

AN ANTI-BRITISH ALLIANCE OF THE NORTH-EAST - THAT FAILED

S. Dutta

Matibar Barsenapati, who could extract an autonomous status to his Matak Kingdom (now approx. Dibrugarh District) after being agreed to pay an annual tribute in kind, such as, Elephant and Silk, to the Ahom Government; and later on who was placed "in the Semi-independent possession of the Matak country" by the British after its occupation of Assam in 1826, by an agreement made by Mr. Scott with him on May 13, 1826,¹ died on January 2, 1832, after a successful rule that could draw appreciation even from some British Officials. Before his death the Barsenapati, because of his deteriorating health condition, with the consent of the Council of Elders, selected his second son Bhagirath alias Maju Gohain, as his successor and handed over the charge of the administration to him.

The long-coveted opportunity to annex the Matak territory, after grabbing the Ahom Kingdom of Purandar Singha in October 1838, had arrived for the British. When the 'Divide and Rule' policy of the British could create dissension among the Matak by proposing a separation of Moran region to leave a truncated area for the Matak Ruler with more other stringent conditions that could not be accepted by the Maju Gohain and his other brothers, the British Government by a proclamation assumed the charge of the Matak Territory in November, 1839.²

After the annexation of the Matak territory, the Gohain brothers were tried to be conciliated by the offer of pension, for which an amount of one-third of the net revenue of the territory estimated at Rs. 15,000/- was sanctioned.³ But the Gohain brothers considered the amount inadequate and objected the payment of pension entirely in cash.⁴

Thus, mortified at the loss of their autonomy and the consequent arbitrary arrangement, the Gohain brothers with the help of the people, planned to overthrow the British Rule and started hatching a plan in concert with the frontier tribes. The British Government scented the trouble and to guarantee the good behaviour "on part of the members of the deceased Senapati's family", three of the most influential Gohain brothers were shifted as hostages to Gauhati.

Considering the delay in settling the pension question as impolitic, the Government then decided that of the proposed pension amount, one-half would be paid in cash and the other half in terms of land. While this new proposal was presented to the Gohain brothers kept at Gauhati, it has been reported, they agreed to the new proposal, on which they were allowed to come back to their territory.

But when Lt. Eld was deputed to demarcate the individual boundaries, the Gohain brothers demanded as before, one-third of the country should be handed over to them in one compact area in lieu of the proposed pension. Lt. Eld then reported to Capt. Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, Lakhimpur.

"In conformity to your instructions, I proceeded from this place on the 18th instant, I returned yesterday after having visited Bujaltolee, Bardurra and Hilleaobarree. The Bora (eldest), Captain and Hood Gohains met me at the former place, and I regret to say my endeavours to convince them of the favour proposed to them were altogether fruitless - as nothing short of a third of the country will be accepted by them. From Bujaltolee, I proceeded to Bardurra, the residence of the Majoo Gohain, whom I found equally averse to the measure proposed. Such being the case I did not conceive it necessary to put up marks or make an admeasuring

the land at Hilleaobarree."⁷ He further mentioned, "herewith I beg to forward the petitions of the different Gohains on the subject from which you will perceive the little hope there is to be entertained, of their acceding to the arrangements intended."

The translated version of the petition from the Bor Gohain, Capt. Gohain, Saru Gohain and other seven Gohains of 5th Aghun 1762 Saka has been mentioned here:

"The allowance that you have given us of or 4000 poorahs of land is insufficient for us because our cattle straying beyond our boundaries and into the lands of the ryots cause constant complaints against us for trespassing.

The lands within the following boundaries have always belonged to our family viz., Dingree nuddee (present Dangari river), Pangree Bhur (present Pengeri Gurh), Boree Dehing and Debroom Mookh and we cannot support ourselves comfortably without one-third of these lands. you had better send us out of the country than give us less than this quantity. We do not wish our lands to be in separate parcels but altogether in one tract. We should wish to have the lands within the following boundaries; viz. Sabyan nuddee, Tingraighar, and the Debroom nuddee, and we shall be satisfied."

Maju Gohain in a separate petition echoed similar views in his letter dated 6th Aghun, 1762 Saka.

"My ancestor held the lands bounded as follows: Dangaoree nuddee, Pangareeghur, Bura Dehing and the Barrampooter when Major Scott and White took the country Since his death (death of Bersenapati) myself and brothers have not been able to support ourselves with one or two thousand poorahs

allowed to us. You had better turn us out of the country than not make a greater allowance.

When you took the country from us you agreed to give us one-third of all these lands, and unless you do so, we cannot live comfortably. We do not want the lands in separate pieces but altogether, as the ryots are constantly complaining against us. We want the lands within the following boundaries; Subyan, Bura Dehing, Dibrooghur and Rajghur."¹⁰

In the petitions the Gohain brothers committed a tactical mistake by referring "You had better turn us out of the country than give us less than this", which was fully utilised by the British afterwards.

But considering the fact that submission to such a proposal would only give a chance to the Gohain brothers to get themselves organized, the British Government tried to evade it tactfully and delayed the settlement of the pension question, dissatisfied with the attitude of the Government, the Gohain brothers made elaborate plans of rebellion against the British Government.¹¹ Lt. Eld, however, made an attempt to find the roots of conspiracies to implicate the Gohain brothers.

In his D.O. letter from Dibrugarh dated 29th November 1840, to Capt. Vetch, the Political Agent of Upper Assam, Lt. Eld mentioned:

"Enclosed I beg to forward the deposition of an emissary of the Gohain whom I seized at Bujaltolee, the very day after his return from the Singpho Hills. This together with the statement of Punbur Subedar will show you the trouble which the Gohains are endeavouring to give us and which in my humble opinion will never be at the end until they, the Gohains are turned from the country."¹²

The deposition of Punbar Subedar of the 2nd Sebundeas, a Matak by birth, has been given below:

On the 20th November, the Junior Assistant appointed Dome and Boolie, two Sepoys of the 3rd company to quietly see what the Borgohain, Majoo Gohain and the others were doing. Dome went to his elder brother who is the Mahout of the Borgohain and was informed by him that Majoo Gohain had been this year to Debrooghur and brought Rs.150 worth of Kannee (opium) to present to the Singphos, the Kampteas and the Nagas. It was decided that at the new moon the Kampteas and Singphos should attack Saikuah, Kanjoo, Ningroo and Tego. The Nagas should attack Joypore. The Borgohain, Saru Gohain attack Rangagarah and the Majoo Gohain and Capt. Gohain Debroomookh. After this arrangement they separated. They have employed elephants for bringing down the jungle in order to make the road straight. The Mahout told this to my sepoy, who have repeated it to me, and I have sent sepoy to ascertain the road on which elephants have been employed.

Are any of the Muttocks in connivance with these Gohains?

All the Ghur Bundha, all the Bujaltollie and all the Gohains."

The translation of the report from the police Jamadar stationed at Kontee Pukree near the residence of the Borgohain is given below:

"One Muttuck of Paneetollah (present Panitola of Dibrugarh district) reported to him that on the 7th Assin last, Majoo Gohain and Borgohain, Hood Gohain, Capt. Gohain, the Gohain's son Bakrah and all the Sykeahs, Borahs and others of Ghur Bundha khel assembled at night in the Numghar (prayer hall) of Paneetollah and they decided upon sending

Rs. 1000 by Audo Ram, Bhabiram and Thalajoo of the same khel to the Nagas to engage their services for making an attack on the forces of Jeypoor. The Nagas had agreed to their proposals and sent these three people back to ascertain the time it should be carried into execution.

They also sent presents each of Jangphai ... and $\frac{1}{2}$ maund of salt for the Gohains.

On the 13th of the same month Goburdhun of Gundeah Khel, Nua Dom of Ghurbandha Khel, Thopok, the son of Jomdhora Baruah of Dinjoiee, Bormuttuck, the son of Moculee Bora of Ghurbandha Khel, Mamadoo, the grandson of Darua Kamptee Gohain of Borthonee and the son of Galdhunese sent off with a present of two thousand rupees to the Kampteas to engage them to attack the forces of Shkwah (present Saikhuah). These have not yet returned, but it is decided in the event of the Kampteas agreeing to their proposal that the Capt. Gohain with all the Ghurbundee Khel and the Khampteas of Borthonee will attack the forces at Rungagarah. The Borgohain, Hood Gohain and Barooah, Jagrah, the son of Soohrah Bar Baruah will attack the forces of Debroghur with the assistance of the following Khels; Patroo, etc."¹³

Another report from Natun Kiagatie, the Darogah of Dibrugarh Thana, dated 3rd December 1840, was also forwarded by Lt. Eld to Capt. Vetch.

"Reports that he has discovered from a person living with Capt. Gohain and the other sons of the Barsenaputtee that they have sent a person to the Singpho-Gaums with present of Kani(opium) to induce them to supply troops. They have also sent two persons to the Kampties for the same purpose, but nothing has yet been heard from them.

They have also sent two people to the Numsung-hea Nagahs - those have sent backward that they

consider themselves sufficiently strong for the troops at Joypur if ¹⁴ the Gohains consider themselves equal to the others.

The report of the police Jamadar stationed at Kontee Pookree contained the following:

"Reports that on the night of the 4th November, Bhatum Bora, Setuman Bora, Bajuah, Gopal Bora, Nuji-mund Bora with four others came to the house of the Borgohain, where they held a consultation. I got intimation from Komal Bora, the son of Ahuna Ligree and immediately sent people to them, but they dis-bursed." ¹⁵

The deposition of one Rumgy Singpho, an emis-sary of the Gohains of Tingree (Tingrai) in the Matak area contained the following facts: ¹⁶

What is your name? Ramjay, son of Bor, aged 30 or 35 years, caste Ahom. I belong to Chakeal Khel.

Did you go to the Singpho country or not? Yes.

To whom did you go and with what intent?

In last Kartick (forget dates) but about 20 or 25 days ago, I was sitting at home when the Sykeah of Tingree Konwar came to me and said that Borgohain, kthe son of Borsenaputtee wanted me. I accordingly went the following day and found many people collec-ted there. In the evening Borgohain and Narsing took me to the Elephant-Shed and said to me. You know the Singpho, Khamptee and Nagah language. Go by the road of making to Palong Pall Gohain of the Kampteas and tell him that I am ready with the people of the Hoolong and Gooreeah Khels and consi-der myself strong enough for the Bangals (British)

now in the Muttuck and tell him to tell the Dufflah Gum when he arrives to move on towards Joypore and himself to come on to Chookowah (Saikhowah). I went as far as their, when I expended all my rice and was obliged to return. The Borgohain said he would again send me in 2 or 4 days.

When did the Borgohain tell the Singphos and Kamptees to come?

He mentioned no particular date to me.

Did Narsing say anything to you or not?

He told me to go on to Palong Pall Kamptee Gohain and said that he was himself going to Rungpoor to ascertain the strength of the forces there. Who knows that you were sent to Palong Pall Gohain?

When I told the husband of my eldest sister Sub Pournah Najir Bora he said to me it was not well to quarrel with the Bangals, but you must go or you will offend the Bargohain. However, come back from half-way with some excuse. Narsing was present when the Borgohain gave me the orders".

On getting these reports from Lt. Eld and realising the gravity of the situation, Capt. Vetch reported the matter to Capt. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor-General in his¹⁷ letter dated 14th December 1840. He thus reported:

"You will be perceived by the enclosed documents, there is strong reason to think the Muttuck Gohains mediate an outbreak, similar to the attack on Sudiya by the Kamptis and appear to have been intriguing with the frontier-tribes for assistance. You will also observe by Capt. Eld's Demi Official letters, and the petitions of the Gohains that they reject the advantageous arrangements I was desirous of effecting in their favour by substituting land as a part of their provisions, instead of paying the

whole in money ... and they will only accept of one-third of the country, which intended for them, although it has been repeatedly explained to them, it was a third of the revenue, and not the country or people they were to have.

It appears to me if their present petition was complied on, it would only strengthen their hands without attaching them to the Government, for when they had much in their power and everything to hope by exerting themselves after the attack on Sudiya, and when a new settlement of their own country was under consideration they throw difficulties on the way of every requisition for labourers, and only complied with these partially and with reluctance.

Whether any actual attack we hereafter made on our parts - it appears evident these alarms, and the anxiety they create among the people, must be most injurious to the prosperity of the country.... Under these circumstances, I solicit the favour of your orders for my proceeding as early as possible, I beg most respectfully to suggest that in event of rejection of the Gohains' petitions, and you concur with me in thinking they will hazard the ruin of themselves and the district - it might be the most lenient mode of proceeding against these misguided men to take them literally at their word, and remove them from the country until such time as it is surveyed, subdivided and settled on a permanent footing. And as cultivation of tea has been so far extended as to give permanent and profitable employment to a considerable portion of the people, which will tender over them anything to secure the country from the futile attempts at insurrection.

The lands lying within the boundaries applied for include nearly all the Tea tracts in Muttuck except those made over to the Assam Company, but I do not suppose the Gohains extend their meaning to

the Tealands as they were conceded by the Bursenaputtee in his life time".

Though Capt. Vetch wrote like this, actually he had an apprehension of loosing the newly started tea gardens in case the Matakas, in alliance with the frontier tribes, become successful in their plan against the British. Anyhow Capt. Jenkins wrote back to Capt. Vetch approving his measures and offering suggestions for his guidance. He wrote:

"I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your demi official letter of the 14th instant with the enclosures relating to the treasonable designs reported to be mediated by the sons of the late Bursenaputtee.

Having given these documents all the consideration in my power, I have come to the painful conclusion of the necessity of removing the Gohains from the Muttuck District for the present.

It appears evident from the whole tenour of their conduct and the continued contumacious and intriguing spirit displayed by them, that they either really mediate an attempt to subvert our rule, or they hope to carry their object of reserving a part or whole of the district under their own independent management by intimidating us and the people by rumours of plots to raise the surrounding tribes against us.

Under all circumstances, therefore, I consider it essential for the peace of the country and for the eventual good of the families of these misguided men that you should take measures to send them or as you see fit to Lower Assam.

You will be good enough to announce to them that as I cannot comply with their wishes to have one-third of the country in one tract assigned to them,

I consider it necessary to accept their offer of leaving the country.

With the Gohains you will be good enough to remove any of the subordinate chiefs whom you have reason to suspect have been principally concerned in aiding the Gohains in their designs.

I consider the best place for the present residence of the Gohains will be Bishenath (present Biswanath) as there they will have less opportunity of conspiracy than in any other part of Assam I would not propose that they should be kept under a guard, but they may be held under good surveillance.

I have to request you will appoint a trusty Jamadar Chapprasee with 3 or 4 peons, who are conversant in the dialects of Muttuck to accompany reside with the Gohains under the pretext of providing for their wants. As these peons should be trusty men and will be removed for sometime from their houses, you will be pleased to allow them liberal salaries."

At the same time Capt. Jenkins wrote to Mr. F.H. Maddock, Secretary to the Government of India, Fort William, to approve the measures taken by him. He wrote:

"I have the honour to submit a copy of a Demi Official letter of the 14th instant from Capt. Vetch reporting that there were strong reasons for supposing that the sons of the late Bursenaputtee mediated an outbreak and suggesting their removal from Muttuck for a time.

I have also the honour to forward copies with translations of reports and depositions regarding the intended treasonable designs of the Gohains and of two letters from them to Capt. Vetch and likewise

a copy of my reply to Capt. Vetch authorising him to cause the removal of the Gohains to Bishenath.

I trust the step here taken will meet with approval of the Right Hon'ble the Governor General-in-Council. It is to be remembered that, this is not the first rumour of the Gohains being engaged in attempts to raise their own people and to incite the neighbouring chiefs to join with them in an open insurrection, but ever since our occupation of the country reports to this effect have been constantly current and substantiated by such very credible evidence and so many strong circumstances as to leave no doubt in my mind as to the design and wishes of the Gohains. I was in hopes however, that as the country became settled and our resources were displayed and these chiefs found that they were not likely to be supported that they would have quietly submitted to the present arrangements, if they become not reconciled to them, in this however it is apparent, I have been disappointed and there seems no probability of any system of indulgence having any effect on the tempers and minds of these stubborn and very rude men, I conceive it essential the well-being of the whole country should no longer be hazarded by allowing them to remain on the frontier. Their removal is all that I would recommend, although the contumacious and rebellious conduct of the family might well deserve severe punishment.

Their demands of an independent charge or of one-third of the whole of the lands in one lot on any terms should not in my opinion be listened to. We could not concede to their terms without again establishing a power that might be dangerous to us or that at least would keep the neighbouring country for years to come in a disturbed state, and I do not think we could with justice again make over to the Gohains a population which have a right to be under the immediate superintendence of the Government of Assam.

The Britishers had a first hand knowledge of the heroic struggle of the Matakas under the leadership of the Gohain family and others against the Ahom Monarchy; and feared a repetition of the same against them also. They, of course, had been given a wrong picture of the nature of the uprisings which had been reflected in the letter of Capt. Jenkins:

"It is now just a century since the rebellions which commenced in Muttuck and were principally supported by the Muttuck Chiefs, have kept the whole province in a state of anarchy and the terrible cruelties and disorders inflicted upon the Assamese of Upper and Lower Assam were chiefly perpetrated by the Muttuck under the guidance of the Chiefs of the Senaputee's family. It is not to be expected that the memory of so long a series of rapine and atrocity will easily be effaced from the recollections of the present generation of Gohains, and it seems prudent to remove them from scenes, where every thing reminds them of their former lawless modes of life."

Thus the stage was complete to implicate the Gohain brothers in an anti-British conspiracy. The Agents of Matak Gohains could convince the Singphos and the Nagas to become allies with them by pointing out to the facts how the colonial rulers had been encroaching on their land for tea cultivation; and to the Khamptis as to how they were inflicted severe punishment when they first rose against the British for having lost their autonomy. Thus, all the aggrieved parties prepared to combine against their common enemy. But before the plan and preparations could be matured, the British-hawk got the scent of the plan. The epicentre of the entire plan i.e., the Gohain brothers along with some of their principal advisers were removed to Biswanath. There they were kept under strict surveillance. The Higher Authority was informed only of the fait accompli i.e., the removal of the Gohain brothers, with the hope of getting its approval.

An effort then was made to implicate the Gohain brothers in a case ²⁰ of criminal conspiracy against the British Government, but due to want of conclusive ²¹ proof they could not be punished as desired. For, Captain Vetch has mentioned ²² in his letter dated 24th March 1840, to Capt. Jenkins.

If reliance could be placed on the testimony of Suckis (witnesses) as to the conversation, he deposes he overheard at the Buragohain's house between the brothers and several of the heads of khels ... it would appear they only want a convenient time to attempt an insurrection. The circumstances of these two persons father and son, having, been long in the employ of the family, no doubt has afforded them very many and favourable opportunities of observing the conduct of the Gohains, but at the same time, their having been ill-treated by the Buragohain, may have induced them to accuse him out of revenge."

In another place of the same correspondence he mentioned:

"On the whole I think there are good grounds to believe the Gohains harbour hostile feelings, and if supported by the inhabitants would on the first favourable opportunity attempt an insurrection, similar to that of the Khamptis, it seems, however, very doubtful, if they can obtain the support to any extent, and as the time fixed for a rising had passed, and the great assembly of the Gossains had been ill-attended, under the apprehension that something of the kind was to follow, I did not consider it advisable to apprehend the Gohains on the evidence referred to."

Thus a grand anti-British alliance in the North-East engineered by the Matak Gohains with the promised-active support of the Hill Tribes proved abortive. As the evidence collected mentioned earlier

against the Gohain brothers to implicate them in a serious anti-Government charge was one of prima facie nature making it difficult to catch hold of them red-handed, the Gohain brothers detained at Biswanath were allowed to return to their homeland after it being surveyed, assessed and settled. The Government by an order of November 29, 1841, made provision of pensions and rent-free grants to the Gohain brothers individually on a fixed rate. For it was thought "it will be highly desirable ... that you should make the payments on some scale to be agreed among themselves, to the individual members of the family rather than to the two or three chiefs only, for by this arrangement you will break up the dependence of the junior branches upon the senior, and destroy much of the danger of a general confederacy". The Matak Gosains or Mahantas who had tremendous influence over the people, were granted rent-free holdings during their lives, and afterwards to their heirs at half or quarter rates, with a view to win them from the Gohain brothers. The ex-officials and men of rank were also granted remission in revenue to procure their goodwill.²³

Thus an all out fullproof effort was tried by the British Government to plug the scope of any future attempt on rising or anti-British alliance in the region.

Notes & References

1. P.C. 1833, January 7, No. 82; C.U. Aitchison, **A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads**, Part III, Calcutta, 1909, p. 138f.
2. P.C. 1839.
3. P.C. 1840, April 27, Nos. 140-141.
4. P.C. 1840, April 27, No. 140.
5. P.C. 1840, June, No. 137.

6. P.C. 1840, June 8, No. 138.
7. D.O. letter from Lt. P. Eld to Capt. Vetch, dated 29th November 1840.
8. **Ibid.**
9. Letter dated 5th Aghun, 1762.
10. Letter dated 6th Aghun, 1762.
11. P.C. 1841, June 25, No. 73-75.
12. D.O. letter to Lt. P. Eld to Capt. Vetch, dated 29th November, 1840, Dibrugarh.
13. Report of the police Jamadar stationed at Kontee Pukhuri, dated 24th November 1840.
14. Report of the Darogah of Dibrugarh Thana, dated 3rd December, 1840.
15. Report of the police Jamadar of Kontee Pukhuri, dated 6th November, 1840.
16. The Deposition of Rumgy Singpho dated 26th November, 1840.
17. Vetch to Jenkins, dated 14th December 1840.
18. Jenkins to Vetch dated 24th December 1840.
19. Jenkins to F.H. Maddock, Secretary to the Government of India, dated 25th December 1840.
20. P.C. 1841, January 25, Nos. 73-75.
21. H.K. Barpujari, **Assam: In the Days of the Company**, Gauhati, 1980, p. 156.
22. Vetch to Jenkins, dated 24th March 1840.
23. P.C. 1841, November 28, Nos. 130-133.