

BESTOWAL OF FISHERY GRANT TO A PRIEST OF THE KAMAKHYA TEMPLE - AN APPRAISAL

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The Ahom-Mughal relations during the years following the treaty of 1639 A.D. form an important chapter in the history of Assam. Politically, it marked the extension of the Mughal Empire as far as the river Barnadi and the Asurar Ali (present Guwahati) and thereby the Ahoms recognised the Mughal suzerainty well inside the Assam's territory. Economically, trade and commerce began to flourish as a result of new trade relations established between the two kingdoms. For nearly two decades, both the belligerents remained nominally at peace. With a view to avoiding further armed clash and to maintain perpetual friendship, a number of diplomatic correspondences were exchanged dealing mainly with the border disputes, trade privileges and intrusion of Mughal elephant catchers into the Assam territory. Many of these epistles, however, contain charges and counter charges resulting in an endless acrimony between them. Thus, although outwardly the period seemed to be one of peace and amity, in reality it witnessed prolonged diplomatic war of recriminations. Admittedly, due to their own internal problems, neither side was in a position to involve in fresh conflict and hence compelled to follow a pacific policy.

In pursuance of this pacific policy, the Mughal fouzdar of Guwahati, Allayar Khan (1639-1646 A.D.) took several steps to assert the Imperial influences over the newly acquired territories and also to ensure economic advantage through diplomatic ploy. The new trade relations brought about significant contributions to fill up the already depleted treasury of Bengal. Barring some minor incidents relating to the violation of trading rights, both sides did not demonstrate any trial of

strength till 1657. Any crisis arising out of the violation of the provisions of the treaty was defused through diplomatic overtures.

With the death of king Pratāp Simha in 1641, Assam lost a capable ruler, and there followed a period of internal troubles, marked by conspiracies and court intrigues, which lasted even after the accession of Sutamla alias Jayadhvaj Simha (1648-1663 A.D.). Besides internal troubles, the new king was also confronted with external threats from the Nagas and the Miris. Nevertheless, these challenges were overcome and were controlled. It was Momai Tamuli Barbarua who figures prominently on the diplomatic scenario and actually raised the power and prestige of the Ahoms to a higher level during this critical period. On the Mughal side, Nawab Allayar Khan carried out the traditional forward policy of the Mughals more vigorously at his own since neither prince Shuja, the viceroy of Bengal nor Emperor Shah Jahan took any interest in the affairs of the north-east beyond Bengal. The Emperor was fiercely engaged in quelling the rebellion in the north-west which had drawn his attention seriously. Nawab Allayar Khan made a network of measures to strengthen the Imperial Sway around Guwahati. The fozdar was certainly enticed by the rich natural resources of Assam. Taking advantage of the prevailing situation, he took vigorous steps to perpetuate the Mughal administration largely for economic gains. One of the measures was the bestowal of land grants and other privileges to the priests of the Umananda and Kamakhya Temples. It is significant that a fishery grant was issued to a priest (name not known) of the Kamakhya Temple by Allayar Khan in the Pandu-Saraighat region of the Brahmaputra. Evidently, the grant was issued to the priest in lieu of certain services to be rendered to the Mughals. The area of operation of the fishery grant is as follows:

"On the south of the Brahmaputra from the mouth of Khanajan (Khanamukh) under Sayani Mouza within the Palasbari circle to Simma (Rangagora); on the north of the Brahmaputra, from the Agiathuri hill (Amingdon) of Pub-Bansar Mouza in the Hazo circle in the District of Kamrup."

The grant was subsequently conferred by Feroze Khan, the fouzdar of Guwahati in the name of Emperor Aurangzeb in the year 1667 A.D. The original record (Sanad) bestowing the grant is said to have been lost. Evidently, the priest and his descendants enjoyed the rights uninterruptedly throughout the period of Mughal administration. The descendants of the said priest have been enjoying the fishery rights till today. In fact, they are in possession of the fishery as their private property and as a Brahmottar (temple land) fishery, free of revenue as the original record shows. It is neither included in the list of Government fishery nor it belongs to the Kamakhya temple. Even after annexation of Assam by the British, the right was not disturbed, and was reconferred in 1841, by the then Lakheraj Commissioner of Assam, Major Jenkins. It became a private property during the British Raj since the descendants of the priest filed by kabuliyats dating from 1843, to prove their possession and enjoyment of their grant. The validity of the grant was recognised subsequently by the British Government in 1855, 1856, 1868 and 1869. Evidently, this case was not covered by the Government of Bengal Order No. 790 dated 25.8.1834 to the Commissioner of Assam which says that "all rights to hold land free of assessment founded on grants made by any former Government must be considered to have been cancelled by the British conquests, and all claims, therefore, for restoration of such tenure can rest only on the indulgence of Government without any right."

The Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, by an order dated 27.4.71, held that the fishery had belonged to the Kamakhya Temple and hence, under the provisions of the "Assam Acquisition of Land belonging to Religious and Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959" vide Notification No. PRT/16/67/19 dated 1.3.67, it had vested in the Government of Assam. Thereafter, Sri Haran Chandra Sharma and his brothers, who are the descendants of the grantee filed objection before the Deputy Commissioner and obtained an order staying operation of the order dated 27.4.71. As prayed for, the order was stayed by the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup.

Sri Haran Chandra Sarma and his brothers later filed appeal before the Hon'ble Gauhati High Court against the previous order of the Deputy Commissioner. A judgement was passed by the Hon'ble High Court quashing the said order of the Deputy Commissioner. The State of Assam has since filed appeal to the Supreme Court of India and the same is still subjudice.

Thus, the question arises, whether the Mughals bestowed the grant as a mark of patronage to the Hindu Temples or for other purposes in lieu of which they wanted the priests to act as stooges. It is a fact that Emperor Aurangzeb forbade all kinds of tortures on the people including destruction of temples after a couple of years of his accession. Mir Jumla, on his part, followed the same policy in his Assam Campaign as far as possible. Truly, there had been few cases of plunder and destruction of the temples initially in the campaign. According to a Dutch sailor accompanying the expedition, Mir Jumla offered the Dutch Rs. 50.00 for every head they brought him and Rs.100.00 for each prisoner captured alive.¹⁰ Despite the Emperor's strict orders atrocities were committed on the inhabitants of Assam. Mir Jumla adopted all sorts of willy methods to conquer assam. He had no respect for

Hinduism. Many Hindu priests were forced to take beef and embrace Islam. On the other hand, he showed kindness to those who had helped the Mughals. The successive fouzders of Guwahati in the post Mir Jumla period, might have followed the same policy in order to strengthen their hold at Guwahati. Politically and geographically, Guwahati occupied a strategic position as it served as a gateway to Assam. It was, therefore, very important to ensure the security and stability of the Mughals, free from all interference of enemies. Ever since the subjugation of Guwahati, the Mughal administration endeavoured to consolidate its power in this region.

It may, however, be admitted that the nature of political relations between the two powers during the period from 1663 to 1667 was not identical to the previous era, from 1639 to 1657. A close study of the epistles exchanged makes it abundantly clear that the feeling of religious animosity was totally absent in the pre-Mir Jumla era. But the post Mir Jumla days were marked by religious hatred and cruelty towards the people of Assam. The fishery grant bestowed on the priest by fouzdar Allayar Khan was aimed at getting political and economic gains out of it. Apparently, the Mughals needed the help and cooperation of the local influential class of people most for continuance of Mughal suzerainty in the north-east frontier and hence he was prompted to make friendship with the priests. The land grant bestowed on the two priests of the Kamakhya temple, Sriballabh and Pranath and also to two priests of the Umananda temple, Sudaman and his son Kamdev bear testimony to this fact.¹² The fishery grant was issued, in all probability, to the priest soliciting their support for continuance of the Imperial authority. The Mughals expected the priest to serve as spies or stooges. They remained ever vigilant on the waters of the Brahmaputra, especially near Guwahati which witnessed many historic armed

struggles between the Ahoms and the Mohammedans. It was, therefore, an imperative need to keep close watch on the enemies in this frontier region. Perhaps the Mughals expected to get secret information from the priests through the fishermen engaged in fishing in the Brahmaputra. It appears, no attempt was made by the Ahoms to regain their lost prestige for about two decades. However, they remodelled their foreign policy and took measures to prevent the infiltration of the Mughals into their territory. The policy of maintaining friendship with the priests was first initiated by Nawab Allayar Khan who succeeded in strengthening the Imperial hold firmly around Guwahati. He may rightly be regarded as a master manoeuvrer in diplomacy. His successors followed the same policy and contributed much to the stability of the Empire. It was Chakradhwaj Simha, who taking advantage of the war of succession in Delhi wrested back the lost territories including Kamrup from the Mughals in 1667.

The post Mir Jumla era in Assam also witnessed frequent exchange of epistles between the two powers. These correspondences mainly dealt with the observance of the provisions of the treaty of Ghilajharighat (January, 1663). At the initial stage, the Mughals strongly pressed the Ahoms for payment of the stipulated tribute and obedience to other privileges. The situation remained peaceful if not cordial for a couple of years. The accession of Chakradhwaj Simha (1663-1669), however, changed the political scenario considerably. The new king expressed his strong desire to recover the lost territories by any means which was perhaps known to the fouzders. But the prevailing situation was not favourable enough to involve in fresh armed clash. The devastations caused and the appalling miseries suffered by the Imperialists in their Assam campaign were still fresh in their mind.

It may, therefore, be admitted that the fishery grant was bestowed in consideration of certain services to be rendered by the priests. The fact that the Mughals remained unchallenged for a considerable period, indicates their superiority in diplomacy. Evidently, much of the credit for success goes to fouzdar Allayar Khan who master-minded the political strategy at his own since neither the subadar nor the Emperor had shown any interest in the north-east. In the post Mir Jumla period Feroze Khan's policy did not succeed as the subsequent events prove it. The grant was probably conferred by the Emperor in 1667 A.D., few months before the battle of Itakhuli (Nov.1667) resulting in the flight of the Mughals from Guwahati. Thus it can be well said that the fishery right was granted not as a mark of patronage but to gain political ends. Sri Haran Chandra Sarma and his brothers, the descendants of the original recipients of the grant, continue to enjoy the fishery right to this day.

Notes & References

1. Bhuyan, S.K. (Ed.), **Kamrupar Buranji** (Gauhati, 1958), pp.42-51.
2. Bhuyan, S.K., **Annals of the Delhi Badshahate** (Gauhati, 1947), p. 18.
3. **Gauhati High Court Case Civil Rule No. 80 of 1973.**
4. **Ibid.**
5. **Ibid.**
6. **Ibid.**
7. **Ibid.**
8. **Ibid.**
9. **Ibid.**

10. Sarkar, Jagadish N., **The Life of Mir Juma** (New Delhi, 1979), p. 309.
11. Gogoi, P., **The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms** (Gauhati, 1968), p.429.
12. Bhuyan, S.K. (Trs.), **Annals of the Delhi Badshate** (Gauhati, 1974), pp. 17-18.