

PROCEEDINGS OF
**NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**



**TWENTYTHIRD SESSION
TRIPURA UNIVERSITY
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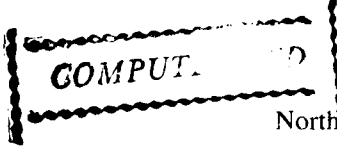
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954.16006

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The publication of the Proceedings volume was financially supported by the Indian Council of Historical Research and the responsibility of the facts stated, opinions expressed or conclusions reached is entirely that of the authors of the articles and the Indian Council of Historical Research or the North East India History Association accepts no responsibility for them.

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Preface

The Twenty-Third Session of the NEIHA was hosted by the Tripura University, and was held at Agartala, Tripura from 26-28 September 2002. The Session was inaugurated by His Excellency the Governor of Tripura. The three days of the Annual Conference was very well attended by historians and other social scientists from different parts of the region and also from other parts of the country and the academic sessions, the most important part of the Annual Conferences of NEIHA, saw the active participation of all NEIHA members present. We place on record our thanks to the Vice-Chancellor of Tripura University for hosting the XXIIIrd Session of NEIHA and also our very sincere thanks to Prof. Mahadev Chakravarti the Local Secretary, and his colleagues in the Department of History and other departments in the University and Colleges who worked untiringly to make the session a success.

This volume is a collection of the papers presented in the various academic panels of the XXIIIrd session and also the proceedings of the business meetings of the session. We regret that the Audit Report and the Treasurer's report could not be printed because these were not received on time. The Association is grateful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the financial support advanced towards the publication of the Proceedings volume.

May we reiterate a point for the information of members that if the papers presented do not follow the **NEIHA style sheet** for referencing and if the revised drafts do not come to us within the last date announced in the business session it becomes very difficult for the editors and the Editorial Board to function. It was mainly for these reasons and also of course for the considered opinion of the Panel Chairpersons, whose comments on every paper were clearly recorded and the deliberations of the Editorial Board, that a number of papers had to be abstracted or listed. We request all NEIHA members to kindly follow the NEIHA style sheet of reference published in **Appendix F of the NEIHA Proceedings Volume of the XVIIIth Session (Agartala)** and also to send in their revised papers within the last date

decided upon in the business session of every Annual Conference. The task of editing, proof reading etc. of such a large number of papers within a very limited period is very time consuming and we can do the work to the satisfaction of all NEIHA members only with the co-operation of all the paper presenters.

Finally we would like to say a very special word of thanks to the members of the Editorial Board, Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Prof. Mignonette Momin and Prof. F. A. Qadri who made our work much lighter by giving much of their time to sit through the Editorial Board meetings to decide on the status of the papers and also editing and doing the proof reading of the papers. We thank Mr. Pradeep Shaha and his staff of *Modern Offset* for their interest in the work and getting the volume ready in time for release in the 24th session.

Shillong
11th July, 2003



(Manorama Sharma)



(D.R. Syiemlieh)

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Opening Up of Nambor Forest for Settlement : A Missed Opportunity

Priyam Goswami

A major problem that exercised the minds of the British Administration in Assam towards the close of the nineteenth century was the urgent necessity for opening up the vast stretches of cultivable land lying waste in the province for the production of food crops. The large scale migration of the plantation and industrial workers into Assam had been unaccompanied by an increase in the production of food grains. A ryot cultivated only as much land as he needed for his own subsistence and, under stress, this subsistence economy had steadily eroded resulting in a growing dependence on imported food grains, the bulk of which came from Bengal.¹ In the circumstances, the price of rice in Assam was abnormally high.² Apart from being a tremendous strain on the tea industry, it was a unavoidable strain on the resources of Bengal, especially during famines, when large quantities of supplies brought into Bengal from Burma had to be diverted to Assam. In the circumstances, the possibility of clearing out the vast stretches of land in Assam for cultivation acquired considerable attention of the Government. This paper is an attempt to examine the initiatives taken by the Government in opening up the area in the vicinity of the Nambor Reserved Forest for colonization.

By and large, Assam was scantily populated. However, there were many parts of the Brahmaputra Valley where the population was fairly dense³ and it was pointed out that unless some special inducements were offered to the cultivating classes to migrate, they would always remain rooted to their ancestral homes. It had been observed that this tendency often led to the division and subdivision of existing holdings to a point at which each afforded no more than bare subsistence for a family.⁴ During the period between 1866 and 1889 the land revenue had more than quadrupled, but land under ordinary cultivation had increased by only 7%.⁵ The increased land revenue demand had been justified on grounds that there had been a substantial increase in the price of staples and a considerable increase in the wages of labour,⁶ but Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner, Assam, was convinced that the high rate itself was one of the main deterrents to the extension of cultivation in the province. He

observed that 'the districts of Assam are probably the only part of India in which the reclamation of waste land is not encouraged by a favourable system of assessment ... and as the stimulus to extension of cultivation afforded elsewhere by setting wasteland on favourable terms is wanting, the average size of the holdings is small as compared with other provinces'.⁷ As early as 1872, it had been recorded that

'although the system is very successful from the revenue point of view, George Campbell, the Lt. Governor, greatly doubts if it is one calculated to promote the settlement and cultivation of the province. It seems very extraordinary that a province eminently suited for the growth of rice and with an unlimited quantity of suitable land available should not grow enough for its own consumption, and that it should be necessary to import large quantities into Assam from Bengal. It seems a great anomaly that we have been giving away land in fee-simple for Rs.2-8 per acre paid by long installments, and at the same time no one can cultivate it under the revenue system without paying Rs.1-8 to Rs.3 per annum down in cash. The Commissioner seems to desire to get the hill people to come down and infuse new blood in the plains. These high rates hardly afford them much temptation to do so.'⁸

The Government justified its rates of assessment by pointing out that if rates were lowered in newly settled areas, the old settled areas would be abandoned and the revenue demand diminished. Another curious opinion was entertained by a certain section in the Administration that 'if assessments upon the native were generalized and not heavy', they would not be available as tenant-cultivators under European planters. When such were the views of those in authority it is not surprising that the general tendency of the revenue administration in Assam was to enhance the revenue, but to leave extension of cultivation to take care of itself.

Apart from the high rate of assessment, another factor that stood in the path of the extension of cultivation in Assam was the Government's systematic discouragement of sub-letting and the induction of middlemen. Henry Cotton had disagreed with the official view in this regard. He had taken pains to point out that local opinion too was strongly opposed to the prohibition of sub-letting and that these opinions 'were unanimous, and give in no uncertain sound, a very strong and even bitter, feeling

against the proposals of the Government of India'.⁹ Yet, in spite of protests, the Government had continued with the *ryotwari* system of land tenure.

A third important factor that determined Government policy to a large extent was the influence of the tea lobby which was extremely apprehensive of any scheme of colonization. In fact the Tea Association of London had warned the Government against any proposals for the extension of ordinary cultivation which might lead to an exodus of the tea garden labour force.¹⁰ Similar opinion had also been expressed by the Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association in its Memorandum to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, in 1897.¹¹

Notwithstanding these limitations, the Government decided to go ahead with its scheme of colonization stating very explicitly that 'it is no part of the policy of the Government to colonise its wastelands at the expense of the tea industry and that the revenue-free concessions will not be permitted to have the effect of depleting tea garden labour forces'.¹²

Once the decision was taken, three considerations predominated,

- (i) Identification of suitable areas
- (ii) Choice of the immigrants
- (iii) Prevention of those who had been imported under a contract from settling in these areas.

Cotton estimated that around five million acres of cultivable land could be reclaimed in the Brahmaputra valley. He believed that one of the most promising areas was the gigantic Nambor forest in the Golaghat subdivision of the Sibsagar district. As early as 1863, 64 square miles of the forest had already been reserved under executive rules and settled under the Indian Forest Act in 1878,¹³ but a survey revealed that in the vicinity of the reserved forest, around 118 square miles could be reclaimed. Cotton's conviction that the forest was of recent growth and the 'the buried cities such as Dimapore with its marvelous monoliths and great tanks, are a silent witness of civilization in a bye-gone age' had been reinforced by the observations recorded in the diary of Mr. Porteous, one of the 'most observant officers'.¹⁴ In the circumstances, he felt that although the re-clearance of this vast area would no doubt be a stupendous task, it might indeed prove to be a fruitful exercise.

Accordingly, the Chief Commissioner sent a proposal to the Deputy Commissioners of Sibsagar, Sylhet and Cachar districts outlining a scheme

for the colonization of the area and requesting for comments.¹⁵ According to these proposals, (i) the area was to be divided into 3 *mauzas*; (ii) one of the *mauzas* would be reserved for Assamese while the other two would be reserved for Bengalis from Cachar;¹⁶ (iii) applications were to be invited from intending *mauzadars*; (iv) the *ryots* would be allotted land at three anas per *bigha* with a revenue-free term of three years; (v) the settlement with the *ryots* would be made for a period of 15 terms; (vi) *mauzadars* would be paid a fixed remuneration in addition to a commission on the number of *ryots* settled in their *mauzas*; (vii) a *mauzadar* would be expected to settle around 100 families every year. Two other clauses were added subsequently.¹⁷ First, the area held by individual settlers was not to exceed 150 *bighas*, and secondly, *mauzadars* were not to tempt, or to allow others to tempt ex-tea-garden coolies to settle on the land. Considering the fact that no concessions whatsoever had existed for reclamation of the land for ordinary cultivation, these were indeed liberal measures.

Opinion on these proposals was, however, varied. The Commissioner of Assam Valley district, P.G. Melitus, cautioned the Government not to be over optimistic. He observed :¹⁸

We must be content with very small beginnings with more than an even chance of ultimate failure. What settlers in Assam Valley want are good local markets for produce and service; and with so many large areas still awaiting cultivation near such markets, and otherwise desirable for habitation, it is difficult to see why settlers should elect to take up their abode permanently in this undesirable locality.

He pointed out that similar concessions in the Kopili Valley had led to the settlement of only around 500 acres in two years and that the estimated average increase of 1,500 acres a year in each *mauza* of the Nambor area was, therefore, too unrealistic a figure. Moreover, in the initial stages, when there was little likelihood of subsidiary sources of income being available to supplement earnings from agriculture, all the land taken up would not necessarily be cultivated to start with. He proposed that settlements with the *ryots* could be made for a term of 20 years in order to make the scheme more attractive. Regarding the creation of *mauzas*, he opined that special arrangements should be made for the charge of Dimapur, as the first settlement was likely to be in its neighborhood and that as such there was the possibility of the growth of an urban centre at this point, with Dimapur being the forwarding station for the Naga Hills

and Manipur. He recommended the name of Durga Ram Das for this *mauza*. Finally, he suggested that the lease granted to settlers should contain a clause against sub-letting to ex-tea garden collies, and that the mauzadar should be responsible for preventing and reporting breaches of this condition.¹⁹

The Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, D. Herbert, informed the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, that the actual cultivable area to be colonized was 60 square miles, including 3 square miles at Dimapur. He believed that the region around Dimapur did not warrant the creating of a separate mauza as it could be effectively supervised by the mauzadar of the adjacent mauza.²⁰ He felt that the proposed scheme provided adequate inducements for colonization. The Assistant Commissioner of Golaghat had suggested that a nominal rate of one or two annas per bigha after the first year might have the advantage of making colonists value their land more than they would if it were absolutely rent free, and that as a further incentive to the mauzadars, they might be allowed to keep the amount collected in addition to their salaries.²¹ The Deputy Commissioner, however, was unwilling to recommend this as he felt it might lead to abuses by the *mauzadars*.

In reply to the Chief Commissioner's circular, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar informed the Government that extensive enquiries had revealed that there was a general reluctance among the people of his district to take advantage of the offer. He attributed this to three main reasons :

- (i) the remoteness of the tract
- (ii) fear that the initial expenditure would be considerable
- (iii) fear that opening up the forest would result in heavy mortality among the first settlers

The apprehension was, no doubt, justified. However, he believed that in course of time and with improved means of communication the first objection would be eventually removed. Regarding the second objection, he suggested that it might be overcome if free railway tickets were granted to settlers together with a cash advance to tide them over the first couple of years. The Deputy Commissioner did not think that mortality would be excessive if the settlers were properly housed and fed. He suggested that the hospital assistant at Dimapur might be instructed to visit the settlements periodically and render medical aid free of cost.²² He had received two applications for the post of mauzadar, but neither was found suitable.

The Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet also informed the Chief Commissioner that the scheme had not met with a favourable response in his district. He had expected that Karimganj sub-division would be the main recruiting ground for colonists but the Sub-Divisional Officer, Mr. Anley had been very forthright in his views and had regretted his inability 'to induce either mauzadar or ryot to accept the offer'. In a Note to the Deputy Commissioner he analysed the problem in the following manner.²³ He observed that while there were several respectable persons in the district who were willing to accept the position of a mauzadar, they were not prepared to take the responsibility of settling ryots. Apart from the difficulty of getting people to go with them, the entire process would involve considerable expenditure which hardly anyone was able to afford. He pointed out that settlers from Karimganj had been available for the Langai and Singla settlements under entirely different circumstances. Those tracts had been settled by ryots from Sylhet and Cachar who desired to be free from the bondage of the Zamindar and aspired to be landholders themselves. They were able to clear out new land and bring them under cultivation because most of them had their homes in the neighbouring parganas which they were able to visit frequently. Moreover, they had not given up their holdings under the zamindars till such time that the new land bore enough crops to sustain them. In the case of the Nambor forest, the settlers from the Surma Valley would be immigrants in a strange country far away from home. The *ryots* hardly had any capital to invest so it was obvious that they would have to be financed by the mauzadar. So even if a prospective mauzadar could induce 100 ryots to accompany him, he would have to be prepared to spend at least Rs.15,000 initially by way of advance payment knowing fully well that he would never recover the entire amount because of deaths, desertions etc. Anley pointed out that in the circumstances even a good remuneration did not tempt anyone to volunteer for the task. The ryots themselves looked upon the scheme with great suspicion as an attempt to expatriate them. Certain individuals were, however, willing to emigrate provided the Government gave them direct and substantial help to maintain themselves and their families until their new land was able to support them. Thus, in view of the unattractive inducements offered by the Government, there were no applicants from this district.

In the circumstances, the Government was left with no option but to allot all the three mauzas to persons belonging to the Brahmaputra Valley. On the basis of a survey conducted by B.C.Basu, Assistant to

the Director of Lnad Records and Agriculture, the area was divided into the following three mauzas :

- (i) *Kardaiguri Mauza*, with a total area of 31 square miles and a cultivable area of 17 square miles.
- (ii) *Naojan Mauza* with a total area of 34 square miles and a cultivable area of 18 square miles
- (iii) *Rengma Pathar Mauza* with a total area of 32 square miles and a cultivable area of 21 square miles.

The Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar District, informed the Commissioner, Assam Valley District, that he had received 32 applications for the post of mauzadar but that of all the applicants, few had any idea at all of the area to be colonized or were in any way fit for the post. The most deserving applicant was one Nanduram Das of Barpathar whose case he forcefully recommended. Naduram Das had accompanied Basu during the whole of his exploration of the forest and was confident of settling 50 families in Kardaigure Mauza immediately if he was appointed to the post.²⁴ Taking into consideration the fact that no applicants from the Surma Valley were available, the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar recommended the names of Gunindra Nath Barua of Jorhat and Sasidhar Hazarika of Sibsagar for the two other mauzadarships. All the three names were approved by the Chief Commissioner, Assam.²⁵

The colonizatin of the Nambor Forest thus made a slow and hesitant start. The Government's dreams of opening out 1,500 acres of land annually were but castles in the air and in seven years, i.e. between 1905 and 1912, only 1,098 acres had been brought under cultivation.²⁶ This was hardly surprising. The entire manner in which the colonisation process had been initiated and carried out reflects the apathetic and half-hearted attitude of the Government. Experienced officers like Melitus and Cotton had repeatedly pointed out that if the colonization of the vast stretches of waste land of Assam was to be a success, settlers would have to be tempted with extremely favourable terms. Unfortunately the Government paid little heed to their advice. It is ironical that at a time when the capitalist element was so predominant in the tea industry, it should have been so vehemently opposed for ordinary cultivation. It was obvious that without sub-letting and the participation of middlemen, land under ordinary cultivation in Assam could never extend to any considerable extent. It was, after all, common knowledge that there was little accumulation of wealth among the ryots of the Brahmaputra Valley. Waste Land Rules for

special cultivation and mining leases had been amended time and again to cater to the interests of the plantation and mineral industries. Had similar inducements been offered for opening up tracts for ordinary cultivation, there is little doubt that within a short time Assam would have been transformed from a rice-importing province to a rice-exporting one. The half-hearted initiatives of the Government in this direction did little to facilitate colonization. The Government's failure to effectively colonise Nambor was just one instance of many missed opportunities.

Notes and References

1. In 1876 the import of rice from Bengal into the Brahmaputra Valley was 4,11,431 maunds; in 1896-97 it was 9,63,917 maunds.
2. The quantity of rice available per Rupee in a few important places of Assam in 1879 were as follows : Guwahati-11 seers; Tezpur-9 seers; Nagoan-8 seers; Sibsagar-10 seers; Dibrugarh-9 seers.
3. Mean density of population per square mile in 1901 : Kamrup-153; Darrang-99; Nagaon-68; Sibsagar-120; Lakhimpur-82. Census of India, Assam, 1911, p.24.
4. The average area of fully assessed *ryotwari* estates in the five districts of Upper Assam in 1896-97 was 2.4 acres only, against 5.85 acres in Lower Burma, 29.07 acres in Bombay, 17 acres in Central Provinces and 7 acres in Madras. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, (henceforth A.S.P.) Nov. 1898, Rev. A, nos. 128-138.
5. Assam Secretariat Records (henceforth A.S.R.), Revenue A. October 1898, Nos. 87&88.
6. A.S.R. (General dept.) April 1902., No.16-75-2.
7. *Ibid.*
8. A.S.P. Rev. A Nov. 1898. No.130, Resolution dated 17 July, 1872.
9. A.S.P. Revenue A, November 1898, No. 128-29, 14 January, 1896. For details refer P. Goswami, *Question of Subletting : Henry Cotton and Public Associations of Assam*, NEIHA Proceedings 22nd session.
10. A.S.P. Revenue A. Nov. 1898, No.130.
11. A.S.R. Memorial dated 2, March, 1897. Appendix A of Letter No.313 of 24 September 1898, from Chief Commissioner, Assam to Secy., Govt. of India.

12. A.S.R. Rev. A., Oct. 1906 No.5383C
13. A.S.R., Indian Forest Act, Section 19, Notificatin No.5, 17 October 1878.
14. A.S.P, Revenue A. Nov. 1898, *Naga Hills Diary*, 22 April, 1890. Also see B.C.Allen, *Assam District Gazetters*, 1905, (Sibsagar District), pp. 64-65.
15. A.S.R. Ev. A. Feb. 1905, Letter No. 697 Rev. 3985 R, 3 September, 1904.
16. The general view prevalent among the British administrators of Assam was that best colonizers of the Dhansiri Valley would be those from the Surma Valley because they were not only more industrious but also habituated to the climate of the area.
17. A.S.R. Rev. A, Feb 1905, No. 74 Rev-622R, 8 Feb 1905.
18. *Ibid*, No 100, Letter No. 3806LR, 13 Dec. 1904.
19. *Ibid*.
20. *Ibid*, No.101, Letter No. 1608R, 29 Nov. 1904
21. *Ibid*
22. *Ibid*, No.99, Letter No. 4743, 7 Dec. 1904.
23. *Ibid*, No.103, Letter No. 2766, 14 Dec. 1904
24. *Ibid*. No. 105, Letter No. 6T, 21 Dec. 1904.
25. No. 108, telegram No. 33C, 1 Feb, 1905.
26. A.S.R., Resolution on the Land Revenue Administration of the province of Assam for the Year 1911-12, Appendix iv.