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NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

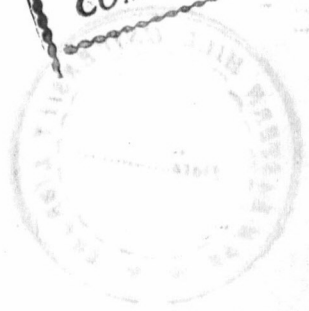


**SEVENTEENTH SESSION
GOVERNMENT AIZAWL COLLEGE
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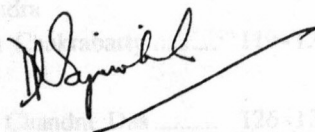
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Preface

The Seventeenth Session of the North East India History Association was held at Government Aizawl College, Aizawl between 3-5 October, 1996. This was the Association's second opportunity to meet in the Mizoram capital. By all counts the session was a success with large numbers attending the Academic Session, particularly the special session on the History of Mizoram. An added attraction of the Annual Conference was the learned lectures of Professor M.M. Sharma, Vice Chancellor of Dibrugarh University, in the second H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures. We wish to put on record the Association's appreciation for the hospitality and organization of the Seventeenth Session to the Principal of the College; to Professor Zochungnunga, Head Department of History and this colleagues and studies.

By now the NEIHA proceedings volumes has become a useful reference to historical research in the region. Young researchers have found in NEIHA a platform to discuss this first attempt in writing history. Other members of many years standing continue to see in our Association the need to foster, encourage and stimulate research of the region as a whole or on select themes. The publication of this Proceedings of the 17th Annual Session has been supported by the efforts of our President - Professor J.P. Singh, Professor A.K. Baruah and Dr. M. Sharma in editing and correcting proofs. To them we acknowledge our gratitude. We are thankful to the Indian Council for Historical Research for its generous financial support to the Association. We also thank the proprietor of Kamala Art Press, Shillong for his concern in publishing this volume.



Shillong
1 September, 1997

D.R. Syiemlieh
General Secretary
North East India History Association

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The Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha* and opium question

Shrutidev Goswami

The Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha* a premier socio-political organisation of Assam, was started in 1884 at Jorhat. The Sabha was established, in the words of its founder Secretary Raibahadur Jagannath Borooah "for the purpose of representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the Government, explaining to the people the objects and policy of the Government, and generally ameliorating the condition of the people."¹ It was a truly representative body having the support of "all classes of people in Jorhat" and the number of its active members ranged from four to five hundred in 1893.² Its activities were manifold, covering all sorts of public welfare programs. However, as a regional association of moderate political views the *Sabha* was more concerned with the problems concerning the local people, particularly the agricultural rayats. During the last decade of the nineteenth century the Sabha became very active. It vehemently protested against the new settlement rules of 1892 enhancing land revenue throughout Assam valley by about 70 per cent on the average. It boldly took up the cause of the agricultural rayats and mobilised public opinion in their favour. Between October 1892 and February 1893 the *Sabha* held a series of meetings in Jorhat to "protest against the policy of the Government for an excessive increase of revenue."³ The resolutions adopted in these meetings and petitions submitted to Government on many such matters reflected the *Sabha's* deep concern at the declining socio-economic condition of the people of the province. It is true that the resolutions and petitions of the Sabha did not have much impact on the working of the Government; but still as "a sort of petitioning body"⁴ the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha* did a great deal of spade-work in preparing the ground for a united opposition to Government programmes and politics in the early twentieth century.

Besides being actively associated with agrarian problems, the Jorhat *Sorbojani Sabha* took a lot of interest in administrative matters, particularly those affecting the interest of the sons of the soil.

It opposed the policy of frequent transfer of Government officers from Assam to other provinces of India thereby depriving the province of the services of experienced and competent officers. It expressed dissatisfaction for ignoring the claims of the local youth for employment in government service. It deprecated the educational policy of the Government and lamented that no sincere efforts had been made by the authorities to promote higher and technical education in Assam.⁵

Interestingly however, in regard to a burning problem of the time, viz. the opium question, the views expressed by the leaders of the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha* not only differed fundamentally from the views expressed by the enlightened section of the society but fell short of public expectation. Opium or *kanees* was, in the nineteenth century, a commodity of almost daily use for a large section of the people of the province. Its use was originally confined to a very small section of affluent class, mostly the Government officials and the nobles.⁶ But gradually the common people "being burdened by no Governmental restrictions"⁷ and not being required to pay a higher tax for the lands sown with opium poppy, began to engage in a considerable extent of cultivation, and hence in the first half of the nineteenth century it became one of the principal crops of the province. Consequently, the vice then became so widespread, it was alleged, the miserable victim of opium would go without food willingly but "he must have his *kanees*"⁸. Writing in 1853 Mills reported that "three fourths of the population are opium eaters, and men, women and children alike use the drug."⁹ Under the circumstances the local authorities deemed it fit and expedient to devise some means to check the immoderate use of opium thereby "placing it beyond the means of all but the most wealthy."¹⁰ After long deliberation the cultivation and manufacture of opium was banned throughout Assam with effect from 1 May, 1860 and the system of issuing the drug from Government treasury under license was introduced.¹¹

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the professed official policy of "maximum of revenue with minimum of consumption", consumption did not actually decrease. On the other hand, the habitual opium eaters, taking advantage of the low price of the drug (Rs 14 a seer in 1860) and increasing facilities of purchase¹², continued to consume it as before. As a result of this consumption of *abkarees* (excise)

opium in the Assam valley districts shot up from 625 *maunds* in 1860-61¹³ to 1,837 *maunds* in 1874-75.¹⁴ The opium revenue during this period had also increased from Rs.2,14,857 in 1860-61¹⁵ to Rs. 11,94,564 in 1874-75¹⁶. The increase in revenue was also in some measure due to gradual enhancement of sale price of opium, which was raised from Rs.14 a *seer* in 1860 to Rs. 22 in 1866 and then to Rs. 23 in 1873.¹⁷ This rising trend continued during the next forty five years. In reality between 1875 and 1919 the opium revenue had grown by almost 350 per cent whereas consumption decreased only marginally - from 1837 *maunds* in 1874-75 to 1784 *maunds* in 1919-20. Strangely, as against the internationally approved quantum of six *seers* per ten thousand people per year, the annual intake of opium in Assam was 274.9 *seers* in 1901, 277.1 *seer* in 1911 and 286.9 *seer* in 1921.¹⁸

That the Government opium policy was one of encouraging consumption for revenue purpose the enlightened section of the population did not fail to understand. Years before opium monopoly was introduced in the province, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in a memorandum to Mills urged the Government to stop supply of *abkaree* opium. He cautioned "the tree will grow so long as the root is not destroyed."¹⁹ Maniram Dewan in his petition to Mills also criticised the Government opium policy. Instead of supplying *abkaree* opium to Assam he asked the Government to gradually prohibit its consumption altogether.²⁰ Ramchandra Barua in his satire *Kaniyar Kirtan* (Glory of opium eaters) held opium as the root cause of all the miseries of the people of Assam. Even the American missionaries were apprehensive of the well being of the future generation if the habit of opium eating went on unchecked.²¹

Be that as it may, largely due to the increasing public pressure in India and England and the agitation carried on by the Society for suppression of Opium Trade, a Royal Commission on Opium was appointed in 1893 with Lord Brassey, Member of Parliament, as Chairman.²² The members of the commission visited India and examined a number of witnesses including a few from Assam. The Assamese educated community was, however, divided in their opinion regarding the steps to be taken for abolishing or restricting the use of this vile drug. Satyanath Bora, Trinayan Borkakoti, Ram Durlabh Mazumdar, Jadav Chandra Ghosh, Lalit Narayan Lahiri, Gunabhiram Barua,

Radhanath Changkakoti, Upendra Nath Barooah (then a law student in Calcutta) and a few others advocated complete prohibition of opium except for medical use. Criticising the licensing system of opium Ram Durlabh Mazumdar described it as "an inducement to take opium" rather than a step to control its consumption. In his opinion in the Nowgong (now Nagaon) district alone two hundred such licenses were issued which proved that there was practically no restriction in giving licenses to applicants. "It is placed at every man's door", he lamented.²³ Appearing before the Royal Commission Gunabhiram Barua regretted that the term *Kaneeea* (opium addict) had become a byword of reproach and demanded total prohibition of the drug.²⁴ Radhanath Changkakoti took a more pragmatic view of the problem when he suggested that any loss of revenue caused by prohibition of opium could be easily made up by curtailing civil and military expenditure.²⁵

The Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha* was not blind to this problem. It was fully aware of the public opinion ventilated against opium eating. However, its members did not consider that the Assam situation was as alarming as projected. Its President (originally Secretary) Jagannath Borooah on the other hand believed that opium was not only a 'necessity' for the people living in "a jungly and malarious province like Assam", but also "a useful thing when used in moderate quantities." He opined that there was very little abuse of opium in Assam.²⁶

In this background the Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha* decided to depute its president Jagannath Borooah to Calcutta to submit its views before the Royal Commission. It is interesting to note that the Sabha took a pro-government stand. It even supported the Government opium policy, describing it as "the best that could be devised."²⁷ On behalf of the *Sabha* a memorial, prepared and approved by about three hundred members on 11 November, 1893, was presented to the Commission wherein the *Sabha* decided to oppose any move to abolish opium totally and immediately. Firstly, it was argued that for the people who were in the habit of taking opium regularly it was "an invaluable medicine in many disorders of the stomach" as it alleviated pain and possessed "a sedative power of restoring health." In the opinion of the *Sabha* opium was very useful for all persons above the age of forty "for prolonging life". In support of its

argument the *Sabha* argued that among the inhabitants of the province the aboriginal tribes like the Kacharis, the Mikirs (now Karbis), the Matakas and the Miris (now Mishings) etc. consumed more opium than others and yet they were "the strongest and the hardiest amongst the population."²⁸ Secondly, in its view sudden stoppage of opium would be disastrous as the bulk of the people who had been in the habit of using the drug for such a long time would be forced to take other narcotic drugs and spirits which were more harmful to the people. It was pointed out

That if the sale of opium be stopped in Assam, those who now indulge in opium are certain to take to some other stimulant, and they would in natural course take to spirits. The consumption of spirits, it is hardly necessary to remark, would be hundred-fold more injurious than opium. Drinking is liable to excess and the misery and distress that would be caused by excessive drinking in a hot climate would be simply appalling.²⁹

This argument of the *Sabha* appears very ludicrous as there is no reasonable ground to assume that stoppage of sale of opium would automatically force the people to take to spirit and that drinking was hundred fold more injurious than opium.

Thirdly, the *Sorbojanik Sabha* was apprehensive that limitation or restriction in the sale of opium in the province would eventually lead to an increase of taxation as the Government would then find an excuse to make up the loss by levying new taxes on the people which they were unable to bear. To quote the *Sabha's* memorial.

That your memorialists would respectfully submit that, even if the Government of this country adopt any measures for limitation and restriction of the sale of this drug to any extent in this province, under instructions from the Home Government, the people of this province are not able, and would not be willing to make up by the contribution of other taxes, any deficit in the revenue of the province caused by such measures holding as they do the views above set forth. The Government of this country will no doubt see the injustice of levying a tax upon the whole population for the supposed benefit of a minority who now use opium of their own accord for their own benefit and

satisfaction, and on whom the Government has not forced the consumption of opium.³⁰

This apprehension of the *sabha* was further supplemented by Jagannath Borooah's deposition before the Royal Commission where he reported that only a year before the land revenue throughout Assam valley was raised substantially which caused great resentment among the people. He argued that in a province frequently ravaged by flood and *kala-azar* (black fever epidemic) the question of prohibiting the sale of opium "should be taken on its own merits, and when so taken, it does not call for any prohibitive measures whatever."³¹

The *Sorbojanik Sabha's* opposition to immediate prohibition of opium, coupled with the lukewarm support given by some tea planters and government officials, made the situation more complicated. Even at the national level there was no united or organised movement for immediate abolition of the drug. Under the circumstances the Royal Commission on opium found nothing wrong in Government's opium policy and did not recommend any drastic change in the opium administration.

Nevertheless, the agitation against opium continued. Public opinion was once again mobilised. Emphasis was laid on educating the people, making them aware of the evil effects of opium-eating. In 1907, at the initiative of the local social workers, an anti-opium conference was held at Dibrugarh. The conference urged upon the Government to check the opium menace and recommended setting up of a temperance association³². This led to the establishment of the *Kanee Nibarani Sabha* (association for the eradication of opium evil) in several districts of the province³³. The issue was raised in the Legislative assembly by a few enlightened Assamese members. Fortunately, with the launching of the non cooperation movement and with Gandhiji's blessings a vigorous campaign against opium was started. Since then the evil was gradually eradicated from the Assamese society.

Notes and Reference

1. *Royal Commission on Opium, Minutes of Evidence*, vol. II, Calcutta, 1894, p. 297, evidence of Jagannath Borooah, 28 December, 1893.

2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
4. Political History of Assam Record, File No. 300 of 1883 (sic), Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha*.
5. For details of *Sorbojanik Sabha's* views on these matters see Shrutidev Goswami 'The Jorhat *Sorbojanik Sabha* : Its Role in Socio-Political Awakening in Assam', *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Sixth Session, Agartala, 1985, pp. 316-322.
6. *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report*, Jorhat, 1925, p. 17.
7. *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. XXXV (September-December, 1860), p. 54.
8. S.R. Ward, *A Glimpse of Assam*, Calcutta, 1884, pp. 33-34.
9. A.J.M.Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854, p.19.
10. Board of Revenue (Customs) Proceedings, 15 October, 1852, No. 37, Reynolds to Jenkins, 4 August, 1852.
11. Bengal Revenue Proceedings (Miscellaneous), April, 1860, No. 52, Brown to Thompson, 13 April, 1860.
12. To regulate the sale of opium the system of issuing licenses to vendors was introduced. But till 1874 no fee was charged for these licenses. As a result the number of persons willing to obtain licenses had always been considerable.
13. Bengal Revenue Proceedings (Miscellaneous), July, 1862, No.77, Dampier to Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 18 June, 1862.
14. *Report on the Administration of Excise Revenue in Assam*, 1874-75, Shillong, 1875, p.23.
15. Bengal Revenue Proceedings (Miscellaneous), July, 1862, No. 77, Dampier to Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 18 June, 1862.
16. *Report on the Administration of Excise Revenue in Assam*, 1874-75, Shillong, 1875, p.23.
17. The ex-factory cost price of opium was originally Rs.5.8 annas-a seer. In 1861-2, in consequence of the increasing manufacturing

cost it was raised to Rs.7.4 annas a *seer* and remained unchanged till 1895. Thus when sold at Rs. 23 it yielded a net profit of above Rs.15 a *seer*. The margin of profit increased in the following years when the sale price was gradually raised, Rs.26 in 1879 Rs. 32 in 1884, and Rs. 37 in 1890. In 1919-20 price of a *seer* of opium was Rs.50.

18. *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report*, Jorhat, 1925, p.23.
19. A. Dhekial Phukan, 'Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam', A.J.M. Mills, *op.cit.*, p. XIIIV, Appendix, J.
20. A.J.M. Mills, *op.cit.*, Translation of a petition presented in person by Moneeram Dutt Borwah Dewan, Appendix KB, p. IXVII.
21. H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North East India*, Guwahati, 1986, p. 180.
22. The other members of the Commission were J.B. Lyall, Lakshmiswar Singh of Darbhanga, WM Roberts, R.G.C. Mowbray, A.U. Fanshawe, Arthur Pease, Haridas Viharidas and Henry J. Wilson.
23. *Royal Comission on opium, op.cit.*, p. 60, see evidence of Ram Durlabh Majumdar, 24 November, 1893.
24. *Ibid*, pp. 186-88, see evidence of Gunabhiram Barua, 6 December, 1893.
25. *Ibid*. p. 306, see evidence of Radhanath Changkakoti,
26. *Ibid*, p .296, see evidence of Jagannath Borooh..
27. *Ibid*, p. 297.
28. *Ibid*, p. 462, Appendix XXXVI, *Sorbojanik Sabha's* Memorial.
29. *Ibid*
30. *Ibid*
31. *Ibid*, p. 297, see evidence of Jagannath Borooh.
32. Amalendu Guha, 'Imperialism of Opium : Its Ugly face in Assam (1773-1921) '*Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Thirty-Seventh session, Calcutta, 1976, p. 344.
33. Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Mor Suarani* (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1971, pp. 40-50.