

Saga of the Assamese Middle Class:1826-1921

– a review article –

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Interest in the role of the middle class in the socio-economic history of British Assam became a serious research concern since the early 1970s, following Hiren Gohain's two seminal articles - 'Asamiya Madhyabitta Samajar Itihas', *Natun Prithivi* (1972-73) and 'Origins of the Assamese Middle Class', *Social Scientist* (August 1973). Then followed our *Planter-Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, (1977) and *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam : Society, Polity Economy* (1991). B. Datta Ray, ed., *The Emergence and Role of middle class in North-East India* (1983), Manorama Sharma's *Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony* (1990), Prafulla Mahanta's *Asamiya Madhybitta Shreni'r Itihas* (1991), Anil Raychaudhuri's *Namani Asamar Madhya Shreni* (1998) and Sailen Barkataki's *Asamiya Madhy Shreni* (2000) are the other contributions. The latest addition to this Assam-specific genre of socio-economic studies is Rajen Saikia's *Social and Economic History of Assam 1853-1921* (Manohar, Delhi, 2000) which is presently under review. All these contributions throw light on the origins, growth and role of the newborn Assamese middle class for whose safe delivery, Saikia gives credit of midwifery to the British rule.

Saikia's 258-page narrative is divided into six chapters followed by a conclusion. His periodisation is sound. He discusses the collapse of the medieval aristocracy and the decline of old handicrafts - the latter for the sudden lack of patronage - in course of the first two chapters, with retrospect since 1826. In most cases, he convincingly argues that the decline of old handicrafts was not so much due to negligent foreign rule as due to their own inherent technological and market limitations. The discussion is not however on an even keel. For example, four-and-a-half pages have been devoted to relatively unimportant wood and ivory carving, while the still surviving bellmetal industry has received not even half-a-page space, though primary source materials throwing light on its conditions are amply within easy access. Again, the chapter on the dying aristocracy is rather overburdened with monotonous details of pension petitions of, and pittances granted to erstwhile princes, potentates and

their widows. The discussion on the survival of the handloom industry is also not very satisfactory. The reader misses the story of how, during 1903-1921, the introduction of fly-shuttle, mill-yarn and factory-type organization, in particular, helped such survival.

Much of Saikia's interest in anecdotes and trivialities is also reflected in the third chapter - 'Agriculture and Peasantry' as well as the fourth chapter - 'The Changing Social Spectrum'. "Racial memory has it that", he writes, "jui, pani, ywin (fire, water and white ants) were the three calamitous agents of undoing every single reserve of private wealth". However, for lack of records, he laments and then mentions only a few stray local incidents taking place from time to time. Such commonplace information give little scope - he admits - to the economic historian for generalization. So he takes his reader to the 1666 Great Fire of London and to Sarat Chandra's novel *Grihadaha* (House Burning, 1917) for a 'feel' of the gravity of such incidents. As to white ants, we are simply informed that in Assam it was a 'veritable plague' according to John M'Cosh (1837) and that according to a British lady of Lucknow. "The white ant is a cruel destroyer of goods".

What is surprising is that, after listing such not so relevant details, Saikia concludes that of the three calamitous agents, fire was the most destructive. In the absence of aggregative quantitative data on estimated damages for comparison, how could he say so? Obviously he does transgress the historical method. May be, water (floods) was more destructive than fire - Who knows ?

The new government institutions, western education and tea industry - all these factors led to a combined progressive impact upon the Assamese society, thus giving birth to a forward-looking new Assamese middle class. The colonial rule, on the whole, came as a blessing. By collaborating with this rule consciously, the aforesaid class could seize the newly opened-up opportunities to grow further. Thus it served both its own as well as the people's interests. Inherently weak and underdeveloped though, it nevertheless was able to make a modest entry into the expanding tea industry. The development of Assamese language and literature, indeed a principal bourgeois task, was also hastened by this middle class. In many respects, thus it did provide competent leadership to the society it belonged to. This is, in a nutshell, the central thesis of Saikia.

We have reservations about this thesis. No doubt, the British rule was not an unmixed evil. It did play a dual role, destructive as well as

regenerative. But British rule, Marx rightly said, was only 'an unconscious tool of history'. In the process of colonialisation a dependent colonial middle class was automatically and integrally created; sick and deformed though from its very birth. It was therefore incapable of growing into a mature bourgeois class and lead the mass struggles with courage and conviction against imperialism. In other words, colonial capitalist development was a distorted development. This naked truth does not come out of Saikia's analysis. On the contrary, it appears that he has swallowed the theory of progressive imperialism and its civilizing mission.

According to Saikia, it was through compromises with imperialism that the Assamese society could develop itself up to a point, wherefrom meaningful action-oriented struggle for freedom could begin in the Gandhian era. He exonerates the moderate/loyalist middle class leaders of the sin of collaborating with imperialism. He suggests that, in a critical situation, they were successful in preserving and strengthening the endangered Assamese identity.

Saikia has a point when he says (p. 232) that 19th century (and early twentieth century) middle class leaders should be judged not by present-day standards, but by those of their own times. Yet we cannot agree with him when he says that Assamese leaders played the same kind of role, as did their contemporary moderate congressmen of all-India stature. Dadabhai Naoroji, for example, sharpened the anti-imperialist ideology by showing how surplus extraction by the British impoverished India (Drain theory). R.C. Dutt also did the same thing through his historical/analytical writings. Later Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar's "*Deshar Katha*" (1909) containing these findings of Naoroji and Dutt in summary form became an ideological weapon indeed even in the hands of the 'fire-breathing' Bengal terrorists, contrary to Saikia's expectations. Nothing like this happened in Assam. Of course, moderate nationalists' tactical utterings of allegiance to the Raj need not be taken in their face value; they are to be judged by the intrinsic value of their deeds. A distinction has also to be made between genuine moderate nationalists and committed or opportunist loyalists when dealing with the 19th and pre-Gandhian 20th century history. In our view, even moderates ceased to qualify for being called nationalists during the Gandhian era. Saikia's 'creative minority' does not pass this test. This does not however mean that they were all necessarily devoid of local or any other kind of patriotism. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, and for that matter, also Kamalakanta Bhattacharya were exceptions.

Saikia commits yet another error of judgment while assessing the 19th century peasant struggles, particularly that of 1893-94. According to him, peasants' participation in the angry outbursts against the land revenue hike was "inspired, not spontaneous. It was more with bravado than conviction that they registered their protest". "Mauzadars and landlords were also hard-pressed. They took advantage of the peasants' anger and directed it against the government" (Saikia, pp. 107-8). This is not true.

This historical method demands that, for saying so, Saikia should have had enough evidence. A single reference - the opinion of M'Cabe (district magistrate) is not enough; it needs further corroboration. Such corroboration he seeks from a secondary source, again mainly based on the same M'cabe - "A Guha writes, 'the non-cultivating land-owners Brahmins, Mahantas and Dolois..... apparently took the initiative and a 'leading role'" (emphasis added, *ibid*). We qualified our observation by the word 'apparently' and further stated that "it was the poor peasantry and other sections of the rural poor" who actually lent a militant character to the movement, Pusparam Kahar being one of them. We also referred to folk memory as depicted in *Dalipuran* which convinces one of the spontaneous mass character of the movement. Yet Saikia misconstrues our text (Guha : 1977, p. 54) to suit his purpose. He denigrates the peasant movement. Later research by Hiren Gohain and others has revealed more names of peasant leaders, who also played a leading role. Saikia's finding is therefore unsound and awkward. Village-level and area-level *mels* (people's assemblies) provided the collective leadership. The movement represented a united front of all revenue rate-paying ryots including the non-cultivating landowners against the common enemy - the tax-hiking alien government and, it was joined by thousands. By their sacrifices, they were able to force the government to deduce the proposed rates of land revenue substantially. Saikia's belaboured misinterpretation of facts is not only tendentious, it is also anti-people.

Contesting Manorama Sharma's conclusion that the social roots of the Assamese middle class can be traced back to early British revenue-officers including Mauzadars and Satra institutions, Saikia rightly argues that the social base was actually much wider. "The Assamese middle class was the compound product of colonial bureaucracy, English education and tea industry". No doubt, these factors played the key role in the new middle class's formation. But wherefrom, from which social class, did men come forward for entry into these fields? This question remains unanswered.

Saikia refuses to drive his analysis deeper. He rather makes a sample survey perfunctorily only to discover that, out of some sixty or so of middle class personalities mentioned for their eminence in his book only three came from Satras and another three from Mauzadar families. This is an undercount. Ratneswar Mahanta, Debeswar Goswami, Padmahas Goswami and Amritabhushan Dev Adhikari, whose names too find mention in his book - they also hailed from Satras. So did unmentioned Simhadatta Dev Adhikari as well. On the other hand, Maniram Dewan, Harakanta Barua, Haribilas Agarwala, Bisturam Barua and Uttam Chandra Barua too hailed from families holding mauzas. Thus, we find that both Mauzadars and Satra institutions played a much larger role in the formation of the Assamese middle class, than Saikia concedes.

Saikia's failure to trace back the origins of the Assamese middle class to the feudal class of peasant-exploiting landowners seems to stem from his wrong observation that "Ahom Kings, as a matter of policy, did not favour the growth of feudalism in Assam as a distinct social system" (p. 14) and that the old aristocratic elite underwent total destruction during early British rule (1826-53). It was only the secular/temporal part of the aristocratic elite that underwent total eclipse, affecting the Ahom feudal families. But the feudal properties of the high caste families and their influence mostly survived and they were quick to enter into early collaboration with the British. It is they, who, possessed of land resources and literacy, provided the seed-bed for the emergence of the new middle class. They did continue to carry a heavy baggage of some of the old values. Yet, while seeking the new opportunities, they also gradually picked up new values. This was thoroughly discussed in our essay "Agrarian structure in the late nineteenth century" included in my book (Guha : 1991, pp. 219-79), but not consulted and considered by Saikia. Our conclusion therein was as follows.

"The big landholders (mostly of high caste origin) who had survived were quick to shift their loyalty to the new regime, and they tried to avail themselves of modern education and other opportunities brought by it. Mauzadars, government servants and men of professions rose mostly from families with a landholding and high caste background. Thus the class of big landholders..... was composed of two broad sections - one backward-looking with old roots and values, and another forward-looking striking new roots and acquiring new values.

The difference was, of course, more of culture than of roots.....
In a contemporary satirical poem, the former were called *dangariyas* (gentry) and the latter *babus*" (*ibid.*, p. 242).

Despite best efforts, the new Assamese middle class could account for only 2 to 3 percent of the total acreage and investment in Assam tea during the seventy years under review or even thereafter. Assam's rate of urbanization remained as low as 2.4 per cent in 1901, 3.2 per cent in 1921 and 4.2 per cent in 1961. In fact, the railways under construction by-passed the then most populous town - Barpeta. Actually the so-called towns were nothing but glorified villages, still maintaining their vital direct links with agriculture. Yet Saikia exaggerates their importance in the formation of the new middle class as well as the importance of their urban roots.

By 'modernisation' he perhaps means only some development of communication, transport, literacy/education and a few extractive industries (all with very feeble linkage effects within the province) and not industrialization per se. He should have noted that the tea industry was more of agricultural than of industrial nature, and it served the imperial rather than local priorities. Its pre-capitalist labour practices, too, were not conducive to growth of free wage-labour. To an economist, the concept of modernization includes genuine industrialization, involving also the setting up of consumer goods industries with strong local linkage effects.

Saikia does a good job when he elaborately discusses the visionary role of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan as a modernizer. The latter's understanding of modernity was perfect. He made a significant point in his 1853 memorandum. "No permanent advancement in agriculture could be effected", he said, "until the people are relieved from the necessity of relying on a foreign country for the requisite implements of husbandry". He further stated -

"No nation can secure to itself the blessings and comforts of civilized life until it had manufactures of its own; and, in short, no country can rise to wealth or importance that is deficient or imperfectly versed in the art of manufacture".

Unfortunately, Saikia misses this very point while otherwise competently analyzing Dhekial Phukan's positivist thoughts. Throughout the British rule, more particularly during the period under review, Assamese society continued to remain deficient in the art of manufacturing despite England's and the new middle class's 'good' work (Guha : 1991, p. 264).

We also do not agree with Saikia's suggestion that "he (Anandaram) was unable to perceive the negative impact of alien rule" (p. 230). At its best, it is only a half-truth. Though formally he remained loyal to the government, he was not afraid to criticise it, as and when necessary. For example, in 1853 he boldly pointed out to Moffat Mills :

"..... we still feel ourselves impressed with an idea, that notwithstanding the superiority of the British system of administration to any under which we have hitherto lived, it is not in its present form so well adapted to the peculiar condition and habits of the people as could reasonably be expected from the liberal and free constitution of England. It has hitherto failed in its effects to improve in any material degree the condition or prosperity of the country and although twenty-eight years have elapsed since the annexation of Assam to the British empire little perceptible change has been effected in the condition of the people and the good government of the Province". (Mills' *Report*, Reprint, p. 94).

After stating that "the general aspect of the Province indicates the administration of an Asiatic Government rather than that of enlightened England", he pinned his hopes on England, but these were never fulfilled. Science, technical education and manufacturing industries were conspicuous by their absence. In our view, Dhekial Phukan was, like Naoroji and Dutt, a moderate nationalist, not a loyalist per se. That is why, we presume, he was under watch of the British authorities during the 1857 rebellion, as Gunabhiram informs us.

Saikia's "creative minority", that is the middle class elite, were a different genre. They were mostly down on their knees before the ruling authorities. Unlike Dhekial Phukan, they used abusive derogatory adjectives whenever they referred to the so-called 'low castes' and tribal people, as scholars (Indibar Deuri, Debabrata Sharma, Paramananda Mazumdar) have recently shown. While Dhekial Phukan believed in the peaceful co-existence of Assamese and Bengali languages side by side in multi-lingual Assam, the 'creative minority' invented the myth of Bengali clerks' conspiracy theory at the close of the 19th century to spite their rival, the resident Bengali middle class by language. Yet another difference is to be noted. While Dhekial Phukan opposed the idea of introducing zamindari settlement in Assam, an ideology emerged later within the Assamese middle class that found merit in the system. This ideology was represented

by the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha in 1897 and also by Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938) [Guha; 1991, pp. 269-70, 279]. We need not forget that Jagannath Barua, Manik Chandra Barua and their other colleagues chose a big zamindar of then Goalpara district to be the founder-president of the Assam Association (1903-20).

All said, though the central thrust of Saikia's thesis is not acceptable to us, his book is nevertheless a serious academic work, marked with some originality and amply demonstrated erudition, raising old issues for a fresh debate. The empirical side of his research is somewhat weak, which he tries to make up by the use of imagination. His subjectivity (reflecting his point of view that individual heroes make history) does not produce the effect of impartial restructuring of the reality. In the use of the comparative method, he is eclectic, freely seeking ideological support from various thinkers like Carlyle, Toynbee, Braudel, H.G. Wells and even Karl Marx, quoting them in and out of context. The book is nevertheless readable, with all its anecdotes and rhetoric, clarity of expression and a captivating style of presentation. Best is his 'anatomy of the language dispute' whereby he demolishes the myth of Bengali-clerk-conspiracy as well as the bogey of Bengali expansionism. None before him did provide us with such a comprehensive and balanced discussion on the Bengali-Assamese conflict of the period. His may be taken as the last word in this relevant debate.

Incidentally and lastly, while giving credit to Kefayat Ullah's book on agriculture in Bengali (1853) as "perhaps the first book on agriculture written in any Indian language by an Indian", he should have had also mentioned that this 80-page book was an adaptation of Fenwick's book on gardening in Urdu. The bibliography indicates one A. Rachaudhury as the author of two Assamese books mentioned below the name. In fact one is the autobiography of Ambikagiri Raychaudhury, a renowned conservative regionalist while the other is written by Anil Raychaudhury, a well-known communist. This confusion amuses the reader.