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## **Colonial Penetration versus Indigenous Reaction : Slavery Abolition in Northeast India**

Slavery has existed in one form or another throughout the world since millennia and contributed to change the world, as the world transformed itself with the changes in the mode of production. The movement of the Europeans across the continents in the fifteenth century created in the Americas the most dynamic, productive and exploitative system of slavery. Three centuries later, the inter-continental developments had successfully challenged the institution of slavery. Within another century, a new phase of anti-slavery movements started with the expansion of European imperialism. On the other hand, the twentieth century Europe was itself 'inundated by a new system of slavery'. The Western scholars working on the problem of slavery presented it more as a 'monolithic', 'one-size-fits-all phenomenon', characterized by the features such as 'natal-alienation', 'persons as property', 'coercion', or 'social death'. They were largely influenced by the Atlantic Plantation Model, which developed in Caribbean, Brazil, and the American South.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the process of enslavement of the weak, poor, defeated, etc. has been continuing for a long time in Northeast India and the neighbouring Southeast Asia before the western colonial penetrations. During the pre-colonial period the institution of slavery was part and parcel of societies and polities in the region, though the societies were largely 'societies with slaves' rather than the 'slave societies'. They operated the institution with resounding impact from Assam to Myanmar. The Singpho territory, which connected the two, was the main area of concentration. The slave-owning strengthened the material foundation of the society, not only by its use value but also by exchange value. Medieval and early modern polities in the Indo-Burmese borderlands enslaved the war captives and the process intensified with the introduction of firearms in the region.<sup>2</sup> It is believed that some of the recent researches on the institution of slavery in Northeast India and Southeast Asia<sup>3</sup> are useful in understanding the process of slavery abolition in Northeast India because of similarity of the sources and their relevance to the historical reconstruction of the problem of slavery abolition. It is in this background that the slavery abolition in Northeast India

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is discussed in this paper. The first part of the paper discusses the historiography and the second analyses the colonial policies and their ramifications.

## I

In his address of the General President to the Indian History Congress, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya observed, "The legitimization of colonial state's authority was accompanied by the delegitimation of pre-colonial authority at levels ranging from the pre-colonial claimants to sovereignty to lower levels such as the 'native princes', chiefs and the like."<sup>4</sup> In case of Northeast India, the colonial interventions 'delegitimized' not only the Ahom state of Assam but also the neighbouring hill polities including those in Burma (Myanmar). The British administrators and writers projected the interventions as that of the saviour of society. The action against the Singpho chiefs towards liberation of their slaves has been glorified as a great service to humanity. The reports of the British officers on Singpho-Khampti raids into Assam and their impact were, therefore, carefully structured to justify the colonial aggressions. To quote an official report,

About 1814, while the Civil Wars prevailed, the tribes of the Khamptis took forcible possession of Sudiya, reducing the Assamese inhabitants to slavery, and maintained possession of the district, uniting with the Burmese interest during their invasion and occupation. Another wild tribe, the Singphos, had also recently taken advantage of the weakness of the Assam Government, and carried their ravages beyond the capital Rungpore, laying waste the whole country as far as Jorhaut, and carrying off the inhabitants into slavery. Both banks of the river were swept by their depredations, and the number of captives carried off amounted to many thousands. Of these the greater part were sold to the hill Singphos, Khamptis, Shams & C; but of those retained for domestic and agricultural services in the Assamese low lands 7,500 were liberated by the advance of the British detachments, and negotiations were set on foot for the liberation of the rest.<sup>5</sup>

The historians, who relied largely upon the colonial sources, also subscribed to the colonial views. For example, R. M. Lahiri writes: "The British seemed to step in as saviours rather than as conquerors. ... Assam was a liability rather than an asset. The Singpho territory had been overrun and pacified no doubt, but an influential number of the Singpho chiefs were still evading the protecting hands of the British Government. The Singphos were a predatory horde."<sup>6</sup> We have already discussed elsewhere<sup>7</sup> that it was a part of the conscious policy of the British administrators and writers to project the Singphos and the Khamptis as the enemies of peace and prosperity of Assam

and law and order in the region to legitimize the official highhandedness in suppressing the tribes. However, the case of the Singphos and the Khamptis is not an isolated one. The Lushai case is another example. The formal annexation of the Lushai Hills (by a proclamation dated September 5, 1895), accompanied by new administration, is said to have "generated a new force which transformed the indigenous tribe into an educated and cultured race" and that "the aim of the new administration was to secure the welfare of the people."<sup>8</sup> The officials also claimed that 'the new administrative set up was different from the Lushai system of government before the arrival of the English' which, according to them, 'may be described as a democracy tempered by despotism' and that the 'British Government ensured efficiency in the Lushai polity because the Superintendent was the philosopher, friend and guide always trying to educate the Chiefs into using their power well.'<sup>9</sup> What is more surprising is that it is not only the colonial writers but there are also some Indian scholars who echoed the same view of the administration. They gave us to understand that the British destroyed the big chiefs and replaced them by a large number of smaller chiefs, which led to peace and stability in the Lushai society. Moreover, the sobering influence of the missionaries is said to have made a considerable headway in removing many primitive savage practices (like slavery, horrible funeral, raid, purchase of bride on credit, etc.) of the tribes. The clergy forbade the marriage between the near relations and denounced the community sleeping of the unmarried persons. The sportive feasting and dancing gradually lost popularity and the harvesting festivities got merged with new festivals, like Christmas. The psalms and hymns of the Bible replaced the passionate tribal folksongs. The Lushais were educated and tamed. They gradually gave up the life of the commune and became thorough-going individuals. The influence of the Christian doctrine took away the rusticity of the wild life and made them inclined to peaceful avocations. Within few years, the educated Lushais became clerks in the offices, teachers in the schools, constables in the police force, and medical assistants in the hospitals. The frequent intercourse with people other than the Lushais in trade marts and other places broadened their outlook.<sup>10</sup>

The historiography of tribal resistance in the Northeast has another problematic due to 'anthropolization' of the tribes. The tribes were projected as 'primitive', 'barbarous', 'uncivilized', and the tribal reactions, like raids and plunders, were never considered indigenous protests against the colonial penetration. On the other hand, in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the British were

forcibly penetrating into the hills, occupying the land and subduing the people. It was during the same period that there was tribal resistance in the form of retaliatory raids and rebellions in almost all parts of the Northeast. Like other areas, the people in the north-east frontier (now Arunachal Pradesh) also wanted to keep the British away from their land and they were unwilling to accept the infringement of their rights in the hills or the plains. The collection of slaves from the plains was such a right that they have enjoyed for a long time. Despite the information in his own book, M.L. Bose did not consider the question of slavery abolition worth of finding a place in his discussion on British relations with the hill tribes in the frontier.<sup>11</sup>

## II

The abolition of slavery among the Singphos became an important issue in the British-Singpho relations because the land and slaves of the Singpho masters were the targets of the colonial rulers to be captured and possessed for the perpetuation of their own interests. The land was to be used for tea plantation and the liberated slaves as labourers. Thus, in January 1825 the British officers informed four Singpho chiefs that they will be allowed quiet possession of their lands, provided they surrendered the Assamese slaves, recognized the British supremacy, and agreed to inform them of the Burmese activities on the borders.<sup>12</sup> In June 1825, Capt. Neufville advanced up to the Nao Dihing and expelled the Burmese from Assam. During the operations, the British forces attacked many Singpho chiefs who had taken side with the Burmese. As the chiefs fled into the hills, Neufville set their 3000 Assamese slaves free. In the meantime, the victory of the British arms on the Irrawady greatly influenced the final submission of the Singphos. The Burmese accepted the defeat and retreated. About 6000 slaves were liberated. Under instructions from Neufville, the auxiliaries under the command of Bar Senapati and Sadiya Khawa Gohain also liberated a large number of Assamese slaves. Of the liberated slaves, 300 were incorporated in the regular fighting forces under Neufville.<sup>13</sup> The liberated slaves were allowed to take away as much as they could of the huge quantity of rice that was found in the granaries of the Singphos. In June 1826, David Scott, the Governor General's Agent, visited the Singpho territory and entered into engagements with sixteen chiefs who set free the Assamese slaves and agreed to help the British whenever the need arises.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, the Singphos were already impoverished by the forced liberation of the slaves as it caused them the loss of labour power. They gradually

settled down to agriculture and many took to elephant catching and hunting.<sup>15</sup> In 1834, a European officer was permanently posted at Sadiya to conduct relations with the Singpho chiefs and the chances of retaining slaves by the chiefs thus became smaller than ever.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the possession of slaves seemed to have continued among the Singphos even after the posting of the officer at Sadiya.<sup>17</sup> A report from the British Resident in the Court of Ava said,

With respect to the many natives of Assam detained as captives, I had ascertained that the great majority of them are in the hands, not of the Burmese but of the Singphos and other wild tribes.... who employ these unfortunate captives as domestic and agricultural slaves. The only way of gradually liberating them is ... to open a more regular and frequent intercourse between Assam and the Burmese dominions and thus facilitate the escape of these persons. We must expect great opposition on the part of the Singphos Chiefs, of whose wealth these Assamese captives have always formed the principal part... One Singpho Chief when deprived by use of his slaves was reduced to the necessity of guiding the plough with his own hands.<sup>18</sup>

The measures towards abolition of slavery were further discussed with the British Resident at Ava who suggested that the liberation of the Assamese captives "must be effected by slow and gradual means and that the most likely of attaining that object would be by opening a more regular and frequent intercourse between Assam and Burmese dominions."<sup>19</sup> In the meantime, the British pressure upon the Singpho chiefs to liberate their slaves mounted up. An official mission to the Singpho area was able to bring back 248 Assamese men, women and children to Assam.<sup>20</sup> Before long, it came to the notice of the government that the abolition of slavery was sure to create new problems in the Singpho area when an official report mentioned that the 'Singphos are in a great measure dependent on them (slaves) for labour, and in some villages they much out number their masters.'<sup>21</sup> As a matter of fact, there was no alternative source of labour in the area and the masters, especially chiefs, were not ready to reconcile to the damage to their socio-economic and political power. The officers in the frontier reported that the abolition of slavery was causing discontentment among the Singphos who were becoming rebellious against the British rule. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Assamese slaves were deserting their masters in large number, in some cases with their women and children, and these deserters, who had no location to settle, were likely to suffer

starvation and death unless the government offers them rehabilitation or restore them to their old masters.<sup>22</sup>

The situation thus compelled the government to strive for a permanent solution. Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, was asked by the Governor General to probe thoroughly into the Singpho affairs. Jenkins reported that the causes of the rebellions were mainly three, viz., (i) encroachment on the lands and privileges of the Singphos; (ii) the seizure and punishment by local officers of some members of their tribes; and (iii) the interventions of the Tippum Raja who was the chief of the Hookoon province of Burma. While reviewing the report, the Governor-General-in-Council set aside the last two causes. The loss of land was also not considered important as 'no land had ever been granted to the Singphos or was claimed by the Singphos as theirs.' It was, therefore, observed that the main reason behind the Singpho rebellion was the loss of their Assamese slaves and that after the loss of the slaves they are compelled to take to agriculture. Finally, it was concluded that they might be left alone for the time being.<sup>23</sup>

Evidently, the government suffered from indecision and the abolition of slavery in Arunachal Pradesh remained inconclusive till the independence of India.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the colonial administration never failed to achieve its objective to gradually expand the size of the area under tea plantation and to win over the liberated slaves who could be used as productive labour force in the tea gardens. The immense expansion of the tea industry in Assam in the latter part of the nineteenth century necessitated the increase in the labour force for the same. The plantation area in 1881 had been extended to more than 2,00,000 acres, whereas in 1850 it was only about 1,000 acres. In the same period the outturn of tea had increased from 2,50,000 pounds to the impressive figure of 40 million pounds. The capital invested amounted to fifteen million and an annual expenditure of two million pounds was being made for the maintenance of the plantation.<sup>25</sup>

The colonial intensions behind the slavery abolition among the Chins, as discussed elsewhere,<sup>26</sup> were not different from those in case of the Singphos. In 1889, Charles Crosthwaite, Chief Commissioner of Burma, informed the Taisuns that the British army will march to Tashon Ywama and that the government wishes to preserve their tribe and had no desire to punish them, as it was done to the Kanhows and Siyins who had resisted the British forces, provided the Taisuns agree only to two things: first, the captives

taken from the Burman villages should be released, and secondly, they should behave peacefully and cease to attack the subjects of the government.<sup>27</sup> The similar terms were also conveyed to the Haka and Zokhua Chins. General Symons, commanding the British troops, was not in favour of making terms with each tribe separately and preferred to deal with the Baungshe groups together. However, when three Zokhua chiefs offered their submission to the British authority, the following terms were offered: (i) to recognize British supremacy by paying an annual tribute and receiving the British officers with friendship and guarantee of safety; (ii) to pay a fine for resisting the advance of army; (iii) to release the Burmese captives at once; (iv) to cease from raiding anywhere in Burma or other British territory; (v) to assist in the movement of the British troops and officers; (vi) to do no damage to the roads or telegraph wires; etc. The chiefs were also informed that if the terms were not accepted by them the British army will burn their villages, destroy their grain and crops, and hunt and shoot their people down.<sup>28</sup> The texts of the proclamations are clear enough to read the arrogant and highhanded attitude of the British officers to penetrate into the hills. The success is also evident from the fact that while reviewing the situation in the Chin hills, in 1890, the Chief Commissioner of Burma was satisfied that the tribes around Fort White in the north had practically submitted and all the headmen had come in and met the Political Officer. The Sihzangs, another tribal group, also had given up the majority of their captives. The Commissioner then decided that the policy of allowing each village which surrendered its captives to rebuild their houses was to continue. However, he made it clear that until all the captives were released the Sihzangs would not be allowed to trade in the plains. He hoped that the 300 men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of 4<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas garrisoned at Fort Haka would be able to maintain British control in the southern hills. In his opinion, the most important work that remained was the making of a good cart road from Bengal to Burma, passing through Haka, for which it was necessary to send survey parties into the hills, both from Bengal and Burma.<sup>29</sup>

It may be concluded from the available sources that the British colonial penetration in the Indo-Burmese borderlands, either through Singpho territory or the Chin hills, faced persistent resistance from the indigenous tribal communities. An important motive behind the penetrations was to ensure the supply of free labour by liberating the slaves of the tribal masters. In fact, the colonial administration felt the scarcity of free labour and land whenever they wanted to facilitate the investments by British capitalists.

They found that the slave population under the control of the tribal chiefs and other tribal masters was an important source of supply of labour, provided those slaves were liberated and the liberated ones were extensively recruited as free labourers in the colonial acts. Accordingly, thousands of slaves were liberated and the tribal raids to capture new slaves were strongly prevented. The policy also aimed at destroying the power and position of the local chiefs for whom the use of slave labour in agriculture and income from the slave trade were important sources of the economy. The use of the slaves in militia was the source of their power and authority. Needless to say, such power and authority of the local chiefs were detrimental to the colonial interests. Hence, the colonial authority made determined efforts for abolition of slavery. On the other hand, the tribal chiefs reacted to the abolition of slavery by sporadic raids and plunders in the British territory as protests against the weakening of their traditional economy and authority. Thus, the tribal raids were actually the indigenous reactions of the tribal communities to the policy of slavery abolition, but the British authorities interpreted these as acts of aggressions and lawlessness to legitimize armed interventions for colonial subjugation of the tribal areas. The historiography of British colonialism in Northeast India is yet to reflect on these motives and consequences of the slavery abolition in the nineteenth century.

## Notes & References

<sup>1</sup> Indrani Chatterjee & R. M. Eaton (eds.), *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> A. K. Thakur, "The Institution of Slavery in the Chin Society: A Study", in K. Robin (ed.), *Chin: History, Culture & Identity*, Dominant Publishers, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 217-247; *idem*, "Abolition of Slavery in Mizoram: Christian Missionaries as a Factor", *Proceedings of North East India History Association* (hereafter PNEIHA), 27<sup>th</sup> session, Aizawl, 2006, pp. 312-24; L. Tochwang, "Bawi among the Mizo – A Historical Study", *ibid.*, 281-289; R. Bezbaruah, "Dr. Fraser's Crusade and Bawi-Correspondences 1909-23: Sources of Social History of the Lushai Hills District of Assam", in R. Bezbaruah (et.al. eds.), *North East India: Interpreting the Sources of History*, Aryan Books International, Delhi, 2006, pp. 225-47.

<sup>4</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Colonial State: Theory and Practice*, General President's Address, Indian History Congress, 65<sup>th</sup> session, Bareilly, 2004, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> *The Report upon the Subject of Slavery*, India Law Commission, 15 January 1841, p.154.

<sup>6</sup> R.M. Lahiri, *The Annexation of Assam*, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1954, reprint 1994, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> A. K. Thakur, "Labour, Land and Laws: Aspects of Tribal Resistance in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Arunachal Pradesh", paper presented to the ICHR sponsored National Seminar on 'Resis-

tance Movement in North Eastern India 1826-1947', 28-29 March, 2006, Department of History, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar (a good number of papers were presented by scholars on the theme in the seminar); *idem*, "Aspects of Socio-Political Formations in Pre-Colonial Arunachal Pradesh" in F. A. Qadri (ed.), *Society and Economy in North East India*, Volume Two, Regency Publications. New Delhi, 2006, pp. 155-99; B. N. Jha, "British Colonial Intervention and Tribal Responses in the North East Frontier of Assam", unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Proceedings of the Foreign Department, External 'A', Government of India, February, 1898, Nos. 118-19, see Major M. J. Shakespear, Offg. Political Officer, North Lushai Hills, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, dated Aijal, July 13, 1897, Letter No. 300. For details of the other Chins, see L. Tochhawng, "Bawi among the Mizo – A Historical Study", *op.cit.*; R. Bezbaruah, "Dr. Fraser's Crusade and Bawi-Correspondences 1909-23: Sources of Social History of the Lushai Hills District of Assam", *op.cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram under the British Rule*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1985, pp. 198-202; L. W. Shakespear's *History of Assam Rifles*, London, 1929, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> For details, see A. K. Thakur, "Some Aspects of Socio-economic and Political Formations in Pre-colonial Arunachal Pradesh: Myth and Reality", *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. XXXII, Dec. 2005, pp. 34-67.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on North East Frontier of Bengal*, Bengal Government Press, Calcutta, 1884, reprinted as *The North East Frontier of India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 63-64.

<sup>13</sup> Secret Consultations, 2 September, 1825, Nos. 22-24 and some other details in *Secret Consultations*, 23 Sep., 1825, Nos. 9-12.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander. Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 64; Secret Consultations, September 23, 1825, Nos. 9-12.

<sup>15</sup> Political Proceedings (Bengal), 7 May, 1830, Nos. 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.66.

<sup>17</sup> Verrier Elwin, *India's North East Frontier in Nineteenth Century*, OUP, Madras, 1959, p.390.

<sup>18</sup> Foreign Deptt., Political Branch, 7 November 1836, Nos. 50-51.

<sup>19</sup> Foreign Deptt., External Affairs 'A', 7 November 1836, No. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Political Deptt., (Assamese Men, Women and Children ...Release of), 6 June 1833, No. 114.

<sup>21</sup> Foreign Deptt., Political Branch (Tribal 'A'), 8 June 1840, No. 139, see Letter from Capt. Vetch to F. Jenkins, dated 8 May 1840,.

<sup>22</sup> These correspondences are also mentioned in the *Slavery in East Indies* (Parliamentary Papers, The House of Commons), Vol. XXVIII, 26 Jan.-22 June, 1841, pp. 421-422.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.70.

<sup>24</sup> For details, see A. K. Thakur, *Slavery in Arunachal Pradesh*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> For details, see *Annual Report of Labour Immigration into Assam for the Year 1881*, Shillong, 1882; "Assam Emigration Bill", *Hindu Patriot*, 1 August, 1881; S. K. Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industries*, Bombay, 1954, pp. 2-3; Amar Dutta, "Slavery in Tea Plantation in Assam", *Society and Change*, Vol. II, No. 3, 1981, pp. 266-79; Amalendu De, "The Plight of the Assam Tea Garden Coolies and the Reaction of the Bengali Intelligentsia", in S. Karotempel and B. Datta Ray (ed.), *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India*, Vandrame Institute, Shillong, 1990; Amalendu Guha, *Planters-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle*

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<sup>26</sup> For details of other Chins, see A. K. Thakur, "The Institution of Slavery in the Chin Society: A Study", in K. Robin (ed.), *Chin: History, Culture & Identity, op.cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Foreign External A Proceedings, December 1889, No.214; Telegram, 29 November 1889; Chief Secretary, Rangoon to Foreign Secretary, Calcutta. (Enclosure No.1)

<sup>28</sup> Foreign External A Proceedings, No.111; From General Symons to Chief Secretary to Chief Commissioner, Burma, No.698 dated 9 January 1890.

<sup>29</sup> Foreign External A Proceedings, March 1890, No. 147; Diary of David Ross dated 9-10 January, 1890.

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