

MIRASDAR IN CACHAR: A TRADITION, A MYTH

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The introduction of British rule and the new administrative measures ushered in an era of great changes in every stratum of the social order of the Barak Valley. However, till the end of the eighteenth century these changes were not marked, as the social structure as a whole was not yet able to shake off its traditional features.

The concept of Mirasdar is clearly associated with land as the word 'miras' is equivalent to estate or land and therefore the owner of the land is so called.

Cachar was annexed to the British dominion in 1832. Prior to British annexation, 'khel' or 'miras' formed ¹the very essence of land revenue system in Cachar. This association or khel was organised purely on commercial principles for the purpose of taking up land with the obligation of payment of ₂revenue and discharge of certain customary services. In order to perform these obligations all the members of the khel were jointly and severally responsible. This practice of taking up and holding of ₃land jointly was locally known as the Mirasdari tenure.

The district of Sylhet (erstwhile Karimganj Sub-Division) came under the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwallis in 1793. Here, the holders of large estates who used to sublet their land were called Zamindars and Talukdars ⁴and the smaller holders were called Mirasdar. But in Cachar Mirasdar was a ⁵petty Zamindar who mostly cultivated land by himself. B.C. Allen defines that during the last settlement the inhabitants of the village were classified into (a) Mirasdar who derived their chief income from rents, (b) Mirasdar who sublet part of their land but were substantial cultivators themselves, (c) Mirasdar who cultivate the whole

of their land and neither sublet nor rent, and (d) Mirasdars who had to rent land in addition to their holdings. Thus Mirasdars by virtue of their age-old status and economic stability added a new element to the social background of the valley of Cachar. Naturally, they claimed themselves to be an aristocratic class which was gradually manifested in their life style.

A careful observation of the rural areas of Cachar and by making conversation with the aged persons of the locality it appeared that as a result of transition and experiment on land by the British there emerged two types of landed Mirasdars in the society. The self-made Mirasdar was one who had acquired that position by dint of hard labour and another, created by the British for their own interest. For example, influential Mirasdars were nominated by the British as village representative like Anjuman Secretary, Sarpanch etc. Here also, the former Mirasdars continued to be regarded as influential persons in the society and thus added more to their power and prestige.

Ashu Mia, (in the book Bangabir Hari Charan Sharma is referred to as Apa mea)⁸ One of the forefathers of Moniul Hoque Choudhury and another Hari Charan Thakur of Hailakandi were the two influential Mirasdars who were sent by the British to check the inroads of the Lushais in the latter part of the eighteen sixties. As a mark of honour to their valuable services they were bestowed with some fisheries and jungle mehals as will be evident from the extract of the officiating Commissioner of Dacca.

"I would ... permit the Deputy Commissioner to give Apa mea and Baboo Harri Thakur some Farms or Talooks on easy terms especially as marks of approbation for services on this occasion. Baboo Harri Thakur's services

were really very valuable. He seems to have exercised on the Dulesary side somewhat the same active influence which Apa mea employed on the Soonay. Harri Thakur has also on more occasions than one been prominently thanked and I⁹ believe rewarded by Government."

Thus Hari Thakur received the area equivalent¹⁰ to 413 acres 2 roods and 16 perches in Halakandi and later he was given the title Rai Bahadur. Similarly, Apa mea or Ashu Mia was rewarded with fisheries and Julkar mehals like Letkhari, Banskandi Anowa (beel), Rupairbali Anowa, Satkara-kandi Anowa and Dhanehari. These examples show that those persons who were influential in the society and the honour bestowed on them had uplifted them into a higher position, also these grants enhanced their aristocratic outlook to a great extent.¹¹

A very interesting tale is connected with the name of Nasib Ali Mazumdar, another landed Mirasdar of Cachar. He was popularly known as Anjuman Secretary, nominated by the British. The British officials used to make all correspondences with him. In this connection he would very often have to go to Delhi. In order for him to show due respect to the English very often parties were arranged in his two-storied building, the pomp and glory of which is still remembered by the elderly people of the village. Those parties were held in an English fashion though indigenous in character and for the occasion the public road was covered with valuable red clothe for the sahib guests.

It is said that, the showmanship character of Nasib Ali created some social hurdles in the minds of the innocent ryot who were compelled to maintain an artificial relation, one of fear and respect. Again, the ryots had to abide by certain

unwritten rules towards those Mirasdars. A legend is in vogue that people had to take off their shoes and to get down from their horses while passing the house of the Anjuman Secretary. Once a person named Zakir Shekh on the charge of violating that rule was inflicted with a severe punishment. He was offered a garland made with shoes instead of flower and that was done ceremonially in front of a public gathering. Undoubtedly, it was an example of oppressions to the ryots by the Mirasdars.¹²

Besides, there were another type of Mirasdars in Cachar who by dint of hard labour had acquired the status of landed Mirasdars themselves. Anjab Ali, the grandson of Alalkha and forefather of Monir Uddin Mazumdar¹³ was another Mirasdar. He was a man of principle, courage and self respect. A tradition goes like this: Once a British high official accused him of not showing due respect while passing in front of his house. Anjab Ali demanded his identification saying it was impossible to tell apart a high official by seeing the attire or the horse of the Britishers all of whom had the identical horse. As a result of which, by an order of the high official, all other horses around had their tuft chopped up since then to extal the identical position of the officials. This was an example of courage and intelligence and it shows that not all the Mirasdars were puppets in the hands of the British.¹⁴

Sona Mia Choudhury, was also an influential Mirasdar of Satkarakandi within the Sonai block, Sonapur Pargana. He was a well-to-do person. To show his power and fame he built some mosques. He was so vindictive by nature that people did not dare to contradict his word even if he was wrong. He had enmity with his brother. Once he killed his brother's elephant. Soon after this incident his grandson while playing with a gun died from a

sudden burst from the weapon. So there is still a saying in vogue among the village people.

"Je barude merechilo Dhulamiar hathi"¹⁵
 Se barude mara galo Sona Miari nathi."

(The firearm which killed the elephant of Dhulamia was the same to kill Sonamia's grandson too).

According to another statement, Madhav Singha Hazaree who was a Mirasdar of Ram Nagar area (adjacent to rail station of Silchar), was appointed by the British as Sarpanch. Similarly, Binode Singh was another Mirasdar of Lakhipur. In Barkhola, Hemango Singh of village Chesri was also a Sarpanch of that area.¹⁶

Thus a comparative study between the two types of Mirasdars revealed their feudal mentality and prestige seemed to be the important feature of the medieval social structure of Cachar. With the gradual influx of land hungry people from adjacent areas of Bengal the Mirasdars started contending among themselves to increase the number of sub-tenants or ryots.

In the later days, the history both recorded as well as in folklore of Cachar is replete with stories of Mirasdars fighting both in the fields and in the Sadar Court for dominance on land. In this context, a number of Mirasdars lost their properties, power and glory, and in between a new class of Vakil class came in the forefront who made most of the feuds of the Mirasdars by offering them advice and guidance in their legal fights against other Mirasdars. But that is a different story and we may leave it for some other occasion.

Notes & References

1. N.C. Dutta, "Land Reforms in Assam Since Independence", Ph.D. Thesis, Gauhati, 1963, p.28.
2. B.C. Allen, **Gazetteer of Assam**, Vol.I (Cachar), Allahabad, 1905, p.28.
3. **The Assam Land Revenue Manual**, Vol. I, Sixth Edition, Shillong, 1946, p. CVII.
4. Dutta, **Op.cit.**, p. 37.
5. J.N. Das, **An Introduction to the Land Laws of Assam**, Gauhati, 1985 (Sixth Edition), p.16.
6. Allen, **Op.cit.**, p. 103.
7. 'Anjuman' is a word of Persian origin equivalent to 'Sabha', 'Majlis', Committee, Council or 'Mahphil'. 'Sarpanch' was also equivalent to public representative.
8. Late Moniul Hoque Choudhury, a resident of Sonabarighat, Part I, Sonai Block, Pargana Sonapur of the district of Cachar, an eminent political leader, one time a Cabinet Minister in Central.
9. U.C. Guha and A.K. Sharma, **Bangabir Hari Charan Sharma**, Dacca, 1325 B.S., p. 65.
10. **Ibid.**, Letter No. 715, 30th November, 1870, pp.81-82.
11. Conversation with Md. Monir Uddin Mazumdar and Sonahar Ali Mazumdar of Sonabarighat Part I, aged about 70-75 years respectively.
12. **Ibid.**
13. Monir Uddin Mazumdar, an inhabitant of Sonabarighat, within Sonai Block, Sonapur Pargana, aged about 70, a well-to-do man with whom conversation was made.
14. Interview with Md. Monir Uddin Mazumdar.
15. Conversation with Md. Zoad Ali Barlaskar and Md. Mohibur Rahaman Barlaskar, aged about 65, resident of Kanakpur, Silchar.
16. Interview with E. Chandra Singha, Retd. Revenue Seristadar of Silchar, Cachar.