

## Mutiny in Cachar : A Survey of the Local Sources

J. B. Bhattacharjee

The Revolt of 1857 had cast a deep impact on life in Cachar for few weeks, particularly because three companies of the 34th Native Infantry stationed in Chittagong mutinied against the Raj and having looted the treasury and breaking open the jail, reached Cachar through Tripura and Sylhet with the intention to join the disgruntled Manipuri princes and the Lushei chiefs who were at war with the British. They fought a pitched battle at Latu with the Sylhet Light Infantry under Major Byang, who and many of his men were killed. The mutineers were, however, ultimately made to flee. The local zamindars gave substantial help to the Raj in suppressing the 'rebels' and, ultimately, the tea planters played the major role in crushing them. The British authorities, nevertheless, were highly suspicious of the conduct of the native Bengalees and Manipuri settlers of Cachar who, it was felt, might sympathise the sepoys who were accompanied by their wives and children. The areas most affected by these operations were Binnacandy, Hailakandi, Sonai, Bhuban, Lakhipur, Saraspur etc.

In spite of the fact that the happening in Cachar during this period had attained a high magnitude, no serious attempt has so far been made to study these happenings in this peripheral region caused by the developments in the country as a whole. Recently the Tagore Society for Cultural Integration, Silchar, has published an old manuscript entitled *The Mutiny Period in Cachar* (Silchar, 1981). Edited by Dr. Sujit Choudhury, this manuscript belonged to Late Robert Reid of England whose younger brother Mr. William Reid handed over the manuscript to the Tagore Society. Incidentally, Robert and William are the sons of Late James Reid, who was a tea garden manager in Cachar in the beginning of this century and married a native Bengalee lady of Cachar. The two brothers and their mother had accompanied James on his return to England and settled there. They might have carried the manuscript with them, which might come into their possession due to

family connections. It contains the notes and correspondences of R. Stewart, who was the Superintendent of Cachar (1857-58) during the eventful months of the mutiny. Some of these letters as well as several others of Stewart are available in the files preserved in the Cachar District Records Office at Silchar, which the present writer had occasions to study. A survey of the non-conventional oral data might reinforce these documents.

### Twilights

The Revolt of 1857 that started from the Dumdum cantonment in January 1857 and subsequently spread to other parts of the country was not ordinarily supposed to have any repercussion in Cachar since there was no major cantonment in the district. The defence of the local frontiers was vested in some local corps and regiments, of which the Sylhet Light Infantry was the most prominent. Moreover, the people of the district had a respite under the British rule after decades of lawless situation caused by the weak rule of Raja Govindachandra, the anti-royalty raids and upsurges organised by the rebel prince Tularam, the Manipuri occupation and the Burmese invasion. The British rule had not only effectively checked the internecine warfare but also restructured the local administration which abolished the intermediary agencies of royal officers and established a direct link between the government and the people through the system of direct taxation. The people from the neighbouring districts of Bengal were encouraged to immigrate and settle in the district, with the result that vast tracts of hitherto waste land were reclaimed by the new settlers. The tea industry that was a colonial induction had brought in a large labour force from North India. The Manipuris who immigrated during the Burmese occupation of their state were also rehabilitated. The introduction of townships and markets, the lines of communication, the regular steamer service with Bengal, post and telegraph, and educational institutions, although primarily intended to serve the British colonial interest had in the process proved to be convenient to the people<sup>1</sup>. There was no symptom of desension against the British. Even when the mutiny was in full swing in northern and north-western regions and the district officers were required to submit monthly reports on the situation in their districts the Superintendent of Cachar had on 10 June 1857 reported to the Government of Bengal that 'the popular mind in Cachar seems to be in no way affected by the disturbances which are occurring in the North West.'<sup>2</sup> On 13 June, he again reported that "all remains quiet in Cachar".<sup>3</sup>

But on 7 December, the Superintendent reported to the same authority that he has taken a number of measures to oppose the Sepoys<sup>4</sup>.

The sudden change in the situation was due to the mutiny of the sepoy in Chittagong cantonment and the report that they were marching towards Cachar. The local authorities were particularly concerned by the fact that the Lushei chiefs in Cachar frontier who had given considerable trouble to the British ever since their occupation of Cachar were behaving well for sometimes but the presence of the mutineers might encourage them to relapse into the earlier state of affairs. The jungles of the Lushei Hills might also provide good hide out to the sepoy. The rebel anti-royalist princes in Manipur might also take advantage of the presence of the sepoy. A rumour was already flouted that the Manipuri settlers in Cachar would capture the local magazine as soon as the sepoy had arrived in their vicinity. The speculations had caused concern and the authorities had to take adequate precautions to upset any of these eventualities by preventing the sepoy from entering Cachar.

The three companies of the 34th Native Infantry that mutinied in Chittagong killed their officers, looted Rs. 278267 from the collector's office, took three elephants, freed the prisoners from the jail and marched towards Cachar. Major Byang of the Sylhet Light Infantry encamped himself, with 160 men at Patharkandi to intercept the advance of the mutineers. The mutineers then changed their direction, they forced the Zamindar of Lungla to supply them food and then reached Latu in Karimganj district. Major Byang and his men rushed to Latu where a pitched battle continued for several hours. In fact, Major Byang was first to be killed. There were casualties on both sides and 26 of the mutineers died on the spot. These mutineers were said to have numbered at 300 and they were accompanied by their wives and children. Subedar Ayodhya Singh of the Sylhet Light Infantry ultimately succeeded in dispersing the sepoy who entered Cachar in several groups.<sup>5</sup> The contingents of the Sylhet Light Infantry encountered several batches of them in several places. The local Zamindars and European tea planters helped the government in men and materials in suppressing the sepoy. The tea planters themselves raised volunteers force and clashed with the sepoy. The mutineers struggled to push their way into Manipur. But the government effectively sealed the borders. After encounters in several theatres, the sepoy were either killed or arrested. A large number of the sepoy then tried to escape to the Lushei Hills, but they were chased by the tea planter's volunteers force.

One of the Major theatres was Dwarband where the volunteers under one Hogg chased the mutineers in the Lushei Hills and recovered huge treasure. Hogg and several others received Indian Mutiny Medal, cash award or were rewarded in several other ways. The Cachar Tea Company, for example, received fresh grant of lands for their services during the mutiny.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Nature of the source materials**

Reid's compilation, referred to above, contains extracts from thirtyone letters written by R. Stewart, the Superintendent of Cachar, between 10 June 1857 and 4 June 1858, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Fort William, Captain Steven, Lieutenant Ross and Lieutenant Binst who commanded various detachments of the Sylhet Light Infantry during the operations, Dr. S. M. Shircore, the Assistant Superintendent of Cachar, and the Magistrate of the 24-Parganas, Calcutta. These letters give detail information about the movement of the Sepoys, the main theatres of the encounters between the British forces and the Sepoys, the attitude of the local people towards the British Government and the *vice versa*, the role of the various social groups, and none the least, the impact of the mutiny in the region. An important aspect of the development was to see how the mutiny became linked with the problem of Manipur and the Lusheis on the Cachar frontiers. The compilation also suggests a revealing fact that one Seikh Faqueer from Bengal had come upto Cachar as "the camp follower of the party of mutineers" with "twelve women and nine children". He was, however, pardoned by the government "in consideration of his services" earlier to one Captain Dewal at Chittagong. The government even made arrangement for the return of the Faqueer, women and children to their homes "in as comfortable manners as possible."<sup>7</sup>

These letters (at least some of them) of Stewart included in the compilation are also available in the files and volumes of records preserved in the Cachar Records Office at Silchar. A few more letters written by him and those received by the district authorities from various sources in connection with the mutiny are also available in the same office. It is known that a number of officials and locals were rewarded by the government for their services in haunting down the mutineers all over India. A researcher in the field may, therefore, profitably look into such lists that are preserved in various archives and identify, who among these awardees were from Cachar. Some information might be even locally available. U. C. Guha,<sup>8</sup> for example, mentions about Rai Haricharan Sarma Bahadur, a native Bengalee and an Extra Assistant Commissioner, who was

honoured with the *India Medal*. A. C. Choudhury<sup>9</sup>, the historian, who was a descendant of the Zamindar family of Jaffirgarh, on the strength of his family sources, mentioned that one of his ancestors, the then Zamindar, engaged one Kala Mian to collect information about the movement of the sepoys.

A survey of the oral traditions, which are being increasingly used by the historians to supplement the available written materials, can be of considerable help to the researchers. The local people in the neighbourhood of the main theatres of operations might be able to narrate what they have heard about it. The sepoys killed at Latu were buried in a nearby hillock which is locally known as *Sipai tilla*. This was visited by the people in large numbers during the national movement, and it is still visited by many. Some people in the area are able to say what they have heard from their elders about the battle. The last battle perhaps took place at Dwarband where the last batch of the sepoys were hunted down. It is a tea garden with a large number of villages around it and the old Cachar-Aizal Road passed through it. The sepoys were encountered when they tried to escape to the Lushei Hills. A section of them had indeed escaped but were chased, captured, and brought back. They were tried in special military court, sentenced and executed on the spot. The present writer in his childhood was shown by the elders a plot of land on the bank of a small river (*Sonacharra*, which is a tributary of the Barak) where the British soldiers were encamped and another plot on the other side of the river where the sepoys were buried, after execution according to the decision of the court martial. The latter is locally still designated as *garad-beel* (*garad* means prison and *beel* is a marshy land or a natural lake). The way the sepoys were tortured to death and the bravery with which they suffered the gallows had cast such a deep impact in the minds of the local people that they believed that the *beel* was infested with ghosts. In the nights they could see (I was told) the lamps patrolling over the *beel*; these lamps would come from different directions and then assemble in one place, *perhaps to resolve to retaliate the British vengeance* (emphasis ours). And we the children were ever ready to listen to the sound of boots, whistles and commands of the parading sepoys in dark evenings. Within few years after independence, however, these were forgotten and no one came across those alarming sights.

An important source of information could, in deed, be the folk-songs in which the Cachar Valley has a strong tradition. In these days also we come across the ballads that are composed by the gifted

village bards on the themes drawn from exciting events and recited in market places in rural areas by the professionals. No conscious attempt has so been made (at least to my knowledge) to gather and examine whether there are songs that contain contents bearing on the mutiny. We have come across with excerpts of at least three such songs that contain contents on mutiny in Cachar.<sup>10</sup> The excerpts are as follows :

- (i) *jaiona jaiona bhai re*  
*latur bazar diya*  
*shoie shoye sipai aichhoin ingraj khediya*  
*haire ingraj khediya*

(Brother, don't go by the Latur Bazar ; the sepoys have come in hundreds, chasing the Englishmen).

- (ii) *duar bandho re sipai aila ghate*  
*saheb babuye hukum dila morbai fanshir kathe*  
*haire morbai fanshir kathe*

(Close your doors, the sepoys are around ; the Saheb (an English officer) has ordered, you shall be hanged (if you give them shelter).

- (iii) *O mon paran fante re*  
*chokkhe dekha dai*  
*kolir kope hai hai*  
*sipair paran jai*

.....  
 .....

*pathe boshi kande sati patir ashai*  
*putra kanya ashohai kare hai hai*

(My heart goes ; to stand (the sight) ; alas ! at the curse of dark age the sepoy looses his life ; the wife cries on the road, in the hope of (return of the) husband ; the helpless children lament).

These songs, although incomplete, provide us with enough clue for an understanding of the response and reaction of the people of Cachar to the cause of the mutineers. Unfortunately, the names of the composers and the villages that they belonged are not known. There might be many more similar songs that can be gathered and recorded for the use of the historians before they are lost into oblivion.

#### References

1. J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar Under British rule in North East India*, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 209-12.

2. S. Choudhury (ed), *The Mutiny Period in Cachar*, Silchar, 1981, p, 2 ; R. Stewart, Superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated 10 June 1857.
3. Ibid ; dated 13 June, 1857.
4. Ibid ; 7 December 1857.
5. E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Second edition, Calcutta, 1925, pp. 378-9 ; A. C. Choudhury, *Srihatter Itibritta*, Sylhet, 1317 B. S., pt. II, chap. V, pp. 50-4.
6. J. B. Bhattacharjee, pp. 247-8 ; Cachar District Records (CR), No. 46 of 1861.
7. S. Choudhury, p. 51 ; R. Stewart to the Magistrate of 24 Pergunnahs, Calcutta, dated 4 June 1858.
8. U. C. Guha, *Cacharer Itibritta*, Dacca, 1921, p. 58.
9. A. C. Choudhury, pp. 51.
10. The author is thankful to Shri Janmejy Barman of Bhagyakul, Shillong, for reciting to him the portions of the songs quoted in the text. This octogenerian former Civil Servant, who is a scion of the royal clan of Cachar, further told that these and may other songs were popular in Cachar in his younger days as *Sipahi juddher geet*.