

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

TENTH SESSION

SHILLONG : 1989

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The Tenth Session of the North East India History Association was held at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, amidst great enthusiasm and gaiety. This was indeed a memorable occasion in the history of the Association. The Decennial Celebrations aspart, a session was being held for the second time in the same institution and in the same venue that the Association was born ten years ago and the First Session held a year later. The Association is thankful to the authorities of the North-Eastern Hill University and organising it in the befitting manner.

Shri P. G. Marbaniang, Speaker, Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, inaugurated the session which was graced by Shri P. A. Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya, as guest of honour. Professor Iqbal Narain, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. P. Singh, Head, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University—did the Association a great honour as the Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor J. N. Phukan of the Gauhati University. The release of a commemorative Publication of the Organising committee entitled NEIHA DECENNIAL by Professor H. K. Barpujari, the first President of the Association, a decennial symposium on "A Decade of Historical Research in North-East", and colourful cultural programmes of songs and dances of the seven states of the region by the students of NEHU are among the special features of the decennial Celebrations. A record number of one hundred and eighty delegates attended the session in which ninety research papers were presented and discussed in eleven panels.

The present volume is the proceedings of the tenth session of the North East India History Association held at the North-Eastern Hill University on October 12-14, 1989. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. M. S. Sangma, Dr. Gautam Sengupta, Dr. Soumen Sen, Shri Atul Dev Sarmah and Shri Amitabha Deb for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We must also thank the Indian Council of Historical Research for generous financial assistance to the Association for the session and for publication of the proceedings.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North-East India History Association.

Shillong,

The 25th August 1990.

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The British Land Revenue Policy in Assam in the early Stage and its Impact Upon the Peasantry (1826 - 1874)

Ananda Saikia

During the period under review, Assam means Assam proper or the Brahmaputra Valley, covering an area of about 56, 274 sq Km., which included the former administrative districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup, and Goalpara.¹ The peasantry constituted nearly 90% of the total population of Assam. The land revenue was one of the main sources of revenue of the British Government. After the independence, the National Government assured the toiling masses of the country to set up a socialistic pattern of society by liquidating all traces of feudalism. But very little has been done to distribute the agricultural land among men behind the plough.² Even after 42 years of achieving independence, the problems of peasantry in Assam remained the same as those of other states of India. The roots of the present land problems which originated in the British rule must be sought out on regional basis of a vast country like India for proper solution of the problems. With proper understanding and interpretation of the past, it is convenient to evolve policies for future. Here, in this paper, a humble attempt has been made to investigate how new type of feudalism introduced by British East India Government along with capitalistic form affected the peasantry in the first stage of the British rule, that is from 1826 to 1874 during the Bengal presidency.

With the expulsion of the Burmese from the soil of Assam, the British East India Company established the joint commissioner-ship in Assam. David Scott and Col. Richards were Commissioners of Lower and Upper Assam respectively.³

So far as the land revenue is concerned, David Scott, at first, continued with the earlier '*Khel*' system in a modified form. In lieu of personal service, produce revenue was demanded in cash from the Pykes. Rupees 3 per pyke as poll tax was levied in-

Assam. The old Pyke officers of the former Ahom Government, Borahs, Saikias, and Hazarikas were assigned with the duty of revenue collection in the lower Assam, the settlements were made on the basis of earlier records. Both in lower and central Assam a tax Rs. 2/- known as 'gadhan' was imposed on each pyke. In return, they were entitled to get three 'Puras' of arable land. At first, it was neither hereditary nor transferable.⁴ Moreover, the whole valley was divided into five administrative districts : Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong and Lakhimpur except the present Sibsagar District. The then Sibsagar District was given to Purandar Singha, an Ahom prince on tributary basis in 1833. On the plea of his being a defaulter in 1839, he was deposed of and Sibsagar was also annexed with the rest of the British Indian Empire. Sibsagar became the sixth district of the newly acquired Assam.⁵ Before 1835, the newly annexed territory in Assam proper was under the direct administration of the Governor General of India. But it came under the Bengal presidency with a separate Commissioner of its own directly responsible to the Bengal Government in that year. The Hill areas which came under the British occupation were reorganised on district basis. Here, the British Government introduced house tax in every family as a revenue measure. In fact, barring a few particular areas such as the submountain regions at the Garo Hills and some tracts in the Jaintia Hills, there was practically no land revenue and in most part, the assessment was on the house and not on land. In other two districts of Assam, Cachar and Goalpara, the British Government introduced the permanent settlement like that of Bengal. These two districts are outside the scope of our present study.

The first and foremost problem of the peasantry of Assam was the payment of land revenue in cash. First, they were not accustomed to it. Secondly, there was a negligible volume of money in circulation under the Ahom rule. After the British the supply of money was scarce in the state in relation to revenue demand in cash. Even the export position was not better than that of the import. As a consequence, very many sold themselves and their children into slavery. Rutherford, the P. A. Central Assam, claimed in 1833 that the Britishers were successful in their "daily obtaining a greater whole in Assam".⁷ As a result of the cash payment of the land revenue policy adopted by British Government, the condition of the peasantry in Assam who were comparatively self dependent during the Ahom rule, became worse under the new administration.

During the period under review, the relation between the government and the cultivators was determined by the Ryotwaree system of land settlement. In order to understand Ryotwaree settlement, we must go a half century back from this period. It was Captain Road who experimented with the Ryotwaree system in Madras from 1792. Its proper and actual functioning was brought into practice in the same state in 1864.⁸ This system was found largely in Madras, Gujarat, Tamilnadu, Madhya Pradesh and Assam.⁹

Under the Ryotwaree system the settlement is made by the Government directly with the Ryots or cultivators who thus became the proprietors of land. Initially this was doccenial and later increased to thirty years, after which there was to be re-assessment and settlement on new terms. In the new settlement, the Ryots were subject to rigorous terms and over-assessment. They had even the right to sell their land. Since the ownership of land was vested with the government, the Ryots had simply the right of occupancy. It is for this reason that they were known as occupancy tenants. Cultivation under the system is done ordinarily by land owners themselves.¹⁰ But some land owners gave land to others on share cropping basis. This is known as 'ADHI' system, the cultivators under the system are called 'Adhiars'.

There were three types of land tenure system found in operation in different regions of British India - *Zamindari System*, *Mahalwari* and *Malguzari system*, and *Ryotwaree system*. The Ryotwaree system was preferred most. The only reason for the choice of it was that the government was allured into the everpressing need for revenue. The assesment of the individual cultivator made possible high collection, at least as important, it ensured that when cultivation expanded, the government would gain directly.¹¹

It is essential to discuss some of the evils which resulted from Ryotwaree system. At the first place, the payment of land revenue was subject to periodic revisions. Secondly, in many occasions, the assesment was excessive and many Ryots were forced to abandon their cultivation and became wage earners. Thirdly, as it was individual settlement, the Ryots could not stand collectively to get their grievances removed.¹² Hence, R. C. Dutta, in his 'Economic History of India' remarks,

"Sweep away all intermediaries ignore the usefull role of village community official, left cushinoing influence between the government and vast multitude of helpless cultivators and there

by opened the way for excessive assesment without suitable provisions timely readress.”¹³

Assam's Ryots under this system faced same difficulties as stated in the above mentioned quotation.

It is indispensible to say something regarding the abolition of slavery system in Assam in 1843. The abolition of slavery system is interrelated with the revenue system of the state. By abolishing slavery in Assam, the Britishers did a Yeoman's service to the people of Assam. But it should be noted here that they were induced to do this for their own interest. Along with the British Officers, some European Tea Planters also came to Assam, for lucrative tea cultivation.

The British Tea Planters also wanted to utilise the services of the freed slaves in their newly established tea gardens in Assam. In the words of Dr. Amalendu Guha's "Planters Raj to Swaraj" 2nd Ed. Page - 10, the slaves and bonds man under the Ahom aristocracy became tenants under the British rule. After all, the abolition of slavery by Britishers served three feld purposes. First, it crippled the Ahom aristocracy and upset the very social structure of the society. Secondly, it compelled the freed people to look for employment in the tea gardens. Lastly, most of them became wage earners and sharecroppers under the land owners. Freed although they were, the people could not avail of the opportunity of land abundance in the country due to capital shortage. The prevailing land revenue system stood on their way of becoming free ryots. The abolition of slavery, in fact, could not do any good for the freed slaves.

With regard to religious land property of Assam, the Britishers followed the same land revenue policy of the previous Ahom Government with slight modifications under the Ahom Government considerable areas of arable land were also assigned as rent free '*Lakhiraj*' in the form of '*debottar*', '*Dharmottar*' and '*Brahmottar*' grants for the services in the temples and *Satras* and for the support of the persons attached thereto.ⁿ The Britishers retained this system with a view to getting the support from the '*Satradhikars*' (religious head of the *vaishnavite* monasteries). With the object in view the Government granted '*Lakhiraj*' (rent free) land and in some cases '*Nisfkhiraj*' (land assessed at half the usual rate of revenue) land to the '*Satradhikaras*' who could produce relevent documents of the provious government in this regard. In this context the names of Auniati *Satradhikar* and *Dakhinpat Satradhikar* may be cited who were granted 2200 and 1200 acres

of land respectively by the them British Government.¹⁵ By acquiring rent free land from the government, most of the *Satradhikars* who got rent free land exploited the poor ryots by offering them land on share cropping basis and created a *Zamindari* of their own over their *Vaishnavite* disciple. Thus the British land settlement system is directly responsible for creating a *Vashnavite Zamindari* Class in Assam, of course, all states were not included in it.

Another set of rules can be mentioned in connection with the land settlement of this period. This is known as wasteland rules of 6 March 1838. To make wasteland available for special cultivation on attractive terms, these rules were framed. The land grants by the government under this system was fully utilised by the British tea companies. The Assam Tea Company and Jorhat Tea Company were started in 1840 and 1859 respectively. Again, the British government introduced the system of fee simple grants in 1861 for facilitating the tea planters in getting land from the government on easy term.¹⁶ Of course, an indigenous ryot also could get as much land under this act, but he had not means enough to improve the lands under occupation. Moreover, the planters who had the advantage of being Europeans urged the government to enhance the land revenue so that the poor peasants could be flushed out of their village to work for wage on the plantations. After all, the tea planters in Assam could get as much land as they desired in the name of tea cultivation. Upto 1870-71, the British tea planters get settlement of seven lakh acres of land. But only 56000 acres of land were under tea cultivation, that is 1/8th of total settled land. All forest resources of uncultivated land like timber bamboos etc. were freely utilised by the planters themselves. Moreover, most of the unused land was sublet to their plantation workers for habitation and cultivation. In other words, every tea garden of Assam was a new *Zamindary* itself. The plantation workers in the tea gardens were thus the serfs in the new *Zamindari*.¹⁷

The essence of the various land system in British India was that they maintained a set of middle man called by different names in different parts of the vast country.¹⁸ Here, in Assam this class of middle man consisted of *Mauzadar*, *Choudhuries*, *Patgiries* in upper lower, and *mandal Tekala* (revenue collector) *Gaonburas* (Village head man) etc. in lower level of the society. The government counted for support on this class. In course of time, this class too became land lords. They gave out their surplus land to the landless ryots. In return, the land owner is entitled to have half of the produce from the land. This is another type

of exploitation on the poor and landless ryots which is prevailing still to-day.

To sum up, neither the very word *Zamindar* like that of Bengal was found in vogue in Assam proper excepting Goalpara, nor was it applied in any case although the mode of their activities was precisely the same. In Assam, the government exercised the power of a *Zamindar*, and the way the revenue demand was increased, the contact in which such increases were enforced, and their consequences for the present, were distinctive.¹⁹ Hence, the said revenue policy resulted in a set of *Zamindar* who could exploit the poor peasantry in the state at their own discretion.

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