

THE NORTH-EAST AND THE MUGHALS

(1661 - 1714 A. D.)

ABSTRACT

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North East India consists of five States (viz. Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura) and two Union Territories (viz. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram) in the Indian Union. Flanked by Bangladesh, Burma, China and Bhutan and connected with the mainland India by the narrow 'Siliguri neck' the region had a predominantly Indo-Mongoloid background. Whereas the hills retained the traditional tribal formations till supersede by the British, the valleys experienced rise and fall of the monarchies in ancient and medieval times. The larger state formations in the neighbouring areas and the mode of production there generated impact for the hills and dales of the region. The extension of the Indo-Aryan settlements in the region has been recorded since earliest times. The political connections with Eastern India was indeed very close during the Varman - Pala - Sena periods and the region was covered in the imperial scheme of Samudra Gupta in ancient time. The Koch, Ahom, Kachari, Jayantia, Manipuri and Tipperah monarchies consolidated their bases in the valley areas of the region atleast since 15th - 16th centuries and such state formations with occasional confronting relations with neighbouring Bengal contributed to the splendid political isolation that the region could maintain inspite of the repeated expansionist endeavours of the Turko-Afgan and early Mughal rulers of Bengal. Nevertheless, the economic intra-dependence of the various peoples inhabiting

the region and its inter-dependence with Bengal had always inspired interaction. Trade served as the instrument of hills-plains contacts within the region and the surplus generated by the region were exchanged with Bengal, Burma, China, Tibet and Bhutan to balance the deficit, either directly or through intermediaries which, on the other hand, provided the condition for socio-cultural assimilation and exchange of ideas, institutions and technologies. Determined attempts that were made during the reigns of Jahangir(1605-27) and Shah Jahan (1627-58) to extend the Mughal imperial hold over the region succeeded in the annexation of Lower Assam and imposition of tributary status on Cooch Behar, Jayantia, Cachar and Tripura, besides Sherpur and Susang in Mymensing.

The accession of Aurangzeb to the Mughal throne was followed by a forward policy in the North East, inspired mainly by the aggressive imperialism of the Emperor and partly, by the fact that during the war of Succession that preceded his reign the dependent monarchies in the region had reasserted themselves and the Ahoms overtured for the recovery of the ceded territory. The refuge taken by Prince Shuja in Aracan (May 1660), where he was reportedly joined by the dethroned ruler of Tripura was an added factor. The Mughal authorities also looked for the promotion of trade and commerce beyond the north-east frontier of their eastern Subah i.e. Bengal. Although death news of Shuja received through the Dutch Factors was a relief to Aurangzeb, but

his expansionist policy involved him in frontier wars in the North East in the same prowess as in western India and the north-west frontier.

Aurangzeb ordered a campaign in November 1661 Mir Jumla, the Governor of Bengal, who succeeded in occupying Cooch Behar and Assam and securing the submission of Dimarua and Darrang. The Raja of Cooch Behar who had fled to Bhutan, ultimately returned to his state and was reinstated on tributary terms. The Ahom monarch Jayadhvaj Singh (1648-63) signed the Treaty of Ghilajorighat in January 1663 according to which the river Manas came to be recognised as the Ahom-Mughal boundary and the Ahom monarch undertook to pay war indemnity, tribute and delivery of hostages.

The death of Mir Jumla (March, 1663) on his way back to Bengal, nevertheless, encouraged the Ahoms to reassert their position. The Ahom monarch also reoccupied Gauhati and commanded the loyalty of the rulers of Dimarua and Darrang. An expedition that was despatched under Raja Ram Singh in 1667 failed to pacify the Ahoms as the Mughals were defeated in the battle of Saraighat (March 1671). The failure of the Mughal authorities to reinforce the invading forces due to the preoccupation with Maratha, Sikh and jat rebels and the reorganisation of administration and military structure of the Ahom state under Udayaditya Singh (1669-73) were at the back drop of the Ahom success and the Mughal disaster.

In the trail of Saraighat was noticed a prolonged

period of inaction both on the Mughal and the Ahom sides. The Mughals were locked in encounters with the Marathas for which Aurangzeb had to encamp himself to the Deccan. The Sikhs, Jats and the Rajputs intensify their rebellions forcing the Mughal authorities in costly operations and taxing dearly in men and money. To make matters worse, the imperial officers and the landed gentry in Bengal as well as European merchants based there, took the advantage of the situation to indulge in strifes and conspiracies. Even the Subahdars Fidai Khan (1678) and Prince Muhammad Azam (1678-79) did not lag behind in exhibiting symptoms of disloyalty. In such a crucial situation the Mughals could not obviously, decide to risk another expedition to their distant North-East. The Ahom state, on the other hand, passed through serious internal disorder (1673-81). The conspiracies and political assassinations led to frequent changes of monarchs and high officials. The unscrupulous nobles even established link with Mughal officers in Bengal and an expedition sent under a fugitive Ahom noble even resulted in temporary Mughal occupation of Gauhati.

The administration of Shaista Khan as the governor of Bengal for the second term (1679-88), however, enabled the Mughals to consolidate their position there and this made an impact on the nature of relationship with the rulers in the north-east frontier of the province. The Rajas of Cooch Behar, Jayantia and Tripura reaffirmed their acceptance of the Mughal fealty. The Rajas of Sherpur and Susung had

and Susung had assumed hostile attitude but a policy of non-intervention in their internal affairs succeeded in pacifying them. Aurangzeb also succeeded in installing a Raja in Laur in Khasi frontier, who accepted Islam as his new faith and ruled as a tributary.

The difficulty faced by Aurangzeb towards the end of his career and War of Succession that followed his death offered additional incentives to the north-eastern rulers to throw away allegiance to the Mughals. The Ahom state had, in the meantime re-emerged from its internal problems under the successive stewardship of Gadadhar Singh (1681-96) and Rudra Singh (1696-1714). They succeeded in recovering Gauhati (1682) from the Mughals and rejuvenated the administration and military structure of the state. The rulers of Cooch Behar, Jayantia and Tripura asserted themselves and indulged in raids in Mughal territory. Rudra Singh cashed out of this growing anti-Mughal venom and raised a confederated army with contribution from the rulers and chieftains in the region with the avowed object of invading Mughal Bengal. The challenge of the North-East which was, indeed, provoked by the years of imperialism on the part of the Mughals also came to an end with the death of Rudra Singh in 1714.

The Mughals thereafter did not make any endeavour to expand their territory in the North East. The decline of the empire that set in with the death of Aurangzeb (1707) and the secession of Bengal under Murshid Quli Khan stood decidedly against such a policy. The successor of Rudra Singh

also abandoned the attitude of his predecessor. Consequently, there was no confrontation thereafter. The Mughal imperialism during the period under review (1661-1714), succeeded only in imposing occasional suzerainty over the border states and annexing Lower Assam to their rule. Nevertheless, the impact generated by the contact was highly significant in the history of the North East. The Mughal invasions had broken the centuries' isolation of the region. The challenge posed by them had forced the local rulers to reorganise their administration and defence structures, borrowing elements from the invaders themselves. The war-captives became the sources of innovation in various fields. The rulers also encouraged immigration and recruited specialists and technocrats from Bengal to revitalise their army, administration and economy. The indigenous institutions and practices underwent changes. The impact was felt in the fields of religion, culture, language and literature as well. The presence of subjects with diverse faiths in individual states induced secular attitude on the part of the rulers.