The practice which existed since a long time past had distinct spiritual and socio-economic sanction from the Dafla society. It was a common belief among the Daflas that a person would get after his death as many slaves as he commanded in this life. This belief sustained the system of slavery in the spiritual front. Inter and intra-tribal feuds which was very frequent among the Daflas in the 18th and 19th century was in fact the breeding ground of slavery. Every raid and feud resulted in the capture of a number of persons as war captives who automatically become slaves in the society. Besides perpetual offenders of a social group or clan were also condemned to slavery. The institution was hereditary and as such a slave's children were also slaves

to their master. In any primitive society slavery was a common practice, but among the Daflas it was prominent. No doubt it was "a mild form of servitude"¹⁰, but its importance in the Dafla society was undeniable from the economic point of view. For a people, whose two basic, rather only profession was hunting and jhuming, slaves were not only an asset in their agriculture and trade but were also the caretaker of their home and children.

The establishment of a new order in the plains with ample chance of economic prosperity lured the slaves towards their migration into the plains. In the Daflas perception the British not only encouraged their slaves' migration but also gave protection to them under their jurisdiction. That is why whenever and wherever they could the Daflas pounded upon them in the plains without the slightest regard for the British laws. From 1870 and onwards such raids became frequent. The local administration was very much worried over the frequent violations of their frontier and laws. To counter such barbarism the British administration took resort to force and economic blockades. Still the raids continued and the Daflas remained a permanent sore in the body-politic of the British administration in NEFA.

'Posa' remained another major bone of contention in the Anglo-Dafla relationship. Posa was a sort of revenue assignment made to the bordering tribes as a measure of reconciliation with them". This system was introduced during the weak days of Ahom rule when the Ahom rulers were incapable of keeping tribal depredations in check into their hills¹². In their first encounter with the Daflas, the British frontier officers branded this practice as something illegal and irrational. In their opinion posa was a "blackmail" exacted by brute force by a marauding tribe. Thus, right from the beginning they were against the collection of posa by Daflas and other bordering tribes.

But in order to avoid hostilities at the initial stages they allowed the Daflas to continue with their old practice. However, the status quo did not last long. Free movement of the Daflas in the plains and the assertion of their supremacy in a large tract of the Assam plains created administrative problems for the British local administration. Moreover revenue survey reports brought to light the fact that the British administration would gain from the revenue of the bordering villages if the posa system was outrightly stopped. At a time when the British administration was firmly entrenched in Assam, the administration was considering this proposal¹³. But later the proposal of terminating 'Posa' altogether was dropped at the Chief Commissioner level. As early as 1835 agreements were reached with the Dafla Chiefs and posa was fixed in respect of them which they were to collect from the Mulguzars or revenue officers. The fixation was made at, one coarse arkt sheet, one long cotton handkerchief, two seers of salt, one dao and one goat for every ten houses¹⁴. From Dalton's account it appears that some two hundred and thirty eight chiefs were in receipt of the posa. By 1852 the posa was commuted for money payment by the order of the Court of Directors. In exchange of the receipt of posa from the nearest Deputy Commissioner, the Daflas agreed to respect the British laws in the areas under British jurisdiction and vowed not to act in a hostile manner against the British administration. In spite of these agreements minor violations took place from the side of the Daflas over, local, personal and sometimes petty issues. But everytime after a Dafla raid on the plains economic blockade was imposed on the concerned Daflas and payment of posa suspended till the raiders surrendered to the British. There are several instances when suspension of posa was successful in bringing the surrender of the culprits. In 1838-39, 1871, 1874-75,, 1881, and onwards on several occasions posa was used as an economic weapon against the Daflas.

What was once their right was thus reduced to a "payment at merry" by the British administration. The scattered resistance of the Daflas failed to make any dent in the British policy. As a matter of fact the Daflas suffered the worst. The posa system effected by the British amounted to a great financial loss along with a loss of man power and tribal supremacy over the bordering plain villages. It also made the Daflas economically dependent on the posa amount and on the plains because of their deprivation in the hands of the British.

Apart from the posa system a systematic British policy towards the Daflas was also responsible for a strained relationship among them. There has been a lot of controversy over the policy and pattern adopted towards the Daflas and other tribes of North-East Frontier of India. While most of the scholars were unanimous that there was no policy as such, "there has always been a decided policy towards the North-East Frontier Tribes"¹⁵. In Darang and Lakhimpur section of the North East Frontier the Daflas were unceasing raiders since Ahom times. Towards the close of Ahom rule the Daflas had in fact established a sort of practical sovereignty over a large stretch of plains of Assam bordering their hills which was formerly ruled by the Ahom rulers of Assam. The extension of such political sway into the plains of Assam and its sustenance by virtue of brute force compelled the British to evolve a strategy towards the Dafla Hills. From 1826 till 1852 the status quo continued only with minor changes in relation to the Daflas. In this period the British administration was seriously concerned over a possible second Burmese invasion of Assam from across Manipur and Lushai Hills. That is why the entire machinery of the British administration was concentrated in the Manipur and Lushai Hills. But with the conclusion of second Anglo-Burmese War the Burmese threat perished for all times to come. By 1852 also the British administration in Assam was in a far stronger

position to dictate over the bordering tribes from a position of strength. Besides the large sum of private European investment in Assam and its growing economic importance called for a change in policy towards the bordering tribes.

By 1852 as a major breakthrough in policy toward the Daflas their claim to posa from the plains villages of Assam was commuted for monetary payment. A series of treaties and engagements were concluded with the Daflas¹⁶ by which the Dafla's free-booting activities in the plains of Assam was brought under check. By the force of these engagements not only the Daflas renounced their socereign rights over their plain subjects and territories but also agreed upon to honour the British laws while interacting with the plains of Assam. Moreover they were also made to refer disputed issues pertaining to the plains to the adjudication of the local administration. The implications of the treaties were of considerable importance to the extension of British administration up to the foothills. It set the stage in a diplomatic way towards the concrteisation of the British rule as far as the foothills. In order to legalise that imperial extension Lt. Col. Graham, the Deputy Commissioner of Darang, conducted the boundary survey in the Dafla hills frontier and by 1872-73 demarcated the administrative boundary between Assam and Dafla Hills. In 1873 with the enactment of the Inner Line Regulation¹⁷ the Daflas were further put under check into their hills only. The concept of "Outer Line"¹⁸ which was evolved along with the inner Line also clearly outlined the extension of British political sway into the Dafla hills where the British were to rule only politically. The Outer-Line was indefinite and was subject to change from time to time depending upon the survey of the hills. From 1875 and onwards the outline was pushed forward into the depth of the dafla hills with the phasesurvey and exploration of the hills. At times even proposals was made to impose pooltax and grazing tax on the Daflas

but that was never imposed on account of its non-profitability. The Daflas resisted at every step but in the face of superior strength and but that was never imposed on account of its non-profitability. The Daflas resisted at every step but in the face of superior strength and superior brain of the British administration they crumbled. Still in principle they remained intransigent. The British economic policy towards the Daflas was more striking and penetrating than any other issue at stake. "Dense hills with wild tribes" was definitely non-profitable for the British commercial enterprise in Assam, but the British played the economic cards so well that the Daflas suffered the worst paving the way to their subjugation. To start with, the British policy on slavery in the Dafla Hills and the posa system which has already been discussed in detail struck the first severe blow to the Dafla's economic life. Political expansion of British administrative boundary to the foothills simply added to their territorial deprivation. With the commutation of posa for monetary payment the British introduced for the first time the "money economy" in the Dafla Hills in 1852. Thereafter price level went very high but the amount of posa remained unchanged. By the practical closure of hill passes to the supply of salt, textiles, saos, opium etc. even at very high prices. This in turn increased the Dafla's dependence on the British. Along with this, exploitation of the forest resources like rubber, timber, ivory, iconite, tanned skins etc. continued unabated just at the payment of a very meagre price in exchange. The result was a growing trade imbalance which further worsened the Dafla's economic condition. Any resistance by the Daflas was responded with the suspension of posa and a consequent trade embargo on them. The tribal economy was by then made so much dependent on posa and trade with the plains that it had no way than to submit to the British will.

Notes & References

1. The Daflas are known as Nishings with a number of sub-tribes living around them in the districts of Subansiri of Arunachal Pradesh. The term Dafla carries a derogatory sense and as such it has been discarded.
2. Political proceedings (Assam) August, 1910. No. 25.
3. George Dunbar, **Frontiers**, New Delhi, Reprint 1984 pp.100-101.
4. A. Mackenzie. **The North-East Frontier of India**, Delhi, Reprint 1979, p. 27.
5. Bengal paper in Assam Archives. File No- 309, 1873, Sl. No. 15.
6. A. Mackenzie, **The North East Frontier of India** p, 27.
7. For details see, E.T. Dalton's **Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal**. (Calcutta, 1872, 1960).
8. Administrative Report of 1872-73, Quoted in A.Mackenzie's, **The North East Frontier of india**. pp.31-32.
9. Judicial Proceedings, 8th April 1852, No. 171 (Bengal Archives).
10. Slavery has been defined as such by the Chief Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam in his report to the Government of India. Lakhimpur Deputy Commissioner's collections, XVII F.No. 17, 1917.
11. Judicial proceedings, Bengal, June 1865, No. 73.
12. Alexander Mackenzie, **Ibid** p, 7.
13. Foreign Political (Achives of India), 20 Feb, 1834, Nos. 23-24.
14. Mackenzie, **Ibid**, p-28.
15. M.L.Bose. British Policy in NEFA, Concept Publishing, 1979. p-175.
16. For details see, C.U. Aitchison, **A collection of Treaties, Engagements**

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18. For deails see, Indian Archives, Foreign External 1/8roceedings, October 1884, No. 366-75.