

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

TENTH SESSION

SHILLONG : 1989

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The Tenth Session of the North East India History Association was held at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, amidst great enthusiasm and gaiety. This was indeed a memorable occasion in the history of the Association. The Decennial Celebrations aspart, a session was being held for the second time in the same institution and in the same venue that the Association was born ten years ago and the First Session held a year later. The Association is thankful to the authorities of the North-Eastern Hill University and organising it in the befitting manner.

Shri P. G. Marbaniang, Speaker, Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, inaugurated the session which was graced by Shri P. A. Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya, as guest of honour. Professor Iqbal Narain, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. P. Singh, Head, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University—did the Association a great honour as the Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor J. N. Phukan of the Gauhati University. The release of a commemorative Publication of the Organising committee entitled NEIHA DECENNIAL by Professor H. K. Barpujari, the first President of the Association, a decennial symposium on "A Decade of Historical Research in North-East", and colourful cultural programmes of songs and dances of the seven states of the region by the students of NEHU are among the special features of the decennial Celebrations. A record number of one hundred and eighty delegates attended the session in which ninety research papers were presented and discussed in eleven panels.

The present volume is the proceedings of the tenth session of the North East India History Association held at the North-Eastern Hill University on October 12-14, 1989. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. M. S. Sangma, Dr. Gautam Sengupta, Dr. Soumen Sen, Shri Atul Dev Sarmah and Shri Amitabha Deb for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We must also thank the Indian Council of Historical Research for generous financial assistance to the Association for the session and for publication of the proceedings.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

Shillong,

The 25th August 1990.

North-East India History Association.

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Agrarian Relations in Goalpara During British Regime with Special Reference to Peasant Movements

Santo Barman

The region referred to by the term Goalpara includes four modern districts, viz., Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Bangai-gaon. These four districts formed the old district of Goalpara, which lay at the western part of the modern State of Assam. It may be noted that this portion went under the administration of the British much earlier than the rest of Assam. It presents a somewhat different picture from the rest of Assam in points of history and economy. It was due to the *Zamindari* system in the district.

One may express doubt as to whether the *Zamindari* system may be taken as an index of socio-economic condition of the area. It is a truism that land relations determine the production relation in a predominantly agrarian economy. *Zamindari* system has thus its far-reaching impact on agrarian condition of the area where it was in operation. In Goalpara, undoubtedly the socio-economic structure of the society took shape on the basis of this system.

It may be noted that landlordism or *Zamindari* system in Goalpara originated in feudalism of the Mediaval Ages. It developed as a part and parcel of the Moghul administration.¹ The portion corresponding to the district of Goalpara (old) formed a part of the Koch kingdom and passed over to the Moghul administration when the fugitive Koch king Parikshit Narayan was captured by the Moghuls. No sooner did the Mughuls employ their revenue officials for the collection of revenue than the Koches, who were not prepared to accept the Moghul domination, rose in rebellion under several Koch princes.² This led the Moghuls to follow a conciliatory policy. Thus in conformity with their revenue policy the Moghuls decided to introduce the rule of delegating the work of collection of rent to a *Zamindar*. And Parikshit Narayan's son Chandra Narayan, alias, Vigit Narayan, was confirmed by the Moghuls the *Zamindari* of the tract which lay bet-

ween the Manas on the east and the Sonkoch on the west. ³ It may be noted that the tract formed the later day district of Goalpara (old). Chandra Narayan was, thus, the founder of the *Bijni Raj*, which in subsequent development broke into six *Zamindaries*, i. e., Bijni, Gauripur, Mechpara, Chapar, Karaibari and Parbotjear.

All the *Zamindars* had, as usual, tenants under them from the time of their ancestors. Before the introduction of the Goalpara Tenancy Act, ⁴ there were several classes of tenants. This Act recognised four classes of tenants, i. e., (1) Permanent Tenure holders, inclusive of under-tenure holders; (2) *Jotedars*, inclusive of *Dar-Jotedars*, (3) *Ryots*, and (4) *Under-ryots*.

Of the tenants there was, thus, a privileged class of people who were not the tillers of land. It is worth noting that vast areas were lying fallow for centuries. With a view to earning quick money, the *Zamindars* settled very big blocks of land called *jotes* with non-cultivating middlemen who were known as the *Jotedars*. These *Jotedars* gradually brought the *Zamindars* waste land under cultivation either with the help of labours brought from outside or by settling on them tenants. Very often, these tenants themselves were non-cultivators and they sublet to under tenants their lands. As a result, there were 6-7 grades of intermediaries on the same plot of land.

At the earlier stage, the relations between the *Zamindars* and the tenants were, perhaps, satisfactory. The number of rent suits was comparatively small in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. On the relations between the *Zamindar* and the tenants, Hunter made a reference to the report of the Deputy Commissioner as follows: "On the whole where no usual cupidity is displayedrelations of landlord and tenants are satisfactory. When an arrear of rent is due or alleged to be due the landlord sometimes in order to avoid the complicated proceeding of a regular suit in a court of law, prefers to arrest on his own account and detain in custody either the defaulting tenant or some member of his family until an arrangement can be arrived at. If the tenant cannot raise money to satisfy the landlord's demand a sum equal to the amount claimed as rent is nominally borrowed from a subordinate or relation of the landlord and a stamped bond is executed by the defaulter as if an ordinary debt. The money borrowed is at once paid over to the landlord; and if the tenant omits to pay it with interest to the nominal lender a decree is obtained in the civil court without the harassing details of proving rates of rent; execution of *Kabuliyat*, area under cultivation, and other minutias.

In some instance in which the executer of the bond denied liability, and complained of the manner in which the bond had been obtained, it appeared that considerable pressures had been used, and that the tenant's brother had been detained in custody or surveillance at the house of the landlord for nine days, and the tenant himself for four days, before an arrangement could be arrived at and bond executed. The Magistrate considered the landlord guilty of illegal confinement, and sentenced him to a year's imprisonment. But on appeal, it was held that the detention complained of did not come within the legal definition of wrongful confinement; the subject was deemed to be merely a dispute between the landlord and tenant and the accused was released. The tenant was subsequently sued on the bond by the lender (a brother of the landlord), who obtained a decree".

The *Zamindars* resorted to multitude of oppressions in matters of ruling the *ryots*, of which club law was common. They caused distress to the *ryots* by club law. The estate servants were tyrannical. If the *ryots* refused to pay rent at revised rate, the estate servants took the law into their own hands and resorted to club law, viz., in *Bijni Raj Estate*, one Jogendra Nath Bhattacharjee, employee in-charge of cash book has been posted at Baitamari *kutchari* for collecting enhanced rent. A band of 6 or 7 club men had been sent to that place before he came there. He caused private enquiry to be made, while collecting rent from the *ryots*. The *ryots* could not but carry on his mandate. He the caused one Amrit Kanta Kalita be seized and had him struck with stick. In consequence of grievous hurt, Amrit did shortly after.⁶

This gives the history of the Zamindar-tenant relations that existed in Goalpara during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. It may be noted that the *Zamindars* were the sole owners of the land, were at liberty in respect of survey, settlement and assessment and collection of rent subject to enhancement. The tenants in general and the under tenants in particular had no permanent, heritable, and transferable rights in land under their possession and, therefore they were treated as tenants-at-will. In matters of collection of rent falling in arrears repossessions and coercive measures like arrest and detention were resorted to, though such cases were stated to be few in number.

Towards the late part of that century the relations between the *Zamindars* and tenants were strained. It may be noted that *Abwabs* were collected by the *Zamindar* in Goalpara. Although

the neighbouring tribes. It being thought desirable to get rid of all illegal cesses. Mr. David Scott took up the matter and concluded settlement in some villages. In this estate, he had proceeded no further than the abolition of all irregular cesses & c. and mere temporary assessment of some riceland, when he was called away to take charge as Commissioner of Assam proper. The *ryots* took advantage of this state of things and set a claim to hold their lands, but riceland rent free.¹⁰

The trouble raised its heads in *Khuntaghat Pargana*, too. According to *Gunabhiram Baruah*, there were other causes for the outbreak of the rebellion in *Habraghat* and *Khuntaghat*, i.e., land settlement with the *ryots* were half-hearted. consequent of which most of the *ryots* occupied land in excess to that for which they paid their rents. No sooner did the *Zaimndar* attempt to start fresh settlement then they raised their protest. In 1849, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan* was appointed *Dewan* of *Bijni Raj Estate*. During his tenure of office (from the last part of December, 1849 to November, 1850) *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan* framed a set of regulations *Phukan Dewaner Kaidabandi* as these were called, for the administrative expediency of the *Raj*. As has been stated by *Gunabhiram Barua*, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan* proposed, amongst other things, to undertake a survey for the settlement of lands in *Habraghat* and *Khuntaghat Parganas* and to apply the law of distraint for arrears of rent. This added a fresh fuel to the fire. The *ryots* opposed it tooth and nail.

The survey left incomplete by *David Scott* was resumed. An *E. A. C.* and some *Amins* were employed to the task. They completed the survey and settlement in *Habraghat* and *Khuntaghat Parganas*. A new rate of rent was fixed. But in February, 1862, 500 *ryots* of *Khuntaghat* raised their grievances on the higher rate of assessment; Their grievances were of two folds : (a) Higher rate of assessment; (b) the *Amins* had included in the homelands a plot of *Ahu* land and consequently they had to pay rent at the rate of Rs. 1/- for land which ought to be assessed at - 4/- annas per *ligha*.¹²

Barpatgirir Hangama (rebellion of *Barpatgiri*) : On the death of *Kumud Narayan* (1883), the *Raja* of *Bijni*, the quarrel started between the two *Ranis* and was continuing for some years. The quarrel, the *Sarurani Barranir Dhuma* as it was known in that locality, fomented the peasant rebellion. The peasants assembled in *Ryots Sabha* (Conference of the *Ryots*) at *Jogighopa* to submit their memorandum of complains to the *Bar-rani*, *Siddheswari*.

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But Jiwan Ram Phukan, the Chief Advisor to the *Bar-rani* had the peasants frightened at blank firing. This made them rebellious. The agitating peasants proclaimed one Chandra Narayan the *Raja* of Bijni in place of the *Bar-rani*, Siddheswari she being rejected as illegitimate wife of late *Raja* Kumud Narayan. This rebellion was known as *Bar-Patgirir Hangama*. one of the agitators threw his Javelin on Jiwenram Phukan, who escaped his death the Javelin being misaimed and thereby causing death to one of the *Borkandaes* on duty.¹³

Rebellion of the Garos : Under the Moghuls, the *Zamindar* of Mespara, Kalumalupara, and Karaibari were entrusted with the responsibility to protect the people of the plains from the raids of the hill tribes. They were tributary ; they paid tribute not on land, but on certain transit and market dues, which were realised on certain *hats* established by the *Zamindars* at the frontier.¹⁴ They continued to levy those duties in the earlier administration of the East India Company in 1813, the *sayer* duties were abolished. But the *Zamindars* exacted the *Sayer* duties illegally. It was the opinion of the British administration in India that the illegal exaction of the *Sayer* duties and encroachment on the hills embittered their relation with the tribes of the Garo Hills. Consequently Garo Hills were separated from Goalpara to form the district of Garo Hills in 1869.¹⁵ But there was continual dispute between the Garos and the *Raja* of Bijni over certain lands from which the Garos alleged that the *Raja* was trying to oust them. In 1902, the Garos invaded Habraghat *Pargana* under *Bijni Raj*, 700 Garos under the leadership of Sona Ram Sangma who collected subscription from the different localities of the hills, marched from the hills across *Pargana* Habraghat to Dolgamaghat on the Brahmaputra where they constructed an encampment of grass huts, they proclaimed *Garo Raj* and pasted some notices ordering tenants not to pay rents to the *Zamindars*.¹⁶

The tenants had their grievances. It may be noted that the tenants of different estates in Goalpara were not organised in a body. However the tenants of respective *Zamindari* management in the form of local agitation and submitted innumerable memorials to the government for redressal of their grievances. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the *ryots* started agitation for redressing their grievances, specially for a rent law. By this time, the agitation of the peasants of Goalpara drew the attention of the intelligentsia and local press. The acts of oppressions let loose on the *ryots* by the *Bijni Raj* and its officials were editorially noticed

in the Time of Assam on the issue of the November 15th 1916. The mismanagement of the Mespara Estate and oppression of the *ryots* by its officials and servants were brought to the notice of the elite class through the editorial notes which appeared in the times of Assam and the Eastern Chronicle in the issue of the 26th August 1926 and 15th September, 1916, respectively.¹⁷

In 1922, the President of the *Krishak Sanmilani*, Goalpara, submitted a memorial to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, requesting him to stop the Assam Landlord and Tenant Procedure (Amendment) Bill, which was introduced to make arrears of rent recoverable as arrears of land revenue in the district of Goalpara and Sylhet.¹⁸ It may be noted that the *Sanmilani* was probably affiliated to All India Congress organisation. Thus it could not take up the local problems as much as it was involved in the national programme, though in several places there was confrontation between the *Zamindaras* and the oppressed peasant during the years, 1937-40.¹⁹

*After formation of a unit of the communist party in Goalpara, a *Krishak Sabha* was held at Gaurangatarang in Kokrajhar under the leadership of the communists. Amongst others, the problems of the *Adhiar ryots* was raised in the *Sabha* and resolution was passed to that effect.²⁰

Parbotjear Daffadar-Kuthari Movement :- According to *Daffadarkuthari* system introduced in Goalpara by the *Zamindars*, the *ryots* has to pay to the *Zamindar* a six anna share of the sale proceed of the wood taken away from the forest for sale. It is worth noting that the *ryots* enjoyed the customary rights to consumption of woods of the forests free of any charge. It was, thus, infringement on their rights and the *ryots* complained against it from time to time. The *Zamindar* of Parbatjear Estate on the other hand, stuck to it, and sold the forest in auction sale to the contractors. The *ryots* offered resistance, a *Parbatjear Pargana Krishak Sabha* being formed with Debendra Brahma as Secretary. The second conference of the district *Krishak Sabha* was held at Tipkai in 1947 on this issue. A band of nearly 5000 *Krishak* came on a procession to Bagribari, the headquarters of the estate, and demonstrated their grievance against the *Daffadar-Kuthari System*. In view of the intensity of the movement, the contractor could not get weeds out with their labours. However, a compromise was got through at the initiative of the then Congress leader of the district, Shri S. N. Singha. 2

In non-official terms, Goalpara had been called the Bengal district of Assam, due probably, to the existence of the *Zamindari* system. Goalpara is still backward. Agriculturists are proverbially poor. They are still practising the primitive mode of cultivation. They are not inquisitive. They are satisfied with what they have got from their cultivation in the field. Good number of the agriculturists are landless ; many have not got plough cattle of their own. So the cultivators can't make their both ends meet from their cultivation. Generally, all the villagers lived hand to mouth, not to speak of the modern amenities of livelihood. It was due to the *Zamindari* system, which was in operation in Goalpara. The British did not take initiative to adopt measures for the improvement of the agricultural fields. They were interested in the *Zamindars* in whom they found an ally of the alien rule.

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