The Nature of British objection to the Trade Monopoly of the Raja of Cachar (1827-1830)

J. B. Bhattacharjee

On his reinstatement as the Raja of Cachar after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26), Raja Govindachandra Narayan was called upon by the circumstances to effect a series of measures to redeem the State from its dwindled conditions caused by the internal rebellions and the successive Manipuri and the Burmese occupations. As provided by the treaty of Badarpur (1824), he was required to pay a tribute of Rs. 10,000 annually to the British Government. The northern hill division of the state was userped by Tularam Senapati, and Raja Govindachandra was induced by the British in 1829 to acknowledge Tularam as the *de facto* ruler of the hills.[1] Tularam had also appropriated to himself the resources of a considerable portion of the state including twelve dependent states in Central Cachar (now part of Nowgong district of Assam) where the Raja's officers were prevented by the Senapati from collecting revenue.[2] A major portion of the ryots in South Cachar (Barak Valley) had also fled to the neighbouring disricts of Bengal during the Manipuri and the Burmese invasions. The whole tract of land east of Bikrampur and Panchgram was thrown out of plough and a large number of cultivators were either killed or carried into captivity. When Govindachandra returned to Cachar in 1826 most of the parganas were empty and none of them yielded any revenue.[3]

Although the Raja got actual possession of the state in 1826, he was under obligation to pay the tribute with effect from 1824 as provided in the treaty signed that year. He was a fugitive in Bengal since 1818,[4] and had no means to pay the arrears. In 1827 the Raja, therefore, petitioned the British authorities in Calcutta for exemption from the payment of tributes for two preceding years.[5] The remission was granted,[6] but the Raja was required to construct a road between Sylhet and Manipur through Cachar at his own cost.[7] The construction of the road and the payment of tribute involved a large sum which the Raja could not afford to pay. He also realised that the remission once granted shall not be repeated in future as the British authorities had already made up their mind to annex Cachar at the earliest opportunity.[8] It would indeed be too risky for the Raja to be a defaulter at this stage. Govindachandra, therefore, resorted to all possible means to improve his finance by effecting economy in expenditure and by raising additional revenue. The number of ministers was reduced from four to one and the judges from fifty to four, while the services of the revenue officials attached to the queens and other members of the royal family were dispensed with. The rent-free grants alloted to the members of the royal family and the state officials were discontinued. To increase the collection of revenue, the amount due from the defaulters began to be realised by restraint of property and confinement and in cases of land laid in waste a collective fine was imposed on the whole *khel*. Additional taxes were to be paid for the cultivation of poppy, fruit and vegitables, for manufacturing salt, and the privileges of holding titles, riding on *dola* (palanquin), wearing of gold ornaments and for music at marriage ceremony and all other festive occasions. The custom duties were levied at the river *ghats* on articles of export.[9] As an additional means to extricate himself of the financial tangles, the Raja exercised a monopoly in trade in certain articles, particularly grains, which could be sold by the individuals to the Raja at a price fixed by him and these were eventually resold to the merchants from outside at a higher price, thus keeping a margin for for the State.[10]

The British authorities took exception to the policy of trade monopoly of the Raja which, according to them, was injurious to the 'interest of the people of Cachar' and insisted that the Raja should abolish all restrictions on free trade between the people of Cachar and the merchants from Sylhet.[11]

Structure of monopoly trade

We do not have sufficient data to measure the extent of the monopoly trade of the Raja. What is clear from the British records is that the principal item of such trade was rice. It also covered grass and bamboo.[12] There was no restriction in trade in any item between the people of the state. It related only to export trade, precisely with the Sylhet district of Bengal. The custom duty was imposed on the river *ghats* like Bikrampur, Barkhola, Gumrah, Udharband, Madhuraghat, Sonabarighat and Sialtekh. Sialtekh, on Cachar-Sylhet border, was the most important transit station of Cachar. The duty imposed on transit was generally on timber and other forest products.[13]

Our data is also extremely limited for an objective understanding of the nature of effects of such monopoly on the people of Cachar. In any case, the effect could not be of a high magnitude as it related only to external trade. The fact that the Raja purchased these items from the people and resold them[14] implies that the ryots were paid for the articles, although it was bound to be less than what they would get from direct and free trade. The rice monopoly, as admitted by David Scott, the Agent to the Governor-General, North East Frontier, was established by the Raja "at the desire of his own subjects from apprehension of scarcity".[15] Moreover, as we have discussed elsewhere,[16] some form of state monopoly in trade, including collection of duty on ghats, was in vague in Cachar for a long time before the British rule. David Scott also found that the chief part of the revenue of the State had always been from such sources.[17] Felix Carey, who was for sometimes, in the service of the Raja, wrote in 1817,[18]

> "*Kachar borders upon Manipur to the E, Dhurumpoor is its extreme border to the N. E. and Assam or Burmapootree to the N. The plain country is nearly as extensive as the district of Sylhet and appears to be more fertile, to the plain country may be added the mountainous parts which are still more extensive, and the whole must exceed more than two or two etc hald* (?) *square degrees, doubtless in the course of a very short time with proper management, the revenue of Kachar would much exceed that of Sylhet ; part of which as exceed upon would revert to Government. Not to mention the duties levied upon articles imported from the eastward into Bengal in case a free trade be opened. The profit ensuing from the trade in the produce of the country as Timber, Ivory, Lac, Wax, Elephants, Cotton, Uggun, Bamboos, Ratans, etc. and various other valuable articles in the timber and mineral line which would be brought to public notice all these, in time no doubt will make considerable addition to the Company's treasury.*
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> *Since the Burmans have beocome formidable nation, the principal part of the Trade, in Ivory, Wax, Lac, Silk, Cotton, Cutch, hrrital, Mules, Horses, Copper, tin, lead, Zinc, silver, Gold, Sapphire, and rubies, has been completely drained by that country and exported through that channel to Bengal and other parts of India whereas were a free trade opened through Kachar in the*

course of a few years, the greatest part if not the whole of this immense trarffic rate, would be imported immediately into Bengal certainly then it must follow that these important articles of commerce, might be procured at a much cheaper rate, than what we now get them from the Burmans who dispose of these articles to our Merchants from their different sea ports, at a very enormous profit. During the Mussalman Governments trade appears to have been carried on through these parts.'

British Objections

The British authorities took serious exceptions to the monopoly exercised by the Raja in matter of trade. They argued that the people of Cachar would have been much benefitted by directly trading with the merchants of Sylhet and that under the treaty of Badarpur they were responsible for the welfare of the people in Raja's territory. Charles Tucker, the Commissioner of Sylhet, in a letter to George Swinton, Chief Secretay to the Government, Fort William, on 27 September 1827, stated,[19]

> *"The chief production is paddy of which a supply much beyond the wants of the inhabitants is annually produced for which surplus profitable markets ate at hand but Rajah Govind Chunder, instead of permitting his Ryots thus to dispose of the surplus prohibits the exportation of grain, and thus compels them to sell it to him that he himself may reap the advantage of their labor. In consequence of this most iniquitous measure paddy was selling last year in Cachar for* 17 *and* 18 *maunds for the Rupee, wh lst in our own district the same description of grain sold at the rate of* 3 *maunds for the rupee wholesale, and* $2\frac{1}{2}$ *in the Bazars. The district of Sylhet exports annually a very large quantity of grain to Narrain Gunge and Dacca and receives back, salt, oil, and etc etc. Were the inhabitants of Cachar permitted to participate in this traffic, the country would soon be cultivated.*
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> *The trade is subject to equally absurd and mischievous restrictions. In the first place there was some articles, wax and ivory for example which are considered contraband at least any man bringing them into the country as merchandize must sell them to the Rajah, who fixes his own price and then retails them at a profit. A brisk trade must have been kept up between Munny poor and Sylhet in wax ivory, silk and cotton, but for these rediculous restrictions. Ghauts for levying duties on*

merchandize passing through the country are farmed to individuals, who are not restricted in their demands by any known or regulated rates, and our subjects who engage in the timber trade are compelled to submit to the grossest exactions since the commencement of the present Rajah's rein, particularly since his restoration, the price of timber has doubled, and in the present year scarcely any importation has taken place. Cachar contains an almost inexhaustible supply of valuable timber for purposes of boat building."

The reaction of Swinton to Tucker's observations is noticed in his letter to David Scott on 30 May 1829. He said,[20]

"The description which Tucker has given of the ruinous system of administration in Cachar and of the Rajah's oppressive conduct in preventing his subjects from participating in the traffic of grain, which is exported in large quantities from Sylhet to Dacca and Narrain Gunge, and finds a profitable market there,. is truely lamentable. The restriction which the Rajah has imposed on the transit of articles such as wax, ivory, silk, and cotton between Munnypoor and Sylhet and the gross exactions to which our subjects are exposed who engage in the timber trade seem to call for some notice, as acts of an unfriendly nature towards the Paramount Power which protects him and being a virtual if not actual, infringement of the 2nd article of the treaty, by which the Rajah agrees to attend at all times to the advice offered for the welfare of his subjects by the Governor General in Council and agreeably thereto ractify any abuse that may arise in the administration of affairs. Since the commencement of the present Rajah's reign, particularly since his restoration it is stated by Mr. Tucker that the price of timber has doubled, and in the present year scarcely any importation has taken place, while Cachar is represented to contain an almost inexhaustible supply of valuable timber for purposes of Boat building.'

Scott, in his reply to Swinton, on 19 June 1829 talked in the same line. To quote him,[21]

"Agreeably to the tenor of the second article of the treaty I would further beg to propose that Rajah Govinda Chunder should be advised and required to abolish the monopoly of rice established in Cachar, as decidedly prejudicial to the interests of his subjects and subversive of the improvement of the country.

In conformity to another article of the treaty to which I have not at present an opportunity of referring but by which the Rajah engages to adopt all measures necessary to give effect to the Abkary laws in Sylhet, I would also propose that he should be required to limit, or put an entire stop to the cultivation of the poppy in Cachar, Government in the latter case supplying him with a sufficient quantity of opium for the use of the inhabitants at prime cost.

Evidently, Scott, besides other things, raised the question of opium, which, according to him, the Raja should not be allowed to cultivate but the British must enjoy the privilege of supplying opium for the consumption of the people of Cachar. However, the Governor-General could not agree with Scott and others that the Treaty of Badarpur gave any right to the East India Company's Government to question the rice monopoly of the Raja or to prevent the cultivation of poppy in Cachar. Nevertheless, he asserted the opium monopoly of the Company's Government and suggested that the entry of Cachar poppy should not be allowed into the British territory. Swinton conveyed the observation of the Governor-General to Scott, on 3 July 1829, in the following words,[22]

"......*I am directed to observe to you, that in the opinion of His Lordship in Council the 2nd Article of the Treaty does not give us the right to insist on the abolition of the Rice monopoly in Cachar, as decidedly injurious to the interests of his own subjects and subversive of the improvement of the Country, in the internal management of which we have no right to interfere so long as his misrule does not injure our subjects, or affect the tranquility of our contiguous Territory. On such matters we can only offer our advice.*

In like manner the Governor General in Council does not conceive that we possess the rights adverted to in the 7th paragraph of your letter to limit or put an entire stop to the cultivation of the poppy in Cachar. We can only require him to use his best endeavours to prevent its passing the Frontier as injurious to our opium monopoly, and we must take our own measures to sieze and confiscate whatever opium the produce of Cachar may be imported in our territories.'

Meanwhile, on the basis of the earlier communication of the Chief Secretary, Charles Tucker had already asked the Raja to abolish the rice and other monopoly and Govindachandra accordingly agreed to abolish all such monopoly. David Scott appreciated the attitude of the Raja and, ultimately, sympathised with his genuine financial problems. In a letter to Swinton on 20 July 1829, Scott wrote,[23]

> "*The rice monopoly he (Raja) states was established at the desire of his own subjects from the apprehension of scarcity but he is willing to give up and has indeed issued orders to that effect. In respect to the duties on timber etc etc I did not think that these were points on which I could with propriety interfere, as it is from such sources that the chief part of his revenue has always been obtained, and I cannot perceive that we have any right to diminish the profits derivable from that traffic and which must, in the ordinary course of things, increase in proportion to the enhanced price of timber and occuring from the demolition of the Jungles in the Sylhet district.*'

Evidently, the Raja was not aware of the fact that the Governor General did not agree with the officers in the frontier in questioning the authority of the Raja to exercise trade monopoly or in asking him to abolish such monopoly. But before the views of the Governor General could be communicated to David Scott by the Chief Secretary, the Commissioner of Sylhet on the basis of an earlier reaction of the Chief Secretary had already asked the Raja to abolish the monopoly. The latter was so much crippled by the circumstances that he could not fail to oblige the British authorities. In fact, he lost no time to abolish the monopoly trade.[24]

Motive underneath

The Governor General in Council, as it has already been mentioned, had ultimately turned down the objection of the local officials. The so-called objection was initiated by the Commissioner of Sylhet who aired it to the Chief Secretary and the latter found the objection to be justified. David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, was asked by the Chief Secretary to call upon the Raja to abolish the monopoly. Scott too, it appears, for a time was influenced by the views of the Commissioner and the Chief Secretary, when he suggested that "Rajah Govind Chunder should be advised and required to abolish the monopoly of rice established in Cachar".[25] He was, however, ultimately convinced that the British Government derived no right from the treaty of Badarpur to interfere in the internal affairs of Cachar. He also found that "it is from such sources that the chief part of his (Raja's) revenue has always been obtained".[26] The source of objection, therefore, was the local authority in Sylhet.

It may be interesting to examine the real motive behind the objection of the Commissioner of Sylhet. In fact, the authorities in Calcutta and Sylhet did not like to see Govindachandra as the ruler of Cachar after 1826. The Raja had to be reinstated as per provision of the treaty signed in 1824. The British authorities were then not aware of the economic potentials of Cachar. But once convinced of it, they wanted to rule the territory directly. This becomes clear from the two letters of Swinton. On 23 November 1827, he wrote to Charles Tucker,[27]

> "*You will be pleased to consult with the Agent to the Governor General and report on the expediency of endeavouring to make some arrangement with the Rajah relative to his transferring Cachar to the British Government after his death, as it is understood he has no heirs, and from his advanced years and bodily infirmities cannot be expected to survive long. You are aware that previously to the Rajahs being received under the protection of the British Government he made repeated offers of his country to the British Government which declined to accept them at the time, as there was then no object in extending our influence or Territory in that direction. Under present circumstances His lordship is disposed to believe that the plains of Cachar which have so long run to waste from scanty population and the state of anarchy consequent on the frequent usurpation of it by the Munniporee Brothers Choorjit, Marjeet and Gumbheer Singh would, under British mannagement yield a considerable Revenue, and facilitate the means of our communication with Munnipore.*
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> *His Lordship in Council would be happy also to receive your opinion and that of Mr. Scott whether claimants of Cachar are likely to start upon the present Rajah's decease, and if so, the nature of the title to the succession which could be advanced by each competitor.*"

Again on 30 May 1829, he wrote to David Scott,[28]

> "*The Governor General in Council has deemed it proper to call your attention to the several particulars above adverted to with a view to receiving from you a full and circumstantial report on the affairs of Cachar, a country the welfare of which with reference to the events of the late war with Ava has become an object*

of more importance to us than prevously to that period. Possessed of polite plains, at present allowed to be over grown with jungle from want of population and the oppres ive conduct of a weak and tyrannical Chief, who has been raisesd into power solely by his alliance with us. Cachar under a better rule would become the granary of the surrounding regions, and while it would thus afford adequate supplies to the Munnipore country which is inhabited by a brave and hardy race, who have frequently opposed a noble resistence to their Burmese invaders, would thereby conduce to the security and transquility of our North East Frontier. With the aid which Rajah Gumbheer Singh, the Chief of Munnipore, has already received from us in arms and money it may be presumed that he is better able than ever to oppose resistence to any future attempt of the Burmese to subjugate or pass through his territories, while in the event of British troops being ever employed in Munnipore, the improvement of the intervenning country of Cachar by increased population and cultivation, would facilitate any operations which we might carry on in that quarter."

Scott was hopeful of obtaining permanent possession of Cachar from the Raja. He wrote to Swinton on 20 July 1820,[29].

"I beg to state for the information of the Right Honourable the Governor General in Council that from the tenor of the Rajah's conversation I am led to believe that there would not be much difficulty in obtaining from him the cession of Cachar in consideration of an adequate payment and the assignment to him of a pension and a Jaghir, where he might reside in security with his immediate dependents without being disturbed by the fears that continually haunt him of being murdered by his enemies and competitors for the Raj.'

The Government, however, did not persue the idea of acquiring Cachar on terms that would involve financial commitment. They were convinced that the Raja would not live long, as he was growing old and infirm and that Cachar would automatically lapse to the British as the Raja had no natural successor. Nevertheless, the British authorities were alarmed when they heard that the Raja was going to adopt a son according to Hindu Law. They insisted that the Raja should make it clear that the adopted son shall have no claim to succeed him to the throne.[30] When this controversy was going on, the Raja was assassinated in April 1830 and consequent upon this, Cachar was annexed by the British.[31]

The objection of the Commissioner of Sylhet to the trade monopoly has another interesting aspect. The predecessors of Tucker were also involved in trade disputes with the Rajas of Cachar, arising mostly out of their private trade. Eversince the rise of British power in Bengal the officers of the East India Company and the British merchants carried on flourishing trade in Cachar borders in return of minor compliances. But in course of time the exactions surpassed reasonable limits. As a result, as early as 1790, Raja Krishnachandra Narayan addressed a letter to Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General, complaining that Henry Lodge, the Collector of Sylhet, wanted a monopoly of the Cachar trade in tusks, wax, cane and bamboos and with this intention, he posted sepoys on the borders to prevent all commercial transactions between the peoples and merchants on two sides of the borders. The Raja also mentioned that his state consisted of hills and jungles and the ryots subsisted on the sale of grass and bamboos in Sylhet. The state officers and the Zamindars conducted *khedahs* and sold elephants to the British merchants. These merchants also visited Cachar to purchase elephants. The restrictions, therefore, threatened to crush the state economically.[32] On the instructions of the Board of Revenue, the Collector then had to abolish the trade restrictions between Cachar and Sylhet.[33] The disputes, nevertheless, recurred even subsequently. It is not surprising, therefore, that Tucker found the trade monopoly of the Raja to be objectionable

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that the British demand had forced the Raja to exercise trade monopoly as a means to overcome his financial difficulties. The revenue of the state had declined from one lakh rupees in 1813[34] to twenty-five thousand, from all sources, in 1829[35] 'inspite of two years' improvement. On the otherhand, the Raja was called upon to pay rupees ten thousand annually as tribute and to construct a road between Sylhet and Manipur at his own cost. How could he do that out of a total income of rupees twenty-five thousand ? The tribute fixed on the state was exhorbitant and on the mistaken belief that the state would yield around three lakh rupees annually. As Scott admitted,[36].

> "...... *it appears to me that the amount of revenue that it is conjectured might at no very distant period be derived from Cachar, has been greatly over rated when estimated at* 3 *lacs of Rupees. When the tribute was fixed at* 10,000 *Rupees I*

had every reason to believe that was as large a sum as the Rajah could continue to pay regularly from the country bordering on the Soormah, without oppressing his subjects or neglecting to keep up the necessary civil establishments and police thanahs, and from all I can now learn, I am induced to think that if the whole of Southern Cachar were fully cultivated, it would not produce, at the ordinary rates of rent, a gross revenue of above one lack of Rupees and also that such a state of things could not be brought about under the best management, in a much longer period than 10 *or* 12 *years, the insalubrity of the climate of these Eastern districts proving, as was originally observed by Dr. Buchanan, a powerful check to the increase of population, to which alone we can look on the present backward state of agriculture and with the existing want of capital, to any considerable extension of the cultivation.'*

A Summing-up

It is evident from the discussions that the British had no valid objection to the trade monopoly of the Raja of Cachar. The latter had to resort to such measures due mainly to financial distress for which the British Government was also to a considerable extent responsible, and that the Rajas of Cachar had exercised such monopolies in some form or other even in the past. The extent of the monopoly trade was also not of a high magnitude, it being limited to only a few items. The propriety of such a system is outside the purview of the present dispute. There was, at least, nothing substantial in the deal to suggest that it was against the interest of the people of Cachar or it casued considerable hardship to them or to be a sufficient reason to provoke British intervention. The British relations with Cachar were to be governed by the Treaty of Badarpur which, as admitted by the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, gave no authority to the British to interfere in the internal affairs of Cachar. The trade monopoly could be no reason to interference for the power which was supposed to protect the state from external aggressions. The objection must have originated from the policy of the over enthusiastic British officers who had been waiting for an opportunity to take over the administration of Cachar. They objected to the adoption of a son by the Raja according to his customs and they did not want to see him comfortable as a ruler. The monopoly also could not be to the liking of the British officers in Sylhet who indulged in private trade and thus gave reasons for disputes with the succeding Rajas of

Cachar over such trade. The objection was therefore, in consonance with the expansionist policy of the British officers who were also anxious for their individual prosperity.

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