

Gomdhar Konwar's Rebellion, A Reappraisal

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The British conquest of Assam (1826) left various sections of the Assamese population dissatisfied, and the one which opposed the British rule tooth and nail was the upper class. This class had a required immense power and wealth during the preceding regime, but in the changing political situation of the country it was quite unlikely that the dignitaries would continue find themselves in the same position of advantage. David Scott, Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, was aware of the sense of insecurity which had gripped the aristocracy, and anticipating future trouble, he decided to conciliate them as far as possible. He provided many of them with jobs, pensions, gratuities and even rent-free grants, even though he knew that the Assamese officers, unaccustomed as they were in maintaining systematic written records, were certainly less qualified than their counterparts in Bengal. He considered efficiency "a matter of secondary importance, which could not be put in competition with superior considerations of conciliating the good will of the most influential class in society."

Unfortunately, Scott's policy of appeasing the nobility proved a dismal failure. As the number of such beneficiaries was small those who could not be employed soon became disillusioned. The abolition of slavery and more particularly the emancipation of large number of serfs (*likchows*) in upper Assam created great social tensions. The 'indolence' and 'incapacity' of the nobility so seriously affected his works that before long Scott had to think in terms of replacing the 'men of rank' by 'men of ability and business'. Apart from oppression and extortion Scott had also the information of embezzlement of public fund by some native officers, the most important of them being Janardan Barbarua, the officer in charge of revenue collection in upper Assam.² Similarly, Captain Neufville, Political Agent of Upper Assam, had to remove on various charges about one hundred *Kheldars* and to appoint competent Bengali officers as *tahsildars*. All these were bound to affect the internal stability of the province and to drive a section of the aggrieved population into an anti-British coalition. The disgruntled nobility, who had been pinning their hopes on the restoration of the old regime now came forward to oppose the new rulers in an organised manner. Incorporation of lower Assam permanently into the British possession and the delay in taking a final decision regarding the disposal of upper Assam came as a rude shock to the

Assamese gentry ; it was regarded as a 'betrayal' of the promise made by Lord Amherst, the Governor-General, who promised never to annex Assam. but to place her "in the situation of dependent and protected status". Thus, within two years of the establishment of British political ascendancy upper class discontent found expression in a movement aiming at restoration of a native monarchy.

This attempt to overthrow the British rule was made by a group of disgruntled nobles led by one Dhanjoy Borgohain who took up the cause of Gomdhar Konwar, son of Phena Konwar, a scion of the Ahom royal family.³ Early in 1828 Gomdhar arrived in upper Assam from Burma. He then sought the help of Captain Neufville to ascend the throne of his predecessors on a tributary basis. The appeal was turned down whereupon the prince, with the support of some of the former nobles and a section of the sepoys, decided to challenge the British rule with arms.⁴ Significantly, even though the tribal chiefs of the frontier areas remained by and large indifferent, one Khamti Borgohain of Sadiya offered to help him. Accordingly, along with a troop of four hundred selected men, he accompanied Gomdhar to Mariani. At Bassa, near Jorhat, Gomdhar was formally enthroned as a *Swargadeo* (king) and was vested with white shoes and the umbrella, the insignia of royalty. With the preliminary preparations accomplished in no time, the rebels advanced towards Mariani where they were intercepted by a detachment under Lieutenant Rutherford. After a feeble resistance Gomdhar fled into the Naga hills ; but he was soon arrested. Most of his supporters had, in the meanwhile, deserted him ; the rest including the Khamti Borgohain fell into the hands of the detachment. The Khamti chief became so nervous that in order to prove his innocence he immediately handed over to the British officers a few secret letters supposed to have been written by Gomdhar to him. Nevertheless a summary trial was arranged to try the accused. Gomdhar was found guilty of "illegally assuming the Insignia of Royalty and of Committing other acts tending to excite rebellion against the British Government" and sentenced to death. However, in consideration of his young age and being fully convinced that he was a mere tool in the hands of a number of influential persons having vested interest, ⁵ the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, commuted the death sentence awarded to him by the *Panchayat* held under government order dated 2 May 1828, to seven years of imprisonment in banishment. ⁶ The ill-fated prince who had the unique distinction of being the first standard bearer of revolt against foreign rule in Assam was finally sent to Rangpur (in Bengal) to undergo his jail term.⁷ Among his other accomplices Dhanjoy was found guilty of abetting and aiding the rebellion for which he was given death sentence ; but he managed to escape to the Naga hills and then became involved in another massive conspiracy against the British. The Khamti Borgohain who was accused of high treason was sentenced to death at the first instance, but it was later commuted to seven years' of imprisonment.

Thus the first attempt to overthrow the British rule in Assam failed miserably. From the discussion made in the foregoing pages

it becomes clear that it was essentially an upper class movement, aided and engineered by a section of the dispirited aristocracy with very little popular support. Needless to say that the mass people who had been living in a state of chaos and disorder for nearly fifty years prior to the British occupation of the province, not only evinced a feeling of distrust for the upper classes but also rejoiced at the restoration of peace and stability which followed the establishment of British rule. Peace-loving and law-abiding as they were, the Assamese masses had very little concern as long as their wants remained limited, no matter who ruled them—their own rulers or the English. The nobility, many of whom were at the forefront of this revolt, also failed to offer a united front against their enemy. Moreover, the plot was chimerical and premature being partly founded on a highly foolish ambition of effecting a “union of all the Ex-nobles and Functionaries” of the former realm and partly on a mistaken belief that the troops were preparing to gradually withdraw from upper Assam, leaving the entire territory virtually unguarded and at the mercy of the rebels.⁸ The rebellion was ill-placed and based on a wrong estimation and calculation of the weakness of the British army. Under the circumstances the rebellion was bound to fail both in its objectives and dynamics.

Nevertheless for more than one reason the movement occupied a unique place in history. It introduced a new era of resistance to alien rule not merely in the Brahmaputra valley but also in the adjoining hill areas. The revolt of 1830 in upper Assam, and more particularly, the Khasi insurrection of 1829-33, the Khamti rising of 1837 and the Singpho rebellion of 1845 are only a few instances of the growing opposition of the people to foreign domination. Though quelled without much difficulty these movements proved beyond doubt that the inhabitants of upper Assam had not yet been fully reconciled to the new regime and that the British rule was still unpopular and vulnerable. Gomdhar Konwar's rebellion demonstrated, in a limited way though, the defiant attitude of a section of the nobility towards an alien rule foisted upon them. Though abortive the revolt left an indelible mark in the minds of the Assamese people and inspired them to resist foreign control with grim determination.

Notes & References

1. Foreign Political Consultations, 10 June 1831, No. 50; Scott to the Chief Secretary, 18 May 1831.
2. S. K. Bhuyan (ed), *Asamar Padya Buranji*, Gauhati, 1964. p. 171.
3. It is believed that the pretender was a nephew of Raja Chandra Kanta Singh (1810) and a relative of Jogeswar Singh who ruled Assam for a short period in 1819 under the patronage of the Burmese. He and his father were said to have lived for some time in Burma, originally going there along with Atan Neenga Timense Bor Konwari, the Ahom princess sent down as a present to the Burmese crown prince by Raja Jogeswar Singh. It is, however, not known if the Burmese monarch had a hand in this plot.

4. Foreign Political Consultation, 12 March 1830, No. 4-B; Neufville to Scott, 14 December 1828.
5. Like Scott, Neufville also believed that the pretender was morally less "criminal than some of his advisers". Foreign Secret Consultations, 12 March 1830, Nos 11-14; Neufville to Scott, 14 December, 1828
6. *Ibid.*, Nos 15-17; see Proceedings of the Criminal Court held at Gauhati, 14 March 1827.
7. K. N. Dutta, *Lanemarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, Gauhati (reprint), 1967, p. 5.
8. Foreign Secret Consultations. 12 March 1830, Nos. 11-14; Neufville to Scott, 14 December 1828.