

## The Eastern Nagas and the Salt Trade of Upper Assam

Shrutidev Goswami

Assam in the medieval period had a reputation for its salt springs and wells. In fact, till almost the middle of the nineteenth century salt was manufactured in considerable quantities and the whole of it was consumed locally. The salt springs were numerous and were found scattered all over Upper Assam, at Borhat, Joypur and Sadiya.<sup>1</sup> Salt obtained from these springs were believed to be purer than the one imported from Bengal.<sup>2</sup> However, the indigenous salt being expensive and inadequate, a large quantity of Bengal salt had to be imported to Assam every year.<sup>3</sup>

In Naga hills too there were numbers of salt springs and wells. The Eastern Nagas<sup>4</sup> lived chiefly by manufacturing salt by a crude process of evaporation.<sup>5</sup> The salt was then carried to the *hats* (frontier markets) in joints of large bamboos and retailed along with certain other hill products. Over the salt wells in the hills the Ahom Government enjoyed a joint proprietary right.<sup>6</sup> With a view to ensure a regular supply of salt and to regulate the trade the former rulers of Assam took good care to maintain friendly relations not only between the Nagas and the people of the plains but also among the various Naga tribes. Under Poorandar Singh, Raja of Upper Assam from 1833 to 1838, an efficient establishment was maintained and a duty of 20 per cent was levied on all the salt brought down by the Nagas to the *hats* of Borhat and Joypur for sale. The duties were usually levied in kind and these were extremely vexatious in nature. Moreover not only were the duties heavy but the manner in which these were collected afforded ample opportunities to the tax collectors to frequently resort to undesirable exaction. The tax collectors were stationed at the springs on the hills as well as in the markets below and tolls were levied both at the salt

produced and on the articles the Nagas obtained in barter for the salt they sold.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding Proorandar's great ability to keep the Nagas under control this system of double taxation did incalculable harm to the salt trade of Upper Assam. Moreover, towards the last part of his reign a deadly feud between the Namchangias and the Barduaris began and all the attempts to bring about a rapprochement between the two warring groups had failed to produce any positive result.<sup>8</sup> Trade, as a result, had terribly suffered.

Such was the condition of the salt trade in 1838 when Upper Assam was resumed by the British Government from Poorandar Singh.<sup>9</sup> Great supporters of free trade, as they were, the British could not allow such a chaotic situation to remain unaltered for an indefinite period. The system of double taxation also militated against their policy of encouraging free commercial intercourse not only between Assam and Bengal but also between the hills and the plains, and it was disgusting that such vexatious duties continued to be levied even after the abolition of the customs houses in the Assam-Bengal border.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, not entirely for a flourishing trade that the British wanted to interfere; there were undoubtedly certain political and strategic considerations.

Soon after resumption of Upper Assam Dr. Miles Bronson, the American Baptist Missionary who had intimate contact with the Nagas, suggested the adoption of such measures by which these people could be made more dependent on the Government for their livelihood. This, to him, would have the effect of not only maintaining peace in the Naga country, but would also induce them to work their wells by using new methods of manufacture.<sup>11</sup> The Government did not straightway accept Bronson's suggestions but decided to have more information about the Nagas. Accordingly, T. Brodie, Principal Assistant, Sibsagar, was asked to visit the *hats* on the Naga frontier and to report on the working of the salt wells and to suggest any change that he might contemplate by which the salt trade could be made more profitable. Simultaneously, C. A. Bruce, Superintendent Tea Culture, was also requested to submit his views on the subject.<sup>12</sup> The latter in his report narrated the anomalous nature of transaction at the *hats* of Borhat and Joypur and appealed that for the greater success of the trade the obnoxious duties be taken off.<sup>13</sup> Bruce's views were supported by Brodie, who after visiting some

of the *hats* frequented by the Nagas had come to the conclusion that "the levying of duties in kind on every article carried with the Hills for barter was very vexatious to the numerous ryots and petty traders who resort to the Salt Wells and calculated to diminish the trade with the Nagas and the export of their Salt, upon which they are entirely dependent for their livelihood."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Brodie, pending approval of the Government, abolished all the duties on articles bartered for salt with the exception of the usual twenty per cent levied on the quantity of salt that passed through these *hats*<sup>15</sup>. Two courses were then open to him, (i) to farm the *hats* for the remaining portion of the year, ((ii) or to bring them under *khas* management of the Government. There was also the possibility of the Government working the salt wells on its own account ; but he doubted whether such a step would be really successful. Under the circumstances, Brodie adopted the second course with the hope that such a step would be effective in checking the recurrence of undesirable extortion and oppression.<sup>16</sup> For successful implementation of this scheme an establishment consisting of two native officers, the Pani and the Deka Phukan, who were previously in charge of the *hats*, along with a few other local workers was to be maintained at a total cost of Re 120 per month.<sup>17</sup>

The change unfortunately was distressing as the result of the first year's management (1839-40) under the *khas* (settled) system showed a falling off in the proceeds to the extent of Rs. 398 as compared with the previous year.<sup>18</sup> Side by side there was also a decrease of about 120 *maunds* in the sale of salt as evidenced from the following statement of sale of the article at Borhat, Joypur and other Naga *hats* during 1840-1.<sup>19</sup>

	mds.	srs.	chs.
1839-40	652	38	11
1840-41	532	24	12

Inevitably, the decrease in sale led to a diminution of revenue to the extent of Rs. 944.11as.2ps in 1840-1, the net proceeds of the year being Rs. 880.2 as.2 ps as compared with Rs. 1824 as. 13 ps.4 during 1839-40.<sup>20</sup> This decrease, according to Brodie, was mainly due to the preference of the ryots to engage themselves in pursuits which were now becoming much more profitable to them than bringing salt to the plains. He ruled out the possibility of large-scale smuggling or malutilisation

on the ground that Sub-Assistant Strong had been on the spot for a considerable period of time in that year and no such thing had been reported.<sup>21</sup> Jenkins, on the other hand thought that the decrease was largely owing to mismanagement and smuggling and to a lesser degree to unrestricted supply of Bengal salt which became available to the people of Upper Assam at a much cheaper price than the indigenous salt.<sup>22</sup> Be that as it may, the change appeared to have misfired and had the effect of putting the local authorities in an embarrassing situation. A proposal was then made to substitute the scheme by a novel plan of imposing on the Nagas a fixed annual rent for the right of working the wells belonging to the Government ; but it being unacceptable to the hillmen was abandoned. Under the circumstances the local authorities appeared to have run out of ideas.

The anomaly in the salt trade of Upper Assam was, however, not the only instance of disorder in the inland trade of Assam in those days. In the Garo *hats*, where the Garos bartered their cotton for such essential commodities as salt, tobacco, betel-nut, brass utensil, earthen pot etc. similar anomalies existed, and trade, as a result, was greatly handicapped. The attention of the Supreme Government was frequently drawn ; but nothing was immediately done. The arrival of Jenkins as Agent to the Governor-General in North-East Frontier in 1834, however, brought about a complete change in the situation. The Agent successfully urged the Government to take a serious view of the obstacles and to put the inland trade of the province on a proper footing by removing all the hurdles to free and fair trade. Accordingly, in pursuance of the policy of the Government already declared,<sup>23</sup> the Agent was authorised to allow the Garo and their hill tribes to dispose of their articles free of duties at certain convenient places on the condition that "if disturbances should occur in consequence of the withdrawal of these restrictions, the propriety of reimposing these and other restriction will become a matter for consideration." The effect of this policy was soon felt in Upper Assam where, as already seen, the salt trade was gradually becoming less profitable. However, the local officers were not unanimous in their opinion whether the policy, already followed in respect of the Garo *hats*, should be adopted in respect of the Naga *hats*. In view of his latest experience Brodie felt that it was inexpedient now to retain the system

of collecting tax in kind which was trivial and which had caused a great deal of inconvenience and annoyance to the traders and suggested that the existing establishment maintained at an expense of Rs. 120 per month should be immediately abolished<sup>24</sup>. Jenkins, on the other hand, saw no reason to discontinue the existing establishment; it was, to him, in some measure working as a police establishment by giving the Government an opportunity to exercise influence over the Naga country<sup>25</sup>. The Governor of Bengal concurred with Brodie and decided that the duties collected at the Naga *hats* be altogether abolished and the establishment kept up for the management of the salt trade be paid up and discharged<sup>26</sup>.

The removal of the age-old barriers in the salt trade of Upper Assam was a significant step in the establishment of a sound commercial relationship between the Nagas and the Assamese. Since then traffic with the Nagas was daily increasing and the same was carried on "in a most satisfactory and peaceable manner"<sup>27</sup>, chiefly because the Nagas now found no difficulty to come down to the *hats* and dispose of their salt without being subjected to any kind of harassment. The records proved that the effect of this policy was instantly felt as not less than 600 *maunds* of salt were brought down by the Nagas to the *hats* during the first year (1841-2) since the salt duties were taken off<sup>28</sup>. Along with the growth of commercial activities the bond of harmony and understanding between the hillmen and the people of the plains was further strengthened. The Naga raids on the border villages had become less frequent and consequently agriculture was greatly stimulated. "The cessation of these intestine hostilities", Jenkins wrote in 1843, "and the freedom of passage which we are securing to all the tribes to and from the markets on the plains, must be attended with the best effects, both to the neighbouring Assamese and the Nagas."<sup>29</sup> Captain Brodie, reporting in 1845 confirmed that the intercourse between the Nagas and the inhabitants of the neighbouring plains was greater than before and that the "measure in question has released the Ryots and tenders (traders ?) from many vexations and annoyances they were subject to while the tax was in force"<sup>30</sup>.

#### Notes & References

1. The Sadiya salt mine was for many centuries under the superintendence of an officer called Mohonghat Barua,

- who paid not less than forty thousand rupees a year to the Ahom royal exchequer. Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, Gauhati (reprint), 1963, p. 47.
2. *Ibid* ; also, R. B. Pamberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, Gauhati (second impression), 1966, pp. 84-5.
  3. S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Gauhati, 1949, p. 68.
  4. 'The Eastern Naga' is a term generally used to describe the Naga Tribes living near Joypur and Namchang in Upper Assam. They were grouped into the Namchangias, the Borduarias, the Paniduarias etc.
  5. "The process is carried on by filling the joints of large bamboos with the water of the wells, they are then suspended in an earthen trough or boiler containing water, a fire is applied to the boiler, the brine of the bamboos is evaporated and dry salt remains." John M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, Delhi (reprint), 1975, p. 62.
  6. The salt wells in the hills were for all practical purposes the sole property of the Nagas. In some wells, however, the former Assam Government enjoyed a joint proprietary right, the Nagas and the Government agreed to draw the brine water from the wells for equal period by turn. To the springs below the hills the Government had an exclusive privilege, but the jealousy of the Nagas forced some of the later Ahom rulers to fill up the wells and to prevent the Nagas from having access to them. W. Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Delhi (reprint) 1975, pp. 385-6.
  7. *Ibid*, p. 385.
  8. *Ibid*, p. 386 ; also, H. K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes : North-East Frontier, 1822-42*. Gauhati, 1970, p. 183.
  9. It is interesting to observe that at a time when the Indian Government had maintained a strict monopoly over the salt trade, private manufacture and trade of salt in Assam was permitted. In view of the militant nature of the Nagas the Government perhaps thought it expedient for their livelihood. Moreover, the Naga mode of manufacturing salt being slow and wasteful it was unlikely that this salt would in any way compete with the imported salt of Bengal.

- Even Mills in 1854 advised against any sort of interference. See, A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854, pp. 29-30.
10. In 1835, the Government, with a view to secure perfect freedom to the trade to and from Bengal decided to abolish all the customs houses (*chokeys*) in the vicinity of Goalpara. The inland transit station at Jamunamukh in Central Assam was also simultaneously abolished.
  11. Foreign Political Proceedings, 9 November, 1840, No. 82, cited in S. K. Barpujari, 'Raja Purandar Singha's Management of Salt-wells in the Naga Hills' *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Third Session, Imphal, 1982, pp. 113-4.
  12. Bengal Separate Revenue Proceedings (hereafter BRP(S)), 20 February, 1839, No. 11, Jenkins to Brodie, 2 October, 1838.
  13. *Ibid*, Bruce to Brodie, 19 October, 1938.
  14. *Ibid*, Brodie to Jenkins, 18 January, 1839.
  15. *Ibid*.
  16. *Ibid*.
  17. *Ibid*.
  18. General Letters to the Court of Directors (Revenue), (hereafter CD(R)), No. 7 of 1841, 7 April, 1841.
  19. Board of Customs, Salt and Opium Proceedings (Salt), 10 May, 1847, No. 34, Jenkins to Board of Customs, Salt and Opium, 21 April, 1847 ; Bengal Revenue Proceedings (hereafter BRP), 23 November, 1841, No. 65, Brodie to Jenkins, 19 June, 1841.
  20. *Ibid*, No. 64, Currie to Halliday, 13 October, 1841. Taking the price of salt at Rs. 5 a *maund* (which was then the price fixed) and deducting the expenses incurred in the maintenance of the establishment at the rate of Rs 120 a month (Rs 1440 a year), the proceeds of 1840-1 should have been more. I have not been able to trace the cause of this discrepancy.
  21. *Ibid*, No. 65, Brodie to Jenkins, 30 June, 1841.
  22. *Ibid*, Jenkins to Sudder Board of Revenue, 8 September, 1841.

23. In a minute recorded on 6 August 1833 Lord William Cavendish Bentinck observed : "Every facility should be afforded for communication between the highlanders (with the lowlanders), for it is our object to cultivate a friendly intercourse with the Garrows, the Nagas and other Hill Tribes and this will be best promoted by allowing them, with their few articles of trade, free ingress and egress, to and from the plains." BRP, 7 March, 1835, Minute by W. C Bentinck, 6 August, 1833.
24. BRP, 23 November, 1841, No. 65, Brodie to Jenkins, 30 June, 1841.
25. *Ibid*, Jenkins to Sudder Board of Revenue, 8 September, 1841.
26. *Ibid*, No. 66, Halliday to Secretary to Sudder Board of Revenue, 23 November, 1841.
27. BRP, 8 August, 1842, No 126, Strong to Brodie, 10 June, 1842 ; also BRP, 17 December, 1845, No. 43, Jenkins to Halliday, 12 August, 1845.
28. CD(R), No. 21 of 1842, 3 December 1842.
29. *Hill Tracts Between Assam and Bengal, Selection of Papers*, Delhi (reprint), 1978, p. 290, see Jenkins' letter to Bushby, 18 June, 1843.
30. BRP, 17 December, 1845, No. 43, Brodie to Jenkins, 5 April, 1845.