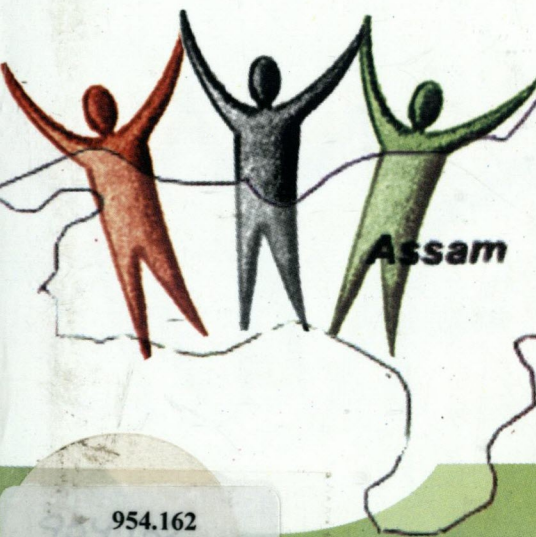
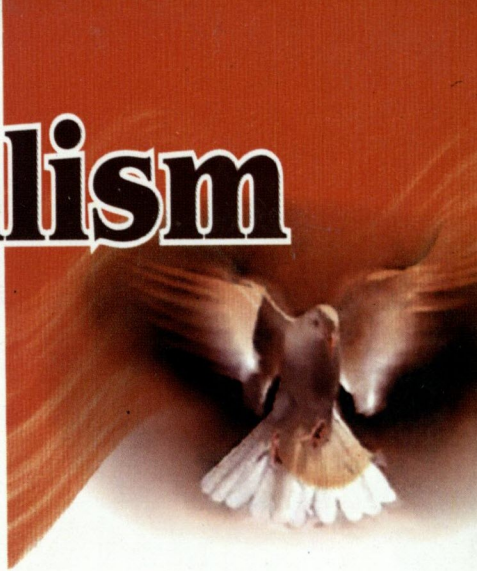


Nationalism in Assam



Chandana Goswami

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The book has been written with a view to bringing to the forefront the feelings of patriotism and nationalism nurtured by the Assamese people since very early times. Contrary to the belief that Assam being situated in the extreme north-eastern corner of the mighty Indian empire remained aloof from the mainstream of Indian politics, the book attempts to bring forth the role of the Assamese people at every stage of India's struggle for independence. The establishment of an empire in Assam by the Ahoms, the taking over of the reins of Government by the British and the effects of their rule have been elaborately dealt with.

Apart from the Ahom nobility the common peasants joined together to oppose the British taxation policy. These movements though were suppressed by the superior force, it contributed indirectly to the growth of a consciousness hitherto unknown before. The spread of education in Assam may be attributed to the efforts of the missionaries as well as the British which led to the growth of a nascent middle class in Assam. The intellectuals from this middle class compiled various works and through articles in various contemporary journals of the period infused into the minds of the people the revolutionary spirit which germinated and bore fruit in the coming century. The development of the press in Assam, the participation of the Assam leaders in the proceedings of the Indian National Congress, the role of the people in the partition movement all led to the growth of an elite Assamese intelligentsia who were now very much conscious of their socio-economic and political existence.

Rs. 495



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ISBN 81-8324-246-4

NATIONALISM IN ASSAM

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MITTAL PUBLICATIONS
NEW DELHI (INDIA)

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First Published 2008

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ISBN 81-8324-246-4

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07/05/09



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Published and printed by Krishan Mittal for Mittal Publications,
4594/9, Daryaganj, New Delhi - 110002, India.

Phone: 23250398, 25351493 **Telefax:** 91-11-25351521

e-mail: mittalp@ndf.vsnl.net.in

Website: www.mittalbooks.com

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HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Pragjyotisha - Kamarupa is the ancient name of undivided Assam. In the early historic period it covered a vast area, the central part of which is the ancient Guwahati known as Pragjyotishpur. The *Yogini Tantra* demarcated Pragjyotisha - Kamarupa upto Eastern Nepal including a part of Bengal, Bihar and present Bangladesh and the entire North Eastern India¹.

The history of this ancient territory known as Pragjyotisha - Kamarupa is to a large extent a history of two distinct regions separated by the mighty river Brahmaputra, also called Lohit. Thus as recorded in the inscriptions, to the north of the Brahmaputra lay the *Uttarkula*, and to the south lay the *Dakshinkula*, evidently taken to be the two sides of the river².

In the Hindu epics and in *Puranik* and *Tantrik* literature there are numerous references to ancient Assam, which is known as Pragjyotisha in the *Mahabharata* and Kamarupa in the *Puranas* and *Tantras*. Its extent varied from time to time. When the stories relating to it were inserted in the *Mahabharata*, it stretched southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal³.

In the *Kalika Purana* it is said that the temple of Kamakhya near Gauhati (now Guwahati) was in the centre of Kamarupa, and in the *Vishnu Purana* it is added that the country extended around this temple in all directions for 100 *yojanas* or about 450 miles. In the *Yogini Tantra*, Kamarupa is said to extend from the Karatoya river on the west to the Dikhu on the east, and from the mountain of Kanjagiri on the north to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers on the south⁴. By far the greater portion of the country now known as Assam was originally included in the ancient Hindu territory of Kamarupa, besides which it also included the whole of

the modern divisions of Rangpur and Rangamati, a portion of the Mymensing district and Sylhet, and in all probability it also extended over Manipur, Jaintia and Cachar. Kamarupa is said to have been divided into four portions, viz. *Kampith* from the Karatoya to the Sankosh, *Ratnapith* from the Sankosh to the Rupahi, *Suvarnapith* from the Rupahi to the Bharali, and *Saumarpith* from the Bharali to the Dikrang⁵.

Assam proper now means the Brahmaputra valley. The great river Brahmaputra enters into Assam from the north-east frontier and flows through from the east to the west traversing a distance of 805 kms. On both sides of this river there are plain lands. What the Gangetic valley is in the history of Northern India, the Brahmaputra valley is in the history of Assam. It is this valley which had lured the outsiders both from the east and the west to come to Assam⁶. The plains of the Brahmaputra are only 450 miles in length and 50 miles in breadth. The erstwhile districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong (now called Nagaon), Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, besides Balipara and Sadiya frontier tracts were included in this valley of the Brahmaputra⁷. 'Assam' is the anglicised form of the Assamese word 'Ashom' which means 'uneven' or 'unparalleled'. According to another interpretation 'Assam' is the phonetic variation of the word 'Ahom', a Tai Mongoloid race, ruling over most of the present Assam valley for nearly 600 years, till the arrival of the Britishers in 1826⁸.

Assam forms a part of the great land of India, which could not be always in the limelight because of its geographical position in an extreme corner of a vast country—the north-east. It had retained its independence right down to 1826, when it came under British protection⁹. The Eastern Frontier Tracts were consolidated into the province of Assam in 1898¹⁰. Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa - Kamakhya are the three geographical names given to a kingdom in later times as Assam, with expanding and contracting boundaries according to the political situations in different periods¹¹.

From the description in the *Puranas* and *Tantras*, it is evident that Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa formed an integral part of India (*Aryavarta*) since early times. We find mention of Pragjyotisha in *Sabha-Parva* and *Udyog-Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. Here it is mentioned that Pragjyotisha was a kingdom of *Mlechchas*¹² ruled over by Bhagadatta, who participated in the battle of Kurukshetra as an ally of the Kauravas¹³. The *Udyog-Parva* refers to Pragjyotisha as an inaccessible city (*Pragjyotisam-durgam puram*)¹⁴.

Like so great a portion of India the ancient history of Assam is buried in marvellous legend and prolix tradition. But that the country ages ago had a powerful voice in the affairs of the Indian sub-continent, is beyond all doubt. Pragjyotishpur—the modern city of Guwahati is spoken of by Ptolemy as *Asonomaro*, “the destroyed throne” and Turnour, in his preface to the *Mahawanso*, mentions it as one of the chief cities of India at this period. It is more than probable that the Pragjyotishpur, or “city of former renown” of the Hindu annals, and the Kusawatee of the Pali and Tibetan records, refer to the same place¹⁵.

Known by different names at different periods—Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa or Assam, this state of India appears to have had political, cultural and commercial contacts with the rest of India throughout the period of its recorded history and has traditions of such contacts even during prehistoric times¹⁶.

Truly speaking, geographical conditions of Assam did not permit her to be closely involved with the affairs of mid-India. But Assam from early times did not remain isolated from the mainstream of Indian politics and culture. The people of Assam from early times were conscious that politically Assam was an integral part of India. This feeling was intensified by the cultural integration of Assam from very early times with India¹⁷. On different occasions in ancient and medieval periods, Assam played a dominating part in the sphere of politics in eastern and northern India¹⁸. Assam, the frontier outpost of Indian civilization, is the meeting ground of peoples of different origin who had entered into the province at different periods of history. These people of various races, namely, the Austrics, the Dravidians, the Aryans and the Tibeto-Burmans, after being confronted with each other, have gradually transformed themselves into a plural society with a composite culture¹⁹. Assam has always held a distinct and independent political existence and though the process of Hinduisation of the non-Aryan tribes began from early times the converts were very few and the province remained, therefore, a land of heterogeneous social strains with linguistic divergences²⁰.

The most curious thing about Assam is the conspicuous ignorance about it on the part of the countrymen in India. This ignorance has persisted since olden times. European merchants trading with Assam in the eighteenth century regretted that they knew very little about Assam as about the interior parts of China. Those who have seen Assam have been charmed by its natural beauty and the simplicity and candour of its inhabitants. Stories of

witchcraft and magic practised by Assam's men and women are current all over India and Ram Singha, the Rajput *Raja* of Amber, invading Assam at the head of a Mughal army in 1669-71, brought with him a number of Muslim saints to undo the effects of *Kamrupi* black arts. In the popular concept of India, Assam's importance lies in its thaumaturgy. Malaria and general unhealthiness are other factors associated with Assam. It is believed that the generals whom the Mughal emperors wanted to get rid of were sent to Assam to die here from the effects of its pestilential climate²¹.

Though the Aryanisation of the land of the remote past developed a society fundamentally based on Aryan ideas, the other non-Aryan tribes who existed there and who came since, were readily absorbed or got themselves assimilated in this general pattern of the social structure. Much were retained of each tribe, of its customs and traditions. Out of this process of give and take and of mutual assimilation and appreciation developed a culture known as the Assamese culture. Furthermore, the different peoples while establishing their settlements in Assam, were assimilated without much distinction with the earlier inhabitants and in fact each wave of influx has brought in its train the staple of its own culture only to be woven into the general texture of the culture of the soil²².

Assam's civilization is catholic and universal. Though living in a sequestered region, the people have received ungrudgingly all the good things that the Gangetic valley has to offer. This open mindedness has brought Assam within the cultural hegemony of India without eclipsing its own inherent tradition and ideal²³. The ancient history of this glorious land indissolubly bound up the social, religious and the national history of the whole of India²⁴.

The first significant feature of Assam's civilization is the part that non-Aryans have played in moulding and shaping it. Turning to the epical age, we find the great hero Bhagadatta, King of Kamarupa, appearing in the battle field of Kurukshetra at the head of his *Kirata* legions whose array and splendour caused terror and dismay in the hearts of the warriors²⁵.

Epigraphs of ancient Assam as well as the *Kalika Purana* mention Bhagadatta as the successor of the great Naraka. The *Harsh-acharita*, on the other hand, describes Bhagadatta as being in the *anvaya* (line of succession) of Naraka. While the Bengali *Mahabharata* by Kasiram describes Duryodhana as marrying Bhanumati, the daughter of Bhagadatta, the Sanskrit text *Sabha-Parva* shows that Duryodhana first came to know of Bhagadatta

through his father Dhritarashtra. It was for this relationship that Bhagadatta participated in the great *Mahabharata* war on the side of the Kauravas²⁶.

Historical materials on which a reliable framework of the history of this region can be reconstructed, are, however extremely meagre. The political history of ancient Assam associated with the rulers of Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa, is wrapped up with legends²⁷. It may be noted that the earliest mentioned king of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa was the *Kirata* chief Mahirangadanava who is said to have established his capital at Mairanka²⁸. He was succeeded in turn, in the direct line, by Hatak Asur, Sambar Asur and Ratna Asur. After them there was a chief named Ghatak, the ruler of the *Kiratas*, who are said to have been a powerful race. Ghatak, it is said, was defeated and slain by Narak Asur, who is the hero of various stories told in the *Puranas* and *Tantras*. According to these legends he was born of the earth by Vishnu, in his pig incarnation, and was brought up by Janak, the king of Videha or North Bihar. This dynasty is also called "Bhauma dynasty" in the ancient history of Assam²⁹. The Naraka dynasty ruled for several generations and the Hindu culture spread unabated to Assam³¹. To the south-west of modern Guwahati, near the Nilachal Hills, there is a hill called the Narakasur hill which exists even today and it is here Naraka is said to have resided³². The capital of Naraka and his descendants was Pragjyotishpur, the modern Guwahati—Prag means former or eastern, and Jyotisha, a star, astrology, shining. Pragjyotishpur may therefore be taken to mean the city of 'Eastern Astrology'. The name is interesting in connection with the reputation, which the country has always held as a land of magic and incantation. From its commanding position on the Brahmaputra and its proximity to the sacred temple of Kamakhya, it is probable that many other kings also made this town their capital³³.

In the seventh century A.D. the throne of Kamarupa, occupied so long by the princes of the line of Bhagadatta, was wrested by a tribal leader named Salastambha who was succeeded by twenty-one monarchs of his line³⁴. The seventh century A.D. after Christ was a glorious period for both India and Assam. When Harshavardhana was Emperor in North India, in Kamarupa Kumar Bhaskara Varman was on the throne. He was the most powerful king of north-eastern India at that time and an ally of Harsha³⁵.

In the thirteenth century, a new kingdom known as Kamatapura comprising a small portion of the kingdom of Kamarupa came into

existence. The glorious days of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa had passed away and the country was divided into a number of small states, most of which were ruled by tribal chiefs³⁶.

Establishment and Growth of the Ahom Empire

The thirteenth century signalled a major turning point in the history of Assam. In the year 1228 a group of Ahoms³⁷ migrated into Assam under prince Sukapha, from the Hukong valley of Burma³⁸. They set up a principality of their own in the south-east corner of the present district of Sibsagar. In the course of the next three centuries, the 'proud conquerors' reduced to submission the Morans, the Borahis, and the Nagas, the original inhabitants of the region, annexed the territory of the Chutias in the east and drove the Kacharis off the valley of the Dhansiri to Maibong in the North Cachar hills³⁹. The system of government under the Ahom rule in Assam is usually described as 'monarchical' and it is usually said that Ahom kingship was hereditary, but there were variants⁴⁰.

The most notable event of the Ahom period is the invasion of the Mughals from Bengal several times successively, but without any tangible success. The Mughals under Nawab Mirjumla started on the first of November 1661, from Khizirpur near Dacca with a huge army and entered Assam early in January, 1662 and advanced as far as Gargaon, the Ahom capital and compelled its ruler Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-63) to cede Kamrup or western Assam to the Mughal dominion. The Mughal success was however short-lived⁴¹. During the reign of Udayaditya Singha (1670-73), Ram Singh, the general of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) arrived at Rangamati, the frontier garrison town in February, 1669. The deputation of Ram Singh marked a new phase in Ahom-Mughal relations. The Assamese general, Lachit Barphukan displayed extraordinary vigilance and circumspection in his preparations to meet the enemy force⁴². A terrible contest then ensued between the two armies, and the whole of the Brahmaputra at the triangle between the Kamakhya, Itakhuli and Aswaktanta became littered with men and boats. This battle is known in history as the Battle of Saraighat (1671). The Ahom victory at Saraighat dashed Ram Singh's hopes and at the end of the contest, he highly praised the candour and skill of his redoubtable adversaries⁴³. King Gadadhar Singha (1681-96), defeated the Mughals in the Battle of Itakhuli in 1682 and extended the boundary of his territory as far as the river Manah⁴⁴. To expel the Muslims from eastern India Rudra Singha (1696-1714), the son and successor of Gadadhar Singha, is

reported to have organised a confederacy of the neighbouring chiefs; but in the midst of the preparations the valiant monarch passed away and with him also ended the venture, as his successors had neither the determination nor the courage to follow up the ambitious project⁴⁵. Turning to the history of Assam, the most striking feature is the people's love of independence. "Death is preferable to a life of subordination to foreigners," declared the Assamese monarch Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-70) and it summarises in a way the political idealism of the people of Assam throughout the centuries⁴⁶. Strangers of every description and country were scrupulously denied admission into Assam. It is said a Frenchman, Chavelier by name obtained access to this kingdom. He obtained permission from the court and advanced with his fleet as far as the capital Gargaon under an escort, which deprived him of all intercourse with the natives, and confined his personal observations within the limits of his barge⁴⁷.

The reign of king Rudra Singha witnessed the climax of Ahom rule in Assam. But from the reign of his son and successor Siva Singha (1714-44) the power of the Ahoms began to decline. Siva Singha's queen Phuleswari committed the greatest blunder in matters of administration by forcibly trying to make the Vaishnava Mahantas, including the Mayamara Mahanta, to bow their heads before the Goddess Durga and by smearing their foreheads with the blood of the offerings made to the deity. This constituted a departure from the policy of religious toleration hitherto followed by the Ahom rulers, which ultimately proved to be disastrous for the Ahom kingdom. The Mayamara Mahanta was the most powerful of all the Vaishnava Mahantas who had received insults at the hands of Queen Phuleswari. This, together with the other insults subsequently received by him in the reign of Rajeswar Singha (1751-69) and Lakshmi Singha (1769-80) goaded him to rebel against the Ahom government⁴⁸.

The political situation of Assam assumed a different turn from the reign of Rajeswar Singha's successor Lakshmi Singha. In the eastern part of Assam there lived a very virile and sturdy race known as the Morans. They were followers of a Vaishnava *Gossain*, the *Mahanta* of Mayamara⁴⁹. They even subordinated their political loyalty to their veneration for their spiritual leader, and refused to bow down before the monarch, as they thought their Guru alone was entitled to their undivided obeisance. The Ahom kings looked upon the pre-eminence and prosperity of the Mayamara *Mahanta* with suspicion and misgiving. Things came to a head during the

reign of Lakshmi Singha when the Mayamara Mahanta and some of his leading disciples were grossly insulted by a high Ahom official who was a disciple of the Mayamara Mahanta. They rose as one man to avenge the insults inflicted on their *guru* and their comrades. The Moran insurrection was suppressed for the time being, but it raised its head with redoubled fury in different parts of the kingdom⁵⁰. The Moamaria rebellion gave a death blow to the power and resources of the Ahom government. Chaos and confusion ensued in the kingdom as a result of this rebellion, which prompted the dissatisfied elements in the Ahom kingdom, especially in lower Assam, to rebel against the authority of the Ahom government and strike a blow at its decaying power⁵¹. The anarchy and confusion in the wake of the Moamaria uprisings also afforded the neighbouring chiefs and tribes to fish in troubled waters⁵².

Last Days of the Ahom Monarchy

To add to the miseries of the people, mercenaries from Bengal commonly known as *Barkandazes*, began to dominate Assam politics. This was possible due to the weakness of the central authority. They came in hordes and swept down the villages and devastated the fields and granaries. The Ahom King Gaurinath Singha (1780-95), son and successor of Lakshmi Singha, petitioned Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General of India, for his intervention. Accordingly in September, 1792 Captain Thomas Welsh with Robert Macgregor as adjutant was sent to Assam and the former succeeded in quelling the *Barkandazes* to some extent. But Cornwallis' pacific successor John Shore who followed the policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the native states recalled Welsh and the latter returned in May, 1794 without having completed the task of rehabilitation⁵³. Assam relapsed into chaos and disorder, and continued in that state till the second decade of the nineteenth century⁵⁴.

As Chandrakanta Singha (1811-18) was a minor, Purnananda Buragohain, the Premier, took over the reins of the administration. Badan Chandra who was appointed as the Barphukan or Viceroy of lower Assam was induced by a section of the royalists to plot against the powerful Prime Minister. At last matters reached such a climax that the Buragohain became determined to remove Badan Chandra. Men were sent to arrest him but forewarned by his daughter, Pijou Gabharu who had been married to the Buragohain's son, he escaped to Bengal. He proceeded to Calcutta where he endeavoured the help of the British Governor-General. Badan then

struck up friendship with the Calcutta Agent of the Burmese government, and went to the court of the Burmese king where he misrepresented facts and succeeded in procuring a promise of help. The result was the first Burmese invasion of Assam in 1817 A.D., which was followed by the occupation of Jorhat, the Ahom capital by the Burmese⁵⁵.

Thus in the sleepy hollows of Assam, the Ahoms who had hitherto been a warlike and enterprising race lost their vigour and their country sank into the most abject state of internal confusion and turbulence⁵⁶. In fact the vitality of the Ahom kingdom was sapped by many factors, political, physical and religious⁵⁷. The last fifty years of their rule practically coinciding with the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth century were marked by insurrections and conspiracies, the worst features of the later period being the unhappy wranglings for the exercise of the supreme power of the state amongst the highest officials of the realm. This unhappy state of affairs was ultimately responsible for the Burmese intervention and invasion which "turned the happy valley of Brahmaputra into a valley of woes and tears"⁵⁸.

The ruin of Assam was complete during the repeated invasions of the Burmese. The latter inaugurated a reign of terror, during which plunder, devastation, murder and desecration were the order of the day. No consideration whatsoever was shown to age, sex or rank. In utter despair and agony the rich and the men of substance abandoned the country while thousands left their hearths and homes, and lived in jungles on roots and plants. There was wholesale depopulation, industry collapsed, agriculture was neglected and trade, if any was at a standstill. Consequently, "This extensive valley", wrote M'Cosh who surveyed it after a few years, 'though some centuries ago richly cultivated..... is now throughout six-eighths or seven-eighths of its extent covered with a jungle of gigantic reeds, traversed only by the wild elephant or the buffalo, where human footstep is unknown and the atmosphere even to the natives themselves is pregnant with febrile miasmata and death'⁵⁹. The Burmese even did not spare the temples at Sibsagar and robbed them of their gold⁶⁰. The arrogance and cruelty of the Burmese in Assam and their aggressiveness involved them in a war with the neighbouring British power whose dominions extended to the borders of Assam. This war, known as the first Anglo-Burmese war, resulted in the ultimate defeat and humiliation of the Burmese. In the Treaty of Yandaboo that followed with the British on February

24,1826, the King of Ava ceded the provinces of Arakan and Tennaserim to the British besides paying a heavy indemnity and renounced all claims of conquest over 'Assam and her dependencies'⁶¹.

The prolonged internal disorder and the internecine quarrels indirectly led to the annexation of Assam by the East India Company in 1826. Thus another foreign power, this time a European power with a culture and religion completely alien to the land, took possession of the territory after freeing the country from the Burmese occupation.

Inauguration of British Rule

The British who had stepped into the land during the course of the Burmese war next took advantage of the dissensions among the princes and nobles of Assam and kept it under their own occupation by right of conquest from the Burmese (and not from the Assamese)⁶². They had earlier proclaimed to the Assamese people that they were not led into this country by the thirst of conquest and assured the latter that they would re-establish in it after the war was over 'a government' adopted to their wants and calculated to promote the happiness of all classes'⁶³.

The supreme Government's views were clearly stated in the following words:

Although by our expulsion of the Burmese from the territory of Assam the country would of right become ours by conquest, the Governor-General in Council does not contemplate the permanent annexation of any part of it to the British dominion⁶⁴.

Considering the sentiments of the Assamese nobility even David Scott, the Agent to the Governor-General in North-East Frontier, was in favour of restoring a native prince⁶⁵.

It was since the acquisition of the *Diwani* of Bengal that the East India Company came into direct contact with the kingdoms of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam as well as the tribal communities of the adjoining hills. These sparsely populated territories did not yet have enough economic worth or surplus revenue yielding potentiality to attract the attention of British annexationists. These were therefore left undisturbed until the Burmese invasion of Assam (1817-24) and the Cachar plains brought an end to this policy of indifference. During the following decade and half, the kingdoms of Assam, Cachar and Jaintia along with their dependencies, and all the petty independent tribal states of the Khasi hills were annexed. Further annexation of

the hills i.e. the Naga Hills, Lushai Hills and Garo Hills was subsequently completed step by step in the face of stiff tribal resistance⁶⁶. Subsequent to the annexation, the British government adopted a separate policy to deal with the frontier tribes on the basis of the economic needs of the people without interfering in the internal affairs of the tribes as maintained by the Ahoms⁶⁷.

The following factors shaped the British policy towards Assam and led to her ultimate annexation in 1826. The first in question was the unsettled state of the frontier lying on the east of Bengal. The next in point was the territorial expansion running through Manipur, Cachar, Jaintia and Assam. The third in point was the lucrative Assam trade, concomitant with the possibility of exploring the inland trade routes through Assam to China. In the last, there was a circumstantial factor, i.e. the political instability in Assam together with the yearning and aspiration of a section of the Ahom feudal aristocracy to accept British protection and overlordship. All these factors combined together made the British policy of expansion effective⁶⁸.

The Burmese capitulation at Rangpur on 31 January, 1825 practically completed the British conquest of Assam⁶⁹ and the supreme Government now found it necessary to make arrangements for the temporary administration of this region pending the final decision regarding the disposal of the country. David Scott and Colonel Richards were appointed Joint Commissioners, the former to remain in charge of western Assam with headquarters at Guwahati and the latter of eastern Assam with headquarters at Rangpur⁷⁰.

As soon as western Assam was brought under British occupation Scott began to find out ways and means for enhancing revenue collection of the area under British occupation even though the decision on final disposal of the country was yet to be taken. It was evident that the British had a fixed policy of retaining Assam permanently under their control⁷¹.

Early in February, 1828, Scott submitted his opinions on the management and disposal of Assam⁷². He recommended that lower Assam be annexed permanently to British dominion, while upper Assam, the territory from Biswanath to the river Buridihing, be placed under an Ahom prince, on terms to be specifically laid down. Emphasizing the importance of conciliating the Ahom nobility Scott brought home to the supreme Government that the introduction of the British rule in upper Assam would lead to great discontentment

among the old nobility. Upper Assam would be uneconomic, Scott argued, the greater part of its revenue, estimated at about a lakh of rupees, would have to be expended for providing for the members of the former royal family and grandees of the realm. Lower Assam, on the other hand, yielded a revenue of more than six lakhs of rupees. Scott further proposed that the territory in the farther east occupied by the Muttocks, the Khamtis and the Singphos be placed under a European officer stationed at Biswanath. The authorities in Calcutta examined the whole issue from the economic point of view, and in their proceedings on 7 March, 1828, they accorded their approval to Scott's proposal of permanent annexation of lower Assam. They also agreed to station an officer in or near the areas occupied by the Muttocks, the Khamtis and the Singphos. Captain Newville, who had in the meantime acquired an intimate knowledge of these tribes was made the Political Agent, upper Assam with headquarters at Biswanath⁷³.

Thus the process began, though slowly, for the extension of British dominion into Assam or the North-East Frontier. The people submitted to the inevitable: in fact, many of them "hailed with unbounded joy" their deliverers who saved them from the tyranny of the Burmese, and offered them the most loyal cooperation. Even Maniram Dewan, originally an admirer and later an arch enemy of the British, heartily welcomed the advent of the English:

The *Sarkar Bahadur* having driven out the Burmese occupied the *killia* (fort) of Rangpur, and brought the whole country of Assam under their subjection. As a reward of this good action in rescuing the people of Assam from the atrocities of the Burmese may God continue their uninterrupted and undiminished sovereignty till the end of *Kalpa* (i.e. 4,4,320,000,000 years) and make them as vigorous and powerful as the Lord of Amarawati (i.e. Indra) and ever glorious like the *Priyavarta Raja* (a mythical king)⁷⁴.

Administrative Reorganisation: Actions and Reactions

Arrangements had to be made soon for the collection of revenue and also for the administration of justice in the areas brought under the control of the British. Scott was convinced of the need of adopting new administrative measures keeping in view the actual wants, prejudices and conditions of the people. He was of the view that the leading men of the state should be allowed to continue in the hereditary offices subject to the supervision of European officers. He based his revenue measures on the earlier *Khef*⁷⁵ system of the

Ahoms and made alteration only where it was absolutely necessary. In upper Assam the *khels* were retained intact. In lower Assam, however, the system of the Ahom kings of utilising the physical services of the men within their dominions was soon done away with and revenue was now collected from the people in cash. In Kamrup, then divided into twenty-six *parganas*, settlements were made with the *Chowdhuries* who were entitled during their term of office to rent - free grants besides the services of a number of *pykes*. They could make no claim either on the land or its produce and remained in office as long as desired by the British government⁷⁶.

From its attitude and actions, it became quite clear that the East India Company was bound to strike roots in Assam. With the assumption of political power by the British, the former ruling classes in Assam lost not only their political authority but social privileges too. The feudal structure of the society began to crumble as new measures were adopted by the colonial rulers to strip the nobility of their rights and privileges⁷⁷. The first flashes of enthusiasm for the new friends soon disappeared and the higher classes began to organise themselves to restore the old Ahom monarchy and made repeated attempts to oust the British⁷⁸.

The first of these attempts was made by Gomdhar Konwar, a prince of the Ahom royal family and Dhanjay Borgohain⁷⁹. Gomdhar was formally enthroned near Jorhat according to Ahom rites, and arms and ammunitions were collected from the neighbouring areas by use of both diplomacy and force. But before he could make much headway a counter offensive was made by Lieutenant Rutherford. After a feeble resistance Gomdhar fled to the Naga hills but soon he and most of his associates were arrested. Gomdhar was found guilty of "illegally assuming the insignia of Royalty" and sentenced to death, which was subsequently commuted to seven years of imprisonment in banishment. Meanwhile, another Ahom prince named. Gadadhar, a relative of ex-Raja Jogeswar Singha, who appeared to have been moving in the Burmese frontier in the guise of a Khamti priest, roused the people to fight the invaders and planned assassination of the British officers. Later he attempted to win over the British regiment at Sadiya by diplomatic means, which was however thwarted by Jalim Singh, the *Subedar* of the regiment, who handed him over to the Agent to the Governor-General. However, the most determined and organised resistance against the British imperialism came from the Khasis (1828-30)⁸⁰.

At the time of the annexation of lower Assam, Sylhet was under

the possession of the British. The British gained the possession of Sylhet when they were granted the *Diwani* of Bengal in 1765 A.D. On their occupation of Assam the British began to feel the necessity of linking Sylhet with their newly acquired possession in lower Assam by a direct route across the Khasi hills⁸¹. In the early part of 1826 Chatter Singh, the Raja of Nongklow (a Khasi territory) died. His death was followed by a succession dispute between Rajiv Singh and Tirut Singh, the nephew and brother of the late chief⁸². This dispute offered an excellent opportunity to David Scott to extend British influence over the Khasi Hills. Tirut Singh organised a meeting of the Khasi chiefs to which Scott was also invited. After much deliberations the chiefs decided to recognise the succession of Tirut Singh as Rajiv Singh was only a boy of four years⁸³. And on 30 November, 1826 a treaty was concluded between Tirut Singh and Scott, and the Khasis agreed to aid the British in constructing a road through their territory and to come under the British protection⁸⁴. For eighteen months since the enforcement of this agreement there existed a cordial understanding between the British and the Khasis⁸⁵. Tirut Singh also provided all facilities to the British for the completion of the road. But misunderstanding soon arose around the interpretation of the terms of the agreement. Tirut Singh was of the view that in return for his assistance to the British, the latter would offer the former all military aid as and when required⁸⁶. But he was refused English military assistance in his dispute with the chief of Rani⁸⁷. He, therefore, took it as a betrayal on the part of the British and declared that he was no longer bound by the terms of the treaty⁸⁸. In association with some other chiefs of the hills Tirut Singh rose in revolt and committed the Nongklow massacre⁸⁹. His aim was to expel the British both from the hills and the plains that were under the possession of the Khasis. After a series of encounters and fighting a grim battle for survival Tirut Singh finally surrendered himself to Captain Inglis on 13 January, 1833⁹⁰. The Khasis had to submit to the superior might of the British but their resistance to the English penetration bore the character of a freedom movement⁹¹.

Meanwhile the nobles of upper Assam had been maturing plans to make a fresh attempt to put an end to the British occupation of Assam. Dhanjay Borgohain, the leader of the first abortive attempt of 1828, had been organising another attack on a "grand scale". He was assisted by his two sons, Harakanta and Haranath and his son-in-law Jeuram Dulia Baruah. Within a short time, he could

collect a large following, most prominent among whom were Peali Barphukan, son of Badan Chandra Barphukan ex-Viceroy of lower Assam, Rupchand Konwar, Deoram Dihingia Baruah and Boom Singpho. They however did not receive the expected support from the neighbouring chiefs. They were repulsed and hotly pursued by the British force. Dhanjay and his eldest son Harakanta managed to slip into the thick jungles. Peali, Jeuram, Haranath, Rupchand, Deoram and Boom Singpho were tried at Jorhat and all of them having been found guilty of treason and rebellion, were sentenced to death.

Under the circumstances, Scott again submitted a proposal for restoration of Ahom monarchy in upper Assam. Of the several claimants to the throne, the choice fell ultimately on Purandar Singha who was considered to be "the person best fitted to be at the head of the state". Accordingly, on March 2, 1833 an agreement was made with Purandar Singha, by which he bound himself *inter alia* to pay an annual tribute of Rs. 50,000, to obey the orders of the Political Agent and to administer justice on the principles prevailing in Company's territory. He was to govern the tract lying between the Dhansiri and the Dihing on the south bank and Biswanath and Sadiya on the north bank⁹².

Before long Purandar's own officials became inimical to him. They could not compromise with the *Raja*, who in his bid to meet the demand of the Company's government in Bengal, left his own officers unpaid and ignored their interests. The short-sighted and ambitious nobles, thinking that the removal of Purandar would put an end to their difficulties, began to lodge complaints after complaints to Jenkins, the Commissioner. To have a first hand information on this matter Jenkins visited upper Assam in the beginning of 1838 and submitted a report to the Calcutta government alleging that there was misgovernment in Purandar's territory and recommending at the same time its immediate resumption. Accordingly, on September 16, 1838, upper Assam was permanently annexed to the Company's territories. Purandar was offered a pension of one thousand rupees which he refused to accept⁹³.

Then came the revolt of 1857, which did not leave Assam untouched. Despite her territorial distance from the main centres of the 1857 revolt and other difficulties Assam's response to it was spontaneous. Maniram Dewan, hitherto one of the most loyal officers of the Company, took up leadership in this war of liberation.

He and his compatriots could not reconcile themselves to Assam's annexation to the Company's territories by the Treaty of 1826⁹⁴.

Maniram had joined the services of the British as Revenue *Sheristadar* of upper Assam in 1828. He served the British faithfully which was why the total revenue of upper Assam rose from Rs. 35,000 to as large a sum of Rs. 1,35,000 in 1830. When in 1833 Purandar Singha was restored, Maniram became his *Barbhandar Baruah*. But when in 1838 Purandar was deposed, the *Dewan* lost all his positions and the former *Sheristadar* was reduced to a mere *Mauzadar* for which he received a salary of Rs. 50 per month. Maniram soon resigned this nominal post⁹⁵.

The deposed king, Purandar Singha was survived by his son, Kameswar Singha. He died in June, 1851 and was survived by a son named Kandarpeswar Singha alias *Charing Raja*⁹⁶, a boy of eleven years⁹⁷. When A.J.M. Mills, Judge of the *Sadar Diwani Adalat* on deputation, visited Assam in 1854, Kandarpeswar Singha waited upon him and submitted a petition stating his right to hold upper Assam as an independent tributary. Mills suggested to the Government of India to inform the *Charing Raja* not to entertain any hope of restoration in future⁹⁸. Having witnessed the fate of his appeal to Mills, in October, 1854 Kandarpeswar Singha submitted a desperate appeal to the supreme Government for restoration but without success⁹⁹. In all these efforts on the part of Kandarpeswar Singha, Maniram Dewan whose relationship with the local authorities was already strained because of the memorials he submitted to Mills, was the chief counsel of the former. In 1856 Maniram Dewan went to Calcutta to plead before the Governor-General on behalf of Kandarpeswar Singha. But his pleadings went in vain¹⁰⁰. It was in these circumstances that news arrived that the sepoys had broken out at Meerut on 11 May, 1857¹⁰¹. Maniram saw in this an opportunity to strike at the Company's government.

From Calcutta Maniram Dewan wrote secret letters to the *Charing Raja* and other reliable persons at Jorhat and Sibsagar urging them to make preparations for a *coup de etat* to seize power from the British in Assam with the help of the sepoys won over from the British Indian troops stationed at Dibrugarh and Golaghat. These letters were purposely couched in enigmatical language and some are said to have been written in a feigned hand¹⁰². Preparations were accordingly made by the close associates of the *Charing Raja* for a rising to take place at the time of *Durga Puja* when the *Dewan* himself would arrive in Assam and install the *Charing Raja* on the

throne of his forefathers. Secret consultations were held at the Raja's parlours; schemes were laid out and agents despatched to mobilise support of influential persons. Arms and ammunitions were collected and stocked at suitable places and men of the disbanded Assam militia were called to be enrolled as soldiers. Contact was established with *subedars* Nur Muhammad and Bhikun Sheikh, and a few *jamadars* of the troops at Dibrugarh and Golaghat and their support obtained. Money and *ghee* were also distributed for the performance of *Puja* at the Dergaon temple, and other holy places to secure divine grace. Many leading men of the time including two Muslims, Bahadur *Gaonburha* and Sheikh Formud Ali, actively joined in the plot and others extended their support¹⁰³.

Holroyd, the Principal Assistant, Sibsagar, reported:

The young *Raja* was advised by Madhu Mullick who had been sent up by Maniram from Calcutta to assemble certain of Barooah's and Phukan's around Jorhat and acquaint them the contents of Maniram's letter. This was done accordingly, and at this consultation it was determined to send one Mohesh Chandra alias Peali, one of their members to Sibsagar to ascertain the feelings of Dootiram, *Fouzdarie Sheristadar*, the Pani Phukan and others.

In accordance with the plan very carefully prepared, Mohesh Chandra alias Peali proceeded to Sibsagar with a letter from the *Charing Raja* to Dutiram *Sheristadar* and having tarried there for about a week had interviews with him and then returned to Jorhat bearing a letter to the *Charing Raja* from the said *Sheristadar* together with a message of encouragement, stating that he (the *Sheristadar*) would shortly send his elder son Priyalal, Sub-Inspector of school, to Jorhat to communicate with him (the *Charing Raja*) in person.

Priyalal arrived at Jorhat in the month of *Assar* (June-July) and in his interviews with the *Charing Raja* stated his father's feelings and desires, and urged him to act according to Maniram's advice.

After receipt of messages from Maniram Dewan, a series of secret meetings were held at the place of Kandarpeswar Singha at Jorhat. People from all walks of life attended these meetings ostensibly for making preparations for the coming insurrection¹⁰⁴. But Charles Holroyd, the Magistrate of Sibsagar and Principal Assistant Commissioner, received timely information about this development from a *daroga* named Haranath Parbatiya Baruah.

Unfortunately before the *Dewan* himself could come to Assam to take the lead a few of his letters were intercepted by the District Magistrate of Sibsagar and the plot was foiled¹⁰⁵.

These developments in the North-East Frontier caused alarm to the Governor-General in Council. The Commissioner of Assam had in the meanwhile directed Holroyd to apprehend the *Charing Raja*. On the midnight of 7 September, with a party of 20 men Holroyd joined at Dikhowmukh a detachment under Lowther, and on the third day, just before day-break, effected without much alarm the apprehension of Kandarpeswar¹⁰⁶. Maniram who was the real embodiment of revolutionary potential, was also put under arrest in Calcutta and gagged behind the prison bars of Alipur¹⁰⁷, and then brought to Assam for trial. Meanwhile one hundred European seamen were sent to help the authorities in Assam to suppress the probable disturbance. Others implicated in the plot, notable amongst whom, Mohesh Chandra Baruah alias Peali Baruah, the *Raja's* right hand man, and Madhu Mullick, a Bengali *Mukhtear* sent by Maniram from Calcutta to help the *Raja* in his preparations, were also arrested. Holroyd was appointed Special Commissioner under Act 14 of 1857 to try these conspiracy cases. Maniram Dewan was tried on 23 February, 1858. He was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death on 'inadequate' if not unsatisfactory evidence. He was hanged at Jorhat publicly on 26 February, 1858 along with Peali Baruah. Others including Dutiram Baruah, Madhu Mullick, Bahadur *Gaonburha* and Formud Ali were given sentences of transportation or imprisonment¹⁰⁸.

The keen and penetrating intellect with which Maniram Dewan had exposed the evils of British rule in Assam not only astonished Mills, but made him and his masters alert to the danger arising out of such discontented and critical elements in the subject population to the safety and integrity of the British empire. He had indeed grown to be 'the tall poppy' to be cut down when the opportunity came. No wonder that the rulers, imbued at this time as they were with Lord Dalhousie's policy of annexation and integration of native territories to the expanding empire, refused to pay any heed to the claims for restoration of any part of their dominions to the Ahom royal family¹⁰⁹.

Thus Assam played her role in the first war of India's independence in 1857. Kandarpeswar Singha became a tragic emblem of fading royalty—a *rios feinant* in grief. Maniram Dewan and Peali Baruah became martyrs to the cause of freedom in Assam,

and their sacrifice made a deep and lasting impression on the minds of the Assamese people who remembered with pride these heroes of 1857 at every stage of the freedom struggle. Dutiram Baruah, Bahadur *Gaonburha* and Sheikh Formud Ali, transported to the Andamans, availed themselves of the amnesty granted by the Queen's Proclamation and returned to Assam shattered in body and mind. Rupahi Aideo and Lumboi Aideo, the two Assamese ladies implicated in the plot, also suffered loss of property and their *mauzas* for participation in the plot¹¹⁰. Thus it is evident that the British authority in Assam struck terror in the land by taking various measures to stamp out all manifestation of revolt¹¹¹. Although the endeavours of Maniram Dewan and his other associates were nipped in the bud, failure did not mark the end of people's movements in Assam¹¹².

The Queen's proclamation on 1 November, 1858 ended the Company *raj* in Assam¹¹³. Meanwhile, following the Revolt of 1857, a severe financial strain had gripped the British Indian Government¹¹⁴. To wipe out the increasing financial deficit the government decided to levy a number of new taxes. In 1858 stamp duties and in 1861 the income-tax was introduced in Assam¹¹⁵. Further, excise duties were also levied at the *sadar* stations of Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon¹¹⁶. There was a growing feeling of discontentment among the people in consequence of the increased taxation¹¹⁷. To ventilate their grievances the people took recourse to the *raij-mels* which took leadership in organising peasant movements to protest against the British taxation policy¹¹⁸.

On 6 February, 1874, Assam proper, together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and the other hill districts was formed into a Chief Commissioner's province¹¹⁹. On grounds of financial viability, the populous Bengali speaking district of Sylhet was also incorporated into it in September that year. It was since 1857, there slowly developed a situation of disharmony between the Bengali bureaucrats, clerks and petty traders on the one hand, and the indigenous gentry and the traditional trading community on the other. The nascent Assamese middle class, who took some initiative in the new economic enterprises grew alert to the changes of the time and also took measures to preserve the identity and develop the language and culture of the people. Gradually a new wave of liberal and nationalist ideas swept through Assam and gave momentum to the political and economic movements of the time marking the dawn of a new era¹²⁰.

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29. Manu classes the Kiratas with *Mlechchas*. Lord Shiva is said to have adopted the appearance of a Kirata before his duel with Arjuna and was considered the special deity of that race.
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32. Barua, G., *Assam Buranji*, p. 5.
33. Gait, E.A., *op.cit.*, p. 15; Kakati, B.K., *op.cit.*, p. 4.
34. Bhuyan, S.K., *op.cit.*, p. 6.
35. Dutta, P.N., *op.cit.*, p. 28.
36. Devi, L., *Ahom- Tribal Relations, (A Political Study)*, pp. 4-5.
37. The *Ahoms* were an off-shoot of the *Tai* or the great *Shan* stock of South-East Asia. The word *Tai* means 'celestial origin'. The *Ahoms* claimed themselves to be the descendants of *Lengdon* i.e. Lord Indra.
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93. *Ibid.*, p. 469.
94. Kakati, S.C., *Discovery of Assam*, p. 188.
95. Sharma, B., *Maniram Dewan*, p. 89.
96. *Charing Raja* was the *Jubaraj* or the Crown Prince of the Province.
97. Hazarika, B.B., *op.cit.*, p. 355.
98. Dutt, K.N., *op.cit.*, p. 18.
99. Barpujari, H.K., *Assam: In the Days of the Company*, pp. 175-176.
100. Bora, M., *1857 in Assam*, p. 27.
101. Chandra, Bipan and Others, *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 31.
102. These letters were sent to their destination either through messengers or by post unpaid.
103. Dutt, K.N., *op.cit.*, pp. 19-20.
104. Barpujari, H.K. (ed), *Political History of Assam*, Vol. I, pp. 69-70.
105. Hazarika, B.B., *op.cit.*, p. 359.
106. Sharma, B., *Satawan Saal Ba Swadhinatar Pratham Yuddha*, pp. 37-38.
107. Sharma, B., *The Rebellion of 1857 vis-a-vis Assam*, p. 57.

108. Barpujari, H.K., *Assam: In the Days of the Company*, pp. 188-191.
109. Dutt, K.N., *op.cit.*, pp. 17-13
110. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
111. Hazarika, B.B., *op.cit.*, p. 374.
112. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
113. *Ibid.*, p. 375.
114. *Ibid.*, p. 382.
115. Barpujari, H.K. (ed), *Political History of Assam*, Vol. I, p. 88
116. Goswami, S.D., *Aspects of Revenue Administration in Assam*, pp. 28-29.
117. Mills, A.J.M., *Report on the Province of Assam*, p. 24.
118. Barpujari, H.K., *American Missionaries and North-East India*, p. 94
119. Guha, A., *op.cit.*, p. 27.
120. Baruah, S.L., *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, pp. 511-517.