

Burmese Policy of Expansion towards Manipur, Cachar and Assam (1755-1826)

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In this paper an attempt is being made to study the Burmese policy of expansion towards their north-western borderlands which virtually lay to the north-east of British Bengal. The Burmese had long cast their covetous eyes on the fertile Valley of Manipur and they used to send expeditionary forces into it from time to time. Just a few years before the East India Company's victory at Plassey, the Burmese king Alaungpaya is said to have led an expeditionary force against Manipur. This expedition into Manipur under Alaungpaya is said to have had caused heavy damage and devastation and in the chronicles of Manipur it was referred to as the 'first devastation'.¹ Towards the end of 1757 he led a second expedition against Manipur. Gait writes that Manipur was attacked and overrun by the Burmese in 1755 and in 1758 and a part of it was permanently annexed to Burma.² And like the first one, this expedition too caused much havoc to Manipur as it resulted in the occupation of Imphal, the capital city, and the deportation of thousands of Manipuris for settlement in the Burmese provinces of Sagaing and Amarapooora.³ Thus set in motion by Alaungpaya, the Burmese policy of expansion was followed successively by his successors till 1824. Professor Hall writes that since the days of Alaungpaya "expansion and conquest were the keynotes of Burmese policy upto 1824".⁴ Emboldened by their victories against the invading Chinese forces, the Burmese commanders, during the reign of Hsinbyushim (1763-76), the third king of the Konbaungset dynasty, led an expedition against that ill-fated country called Manipur in 1765. Besides acts of deportation of thousands of Manipuris, the Burmese this time drove out the king, Jai Singh, and raised their nominee, Beringba, to the throne of Manipur.⁵

Another important military exploit of the Burmese during his reign was the occupation of the coastal region called Tenasserim from the Siamese in 1766.⁶

In the meantime, Jai Singh, who had taken refuge in Cachar during the Burmese invasion in 1765, returned to his country and after repelling the usurper Beringba, regained the throne.⁷ But the Burmese reappeared in Manipur soon and Jai Singh this time fled to Assam and the Burmese again raised one Moirang Raja to the throne of Manipur.⁸ With the assistance of the Ahom king, Rajeswar Singha, Jai Singh organised and led a successful attempt at the seizure of the throne in Manipur by 1768.⁹ Anyway, Jai Singh seated himself as king of Manipur after the departure of the

Burmese. But the Burmese again attacked Manipur and Jai Singh fled to Cachar and took refuge there. During 1775-82, he attempted not less than four times to regain the throne, and every time he was expelled by a fresh Burmese force. In 1782, he seemed to have entered into some compromise with his enemies and since then till his death in 1798 he was in possession of his country in comparative peace and tranquillity.¹¹

Bodawpaya's reign (1782-1819) witnessed the conquest of Arakan in 1784. In February next year, the Arakanese king and 20,000 of his countrymen were taken away to Burma as captives and his kingdom was annexed to Burma.¹² "In 1785 Arakan was constituted a province of the Burmese Empire and placed under a Burmese Governor who resided at Morhaung, the old capital of the Arakanese princes".¹³ With the conquest and annexation of Arakan, the Burmese became dominant on the entire coastline down from the Mergui Archipelago upto the Chittagong frontier as well as the Chittagong harbour. This also made the boundary line of both the powers, i.e., the British and the Burmese, contiguous so far as the Chittagong frontier was concerned. Again, the annexation of Arakan by Burma became a source of constant friction between the two powers till 1826. Moreover, the Anglo-Burmese relations had never been on a friendly footing since a long time past.

The English and the French East India Companies had long vied with each other for the control of the lucrative teak trade in Burma.¹⁴ The destruction of the British settlement and trading centre at Negrais and the massacre of its inhabitants by the Burmese during Alaungpaya's reign in 1760 ultimately led to its abandonment along with Bassein by the British.¹⁵ Now the annexation of Arakan by Burma lent a new dimension to the already existing enmity between the British and the Burmese. In the wake of Burmese aggression into Arakan, thousands of Arakanese fled their country and took refuge in Chittagong and other neighbouring British territories.¹⁶ By 1794 the Arakanese raised the standard of revolt against the Burmese Rule and oppression in Arakan. The Arakanese refugees in and from Chittagong used to pour in men and materials into Arakan against Burma¹⁷ and this naturally was at the connivance of the British. The Burmese in retaliation ruthlessly suppressed the revolt and this resulted in another influx of the Arakanese into Chittagong.¹⁸

Chittagong was used by the Arakanese almost as a base of operation against the Burmese, and, therefore, the Burmese Government repeatedly demanded of the British to surrender the Arakanese living in Chittagong.¹⁹ The British on their part "were naturally reluctant to refuse all right of asylum to defeated belligerents, especially in view of the cruelty of their enemies".²⁰ Disaffected as they were by the stance of the British, a Burmese force consisting of 5,000 or 7,000 men, in an attempt to take away the Arakanese, crossed over the river Naaf and set up a base of operation within the British territory itself. This precipitated a serious crisis, which was averted by the extradition of the Arakanese rebel leaders to the Burmese Government by Colonel Erskine.

The latter was deputed by the Calcutta authority to negotiate with the Burmese authority and the Colonel did the extradition under the behest of the Indian Government. ²¹

The Burmese policy of expansion greatly alarmed the British Government in Calcutta and it became more so with the situation that developed in the Chittagong frontier. In the meantime, Britain's relations with Napoleonic France became anything but friendly and the Calcutta authority deemed it necessary to cultivate friendly relations with Burma so as to forestall any move by France to use 'Burma as a possible base for warlike designs against British India'. ²² Warranted by this international situation and coupled with the issue in the Chittagong frontier, the Indian Government promptly resorted to act. Sir John Shore, the Governor-General, sent Captain Michael Symes to the Burmese Court in 1795. ²³

Before his departure to Ava Captain Symes was instructed to negotiate on three scores with the Burmese authority and these were the negotiation of a 'commercial treaty with special mention of the teak trade' of Burma, the 'removal of the causes of misunderstanding over the Arakan frontier incident', and 'the deprivation of the French of the use of Burmese harbours' against the British. ²⁴

What Captain Symes had achieved was far short of his, accredited mission. The situation in the Arakan frontier remained unresolved. He had only elicited from the Burmese Court some trading concessions and the permission for the stationing of a British Resident at Rangoon. ²⁵ As a follow up action Captain Hiram Cox was deputed to Burma as British Resident. But he was given a cold reception at the Burmese Court and he was recalled by the Calcutta authority, and accordingly, he returned to Calcutta in 1798. ²⁶

After his return to Calcutta Captain Hiram Cox informed the Indian Government that the Burmese Government had threatened to invade Bengal 'if the Arakanese frontier question were not settled according to their wishes'. ²⁷ The Indian Government under Lord Wellesley could not give much importance to this information brought forth by Captain Cox as it was hard pressed than by the most important problem created by the Mysorean ruler, Tipu Sultan, within the Indian sub continent itself. ²⁸

In 1798, the Arakanese again raised the standard of revolt, and this time too it met with utter failure. After the failure of this revolt, many more Arakanese fled to the British territory in the Chittagong district. In 1798-99, the Arakanese refugees in Chittagong were estimated to have reached the number of 50,000. ²⁹ This time Lord Wellesley under the advice of Major William Franklin toyed with the idea of a subsidiary alliance with Bcdawpaya, the Burmese king. ³⁰ To accomplish this, he sent Captain Michael Symes in 1802 for the second time to Ava with a copy of the draft treaty in his pocket. ³¹ But this mission like the earlier ones failed to get anything from the Burmese. ³²

The subsequent missions under Captain Canning (in 1803 and 1807) also met with failure. ³³ On the basis of his informations that he gathered at the Court of Ava, Canning, after his arrival at

Calcutta, reported to Lord Minto I, the Governor General, that the Burmese king, 'Bodawpaya was bent upon annexing Chittagong and Eastern Bengal' to the Burmese empire.³⁴ As an affront to this declared policy and threatening posture of the Burmese authority, Captain Canning suggested the immediate "occupation of Arakan" by the Indian Government.³⁵

By the early part of 1811, the situation in the Arakan-Chittagong frontier became very tense. This happened due to the revolt led by Khyen-Byen*, called King Berring by the British, in Arakan against the Burmese.³⁶ A native of Arakan but a fugitive in the Chittagong district under British possession, Khyen-Byen organised a formidable force there and at the head of this force he crossed the river Naaf, and invaded Arakan. Within a very short time he conquered the whole of Arakan except the capital.³⁷

In this venture of Khyen-Byen, the Burmese authority suspected the complicity of the British. Any way, Khyen-Byen's victory over the Burmese was short-lived, he was soon defeated and driven into Chittagong along with his fellow comrades Larung Bage and Nakloo. Close on their heels, the Governor of Arakan with a large force entered into the British territory in search of Khyen-Byen and other rebel fugitives. But soon he returned to his country along with the force.³⁸ This time again Captain Canning was sent for the third time to Ava to settle the on-going disputes.³⁹ However, Captain Canning did achieve nothing and the Arakan-Chittagong frontier question remained as tense as ever until it was settled as a result of the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824-26 in favour of the British.

During the reigns of Bodawpaya (1782-1819) and of the first eight years of his grandson Bagyidaw (1819-1826) the Burmese annexation of Arakan and intermitant incursions into Chittagong became merged with their policy of expansion towards Manipur and Assam. Burmese aggression into Manipur has already been partially treated above and now we shall take up the thread from where we have left. After the death of Jai Singh in 1798, Harsha Chandra (Robin Chandra according to Pemberton) succeeded him to the throne.⁴⁰ But soon a period of political instability, caused by fraternal wars and intrigues, ensued in Manipur. And taking advantage of it the Burmese intervened in the internal affairs of the country in 1812. This Burmese interference in Manipur resulted in the installation of Marjit Singh as the King.⁴¹

But the relations between the Burmese and Marjit Singh did not continue to be cordial and by the year 1819 the Burmese again invaded Manipur. Marjit accompanied by his brother Gambhir Singh fled to Cachar and there he joined his brother Chaurajit Singh. The Burmese now raised one Shoobal to the throne of Manipur.⁴² By 1823 the Burmese fully established their hegemony in Manipur and now they were in the look out to invade Cachar.

Govinda Chandra, the king of Cachar took refuge in Sylhet ostensibly to get British help for driving out the Manipuri princes from his country in a bid to regain his throne in Cachar. But after his failure to enlist British help Govinda Chandra made overtures

to the Burmese. The Burmese started hostilities with the Manipuri prince Gambhir Singh to restore Govinda Chandra in 1823. Thus since 1813 i.e. since the flight of Churajit Singh from Manipur to Cachar the latter became the arena for the struggle for mastery between the Manipuri princes on one side and Govinda Chandra and the Burmese on the other.⁴³ The Burmese saw to it as an opportunity for the materialisation of their territorial expansionist policy.

Now we propose to turn our attention to the Burmese policy of expansion towards Assam. It has long been contended that Ghinai Badan Chandra Barphukan was the man who to satisfy his own selfish ends in difference to the public weal and safety and security of the country, had invited the Burmese to invade Assam. The Burmese accordingly in compliance to his request invaded Assam in the beginning of 1817 during the reign of Ahom king Chandra Kanta Singha (1810-18). By so doing Badan Chandra Barphukan proved himself to be a traitor to his motherland.

But contrary to this ahistorical treatment and popular concept emanated therefrom the historical evidences before us hold out an altogether different picture or proposition. Late Benudhar Sarma has dealt with this aspect in his memorable historical write-up captioned, "Deshdrohi Kon : Badan Ne Purnananda ?" (Who the Traitor : Badan or Purnananda ?)⁴⁴ But his treatment is also not without some short-comings. However, it is interesting to note that Assam was listed by the Burmese king for conquest even before the Barphukan (Badan Chandra) had extended an invitation and had lighted the torch on their way to Assam.

To begin with, in the light of the Burmese invasions and incur sions in Arakan, Chittagong, Manipur and Cachar it was not unexpected of the Burmese to venture for the conquest of Assam. The British Government in Calcutta got an intelligence from Captain Hiram Cox (1796-98) that the Burmese had planned an invasion for Assam in 1797.⁴⁵ This information, a first of its kind to the British Government on Assam, was communicated by Captain Cox soon after his return from his Burmese mission to Calcutta in March 1798.⁴⁶ "Cox warned", so writes Prof. Hall, "the Government of India that, if the Arakanese frontier question were not settled according to their wishes, the Burmese threatened to invade Bengal, and that *they were actually planning intervention in Assam*".⁴⁷

Captain Cox, during his stay in Burma from 1796 to 1798, came to know of the Burmese intention of an invasion on Assam. On the basis of the evidences found in the Manuscript Diary of Cox, Mr. Bayfield writes, "At this time (March, 1797-RK) a Raja of Assam, who had usurped the throne, and had been deposed with the aid of the British, made an application to the Burmese Court for assistance, and great preparations were making for invading Assam although Captain Cox had previously informed the ministers, that state was under British protection".⁴⁸ Bayfield continues his narratives on the basis of informations of Captain Cox : "Preparations were still going on for invading Assam, and His Majesty intended to head the army ; he, however, had no tent. A polite

message was therefore concocted and delivered by the Ye-Woon to Captain Cox, who immediately supplied the deficiency".⁴⁹

The 'Raja of Assam' referred to in the foregoing quotations was no other than Bijoy Barmura Gohain, a scion of the Ahom royal family.⁵⁰ He was a "capable and energetic prince"⁵¹ but he suffered mutilation twice, in 1775 one of his eyes was extracted and the second ear lopped off, the first one having been removed in an earlier occasion.⁵² Thus he was made unfit to succeed to the Ahom throne. But still, with the death of Gaurinath Singha in 1795 Barmura Gohain made an abortive attempt to install himself as the Ahom monarch on the throne of Assam. But the then Prime Minister Purnananda Burlagohain proved more than a match for him and the former had already made Kinaram (Kamaleswar Singha) the king and expelled Barmura from the country.⁵⁴

Barmura first fled to Cachar and then to Manipur and from thence he communicated with the Burmese Government for an attack on Assam on his behalf.⁵⁴ Barmura Gohain also offered to give one of his daughters in marriage to the Burmese king Bodawpaya. The latter thought that he had got the opportunity to fulfil his ambition for territorial expansion towards British Bengal. With this objective in view, he "had sent early in 1797 an advanced army of 20,000 men to clear the roads in the route to Assam and intended to follow it up by a much larger force. There was great excitement in the city, and all the way up the river Irrawaddy was alarmed with the din and preparations for war".⁵⁵

Therefore, the preparations in the Burmese Court for an invasion of Assam in 1797 was made under the request of Bijoy Barmura Gohain, a very powerful claimant to the throne of Assam. Dr. Bhuyan in the same vein with Captain Cox writes ; "An army was equipped at Amarapura for being despatched to Assam, but the expedition was abandoned on the representation of Captain Cox that Assam was tributary to the Company".⁵⁶ Dr. Bhuyan's opinion that the Burmese had abandoned their contemplated invasion of Assam on Cox's representation can not be accepted on the ground that Assam was not at that time a British 'tributary', nor was it so even thereafter ; secondly, the Burmese never abandoned the plan nor relinquished their rights over Chittagong, Manipur and Cachar even after repeated assertion of rights by the British over them. The Burmese postponed their contemplated invasion of Assam so as to enable them to fight back the British in the Arakan-Chittagong frontier. During 1798-1812, the affairs in Manipur and then the affairs in Cachar during 1812-23 also contributed much for the diversion of the attention of the Burmese Court towards that direction.

We can, therefore, well presume that there was every possibility of a Burmese attack on Assam as they did not give up their plan to do so when the time would become propitious for them. Dr. Bhuyan also writes ; "But Captain Cox, from the intimate knowledge of the character of the Burmese and of their political ambition at that time, was convinced that their resolution to desist from interference in Assam was only temporary, and that it would be taken up when-

ever favourable opportunities would present themselves".⁵⁷ And they did attack Assam in March 1817.

Dr. H. K. Barpujari has rightly remarked that "Apparently, the Burmese intervention in the affairs of Assam had been occasioned by the political bankruptcy of the Ahom monarchy, but the real cause lay in the ambition of the Court of Amarapura to extend its power as far as the Valley of the Brahmaputra. Actually, the programme began with the reign of A-Laung-Pa-Ya (1752-60), when a portion of Manipur was annexed to Burma".⁵⁸ Therefore, Badan's request to the Burmese king to interfere in Assam did not constitute the only 'determinant' and can not be treated as such. In the light of the cherished ambition of the Burmese king(s) his (Badan's) request to interfere in Assam seems to be an historical co-incident.

In extending his request to the Burmese king, Badan Chandra Barphukan, seems to have had the support of king Chandra Kanta Singha.⁵⁹ "In execution of his plan to establish his influence over the states lying between Burma and British India he had in 1813 set Marjit Singha, son of Jai Singha, on the throne of Manipur after having dispossessed his elder brother Chaurajit Singha. Marjit acknowledged his dependence on the Burmese king and ceded the Kabaw Valley to his protector. The prospect of obtaining the allegiance of the Assam Raja by suppressing his prime minister was not a thing to be abandoned by the ambitious monarch Bodawpaya. He therefore commanded the chiefs of Mogaung, Bhamo and Moying, three principalities lying between Assam and Ava, to proceed against the Buragohain, each with 5,000 soldiers".⁶⁰

But in view of Badan Chandra's request the Burmese king, despite his long cherished ambition, seems to have abandoned the plan of his territorial expansion towards Assam and remained satisfied only with providing assistance to the former against the Buragohain as it becomes apparent from the following. The Burmese king entrusted the command of the force to Bom Senapati and Kamini Phukan with emphatic instruction to punish all the enemies of the Barphukan and to desist from any refractory action against the heavenly king.⁶¹ The Tai chronicle, *Weissali Huhkong*, credited the Burmese king with the despatch of 6,000 soldiers under three generals respectively of Man-Mo (Bham or Bhamo), Mung-Kong (Mogaung) and Mung-ang (Moying), the general of Man-Mo being entrusted with the responsibility of chief command while *Weissali Mung-Dun-Chun-Kham*, another Tai chronicle, keeps silent on the strength of the force, says that the command was given to two generals of Man-Mo and Mung-Kong.⁶²

The Burmese king addressed the generals twice before their march towards Assam and strictly instructed them to return to Burma by the time the monsoon began.⁶³ From this it becomes clear that the Burmese king gave the assistance only against the prime minister and it was not in any way an attempt in the fulfilment of his ambition for territorial expansion towards Assam. Thus helped by the Burmese king Bodawpaya, Badan Chandra, at the head of about 6,000 soldiers entered Assam through the Patkai

Hills in March 1817.⁶⁴

Historians held different opinion as to the strength of the Burmese force, they mostly guessed the figure as they liked.⁶⁵ But taking into consideration the evidences provided by the *Weissalisa* and coupled with the nature of the hazardous journey through hilly ridges infested with ferocious beasts like tigers and bears and diseases and rivers with strong currents and paucity of provisions, it can easily be said that the Burmese force had never been consisted of more than six thousand soldiers,⁶⁶ and the actual number was even less when it reached Assam. Hiteswar Barbaruah says that Badan Chandra had collected about 8,000 soldiers within Assam itself soon after his arrival.⁶⁷ Though the figure itself is incredible there is some truth about it and it can be said that Badan Chandra commanded the allegiance of a great number of people in and around the capital the heartland of the Ahom kingdom otherwise he could not have succeeded in enlisting their support against the Buragohain.

In the first en-counter the forces sent by Purnananda Buragohain, the Prime Minister, under Daman Gogoi and Hao Bora⁶⁸ were defeated at Ghiladhari by the Burmese. Soon after this, Purnananda Buragohain died of illness and his son, Ruchinath, became the Buragohain. His attempts to resist Badan Chandra turned into failure in the battle near Kathalbari, and after this he fled to Guwahati.

Numali Rajmao, the queen-mother, made arrangements to welcome Badan Chandra in the capital.⁶⁹ Accordingly Badan Chandra entered into the capital city, met the king, Chandra Kanta Singha, and paid his homage to him (king) 'by falling prostrate at his feet'. 'Both of them were pleased to meet each other' and the king made Badan Chandra the 'prime minister with a new designation, Mantri Barphukan'.⁷⁰

It is to be mentioned here that the Burmese soldiers were kept confined in the east of Jorhat and were well under the control of Badan Chandra. As they were strictly under his control, the Burmese soldiers, says Gunaviram Baruah, could do no mischief to the people in general.⁷¹

Badan Chandra brought forth these soldiers only to suppress Purnananda Buragohain and after the achievement of his objectives, he sent them back with usual presents to the king of Burma as well as to the general, Cha-Ang, the Tai chronicler, who accompanied the Burmese force to Assam, says that 'Badan Barphukan presented the Man-Mo general a young girl, some horses, an elephant and good many pieces of gold and silver'.⁷² Dr. Bhuyan writes on the retirement of the Burmese force thus, 'in April 1817, the Burmese retired from the neighbourhood of Jorhat'.⁷³

It is to be observed here that this force did not attempt at the establishment of Burmese political sovereignty over Assam, rather they retired peaceably after establishing friendly relations between the two countries on equal footing.⁷⁴ This was because of the political sagacity of Badan Chandra Barphukan. However, this episode in the history of Assam can be treated as Burmese intervention but not as Burmese invasion of the worst type.

As a matter of fact, the full-fledged invasion by the Burmese forces took place sometime after the cold-blooded murder of Badan Chandra in Assam. The news of killing of Badan Chandra and the subversion of authority of Chandra Kanta Singha by Ruchinath reached the Burmese Court⁷⁵ and the King of Ava 'was so much aggrieved and enraged that he ordered his army to march to *Weissali* (Assam) at once'.⁷⁶ This time 'ten thousand men were enlisted as soldiers of the invading army'⁷⁷ This Burmese force was led into Assam by Kiaming or Aluming Bargohain with Momai Baruah, an Assamese migrant to Burma and a powerful potentate there of, as guide. This invasion commenced in and from January/February 1819 and continued upto February 1826. It ended as a result of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) by the victory of which the English East India Company established their political hegemony in Assam. Assam became a part of the British empire in India.

Notes & References

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8. Ibid., p. 4 ; Moirang Raja is referred to as Kelemba by Dr. Brown and Bairang by the Ahom Chronicles. Gait, n. 2, p. 188.
9. Ibid. ; Pemberton, n. 5, p. 45. But there is a different account about the assistance given by Rajeswar Singha. He sent one Haranath Senapati Phukan at the head of an Ahom force in aid of Jai Singh, but this force, because of jungle route could not make its way out into Manipur and returned to Assam and the Burmese retreated on their own to Burma. Haranath's attempts at clearing the jungles on way to Manipur were a failure and this episode is referred to in the history of Assam as '*Latakata Ran*'. Asom Buranji, Gunaviram Baruah, Calcutta, 1876, Assam Publication Board (herein after APB), Guwahati, reprint, 1972, p. 101 ; Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826, Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, 1948, Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, reprint 1974, p. 2 ; Ahomar Din, Hiteswar Barbaruah, APB, Guwahati, 1981, p. 250.
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