

A Brief History of the Zamindari of Mechpara in Western Assam

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The Zamindari of Mechpara had its origin in feudalism of the Medieval Ages. The feudal landlords the Bhuiyas as they were called, flourished in this part of the country under the Kamata kingdom towards the later part of the fifteenth century. ¹ That the feudal chiefs in Assam were known as *Bhuiyas* can be ascertained from the views expressed by the late Dr. Wise, according to whom the word *Bhuiya* or *Bhuya* is a Sanskrit equivalent to Persian word *Zamindar*. ² There were twelve Bhuiyan Chiefs in Assam and one of them, Durlabh Narayan, ruled over Kamata at the end of the thirteenth century. The last ruler of this dynasty, Nilambar, was overthrown by Hussain Shah in 1498 A. D. But he could not retain a permanent hold on the territory he acquired, and the *Bhuiyas* took upperhand of the situation; they parcelled out the tract into numerous petty estates and each of which, under its own rulers, was independent of the rest. In all probability, one Thana Kamal founded the Zamindari of Mechpara in the Southern bank of the Brahmaputra at this juncture of this region's history.

According to tradition, Mechpara *Pargana* formed a part of the *Bijni Raj*, and in time of the *Bijni Raja* Mukunda Narayan the *Pargana* was taken away from the possession of the *Bijni Raj* to form a separate estate by order of the Moghul Emperor through the intrigue of one of the officials of the court, who became the founder of the estate. His name was Thanakamal. ³ As has been stated by Buchanan, one Bhagadatta Das Choudhury, was the first *Zamindar* of the estate. ⁴ Be that as it may, the tradition that the *pargana* was taken away from possession of *Bijni Raj* in time of Mukunda Narayan is not acceptable. For, Mukunda Narayan administered the *Raj* in the second half of the eighteenth century. Perhaps, the Zamindari founded by Thana Kamal in the last part of the fifteenth century was captured by the Koch king Viswa Singha in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, and after the fall of the Koch king Parikshit Narayan, Mukunda Ram, the 4th in succession from the said Thana Kamal, was confirmed to the *Zamindari* of Mechpara by the Moghuls. Though his descendants had claimed to be descended of the Ksatriyas, their ancestors was probably Rabha. ⁵

Extent : The estate covered an area of 399 sq. miles. ⁶ The entire estate was situated on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra and was a long strip of land mostly lying within the Goalpara sub-division, only a small portion falling within the sub-division of Dhubri

of the old undivided Goalpara District. The estate had three divisions, i.e., the *Pargana* of Mechpara, A Mahal and B Mahal, the last two being within the administrative jurisdiction of Garo Hills. A Mahal was under the management of the Government, the *Zamindars* getting 15 per cent of the gross collections ; B Mahal was managed by the *Zamindars*, the Government getting 15 per cent of the gross collections.⁷

Tribute and Revenue : The estate was a frontier tract bordering on the hills of the Garos and its original owners, or the chieftains, called *Chaudhuris*, practically exercised paramount control of the people and the Garos inhabiting the plains at the foot of the Garo Hills. As a token of their acknowledgement to the Mughul Emperor, they paid a small tribute to the *Foujdar* of Rangamati. The tribute was paid in the form of certain elephants and a small quantity of the precious wood called Agar.⁸ On the accession of the East India Company to the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765, the district of Rangamati, which lay on both sides of the Brahmaputra and stretched eastward to the then independent kingdom of Assam, passed under the British rule. The Mechpara estate and the sister *Parganas* of Kalumalupara and Karaibari included in this region were known through the settlement proceedings as tributary mahals under the British administration. It may be noted down that, in the later part of the Moghul rule, the principal duties of the chieftains of these estates were to repress the incursions of the Hills tribes of the upland. After the country passed under the British rule, the *Chaudhuris* were placed much on the same footing and this left them as independent as before.⁹ When the Decennial Settlement of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was made the chieftainship of Mechpara like other *Zamindars* among whom the permanently settled portion of the district of Goalpara was divided was assessed at a nominal amount i.e. Rs. 2,235-8 annas as land revenue and Rs. 5,557-8 annas as local rates. Be that as it may the total rent-roll was said to be about Rs. 1,30,000/-. In addition to this the landlords derived a considerable income from their *Sal-trees*.¹⁰ The gross annual income of the estate increased to about 4 lacs in 1922.¹¹

Religion of the Family : The *Zamindar* family of the Mechpara Estate was Hindu by religion. The *Choudhuris* of this house were all *Baishnabs*. *Baishnab satra*, Balijana founded by this *zamindar* family is still functioning. They were the followers of the *Mahapurusia* Sect down to the time of the late *Raja Bahadur* Prithi Ram Choudhury. But contrary to the tenet of their true faith, they were allowed to perform *Pujas*, and they always celebrated *Durga* and other *Pujas* with great pomp. Yet the family deity of the *Choudhuris* of Mechpara was *Madan Mohan*. There was an interesting story relating to the celebration of *Durga Puja* in the Mechpara *zamindari*. It is said that one of the ears of one *Choudhury* of the family was torn away by an elephant while he was coming home from abroad. So, he was suggested to perform the *Puja* of the mother goddess *Durga*. There is still another saying.

The *Zamindars* of the family were invariably engaged in wars against the Hill Tribes, who were ferocious. Once they were humiliated at the hands of the Garo mountaineers. Then they were suggested to worship *Durga Devi*, who was supposed to bless them with power sufficient to suppress the Hill Tribes. Thus, the *Zamindars*, while maintaining their family deity, Madan Mahan, performed *Durga Puja* in the vicinities of the *Rajbari*.

Genealogy of the Zamindar Family : Little is known about the earlier generation of the *Zamindar* family of Mechpara. Khana Gabura (1406-1447 A. D.) was the father of the founder of the estate. His name was Khana alias Thana Kamal or Kamal Lochan (1447-1504 A. D.). He was succeeded by his son, Megha Ram (1504-1561 A. D.). Megha Ram's son Gobinda Ram (1561-1621 A. D.) was succeeded in turn by his son Mukunda Ram (1621-1674 A. D.), and Mukunda Ram was followed by his son Sobha Ram (1674--1730 A. D.) in succession to the zamindarship of Mechpara. Sabha Ram was succeeded by his son, Rana Ram Choudhury (1730-1790 A. D.) whose tenure was eventful. The headquarters of the Mechpara *zamindari* was originally located at Buridagar between Haturgram and Rangochali Hill. It was shifted to Tisimpur for a short period of time during the lifetime of Rana Ram, and the nagain to Haturgram.¹² Among the earlier generations of this family, Rana Ram was a man of unusual enterprise and courage. He succeeded in subduing the Garos with strong hands. Several villages were conquered, and the Garo chiefs were compelled to deliver cotton, the Chief product of the mountain, on terms favourable to him.

At that time Mechpara was a petty *Zamindari*, and its *jama* was included in the *jama* of Karaibari *zamindari*. It was said that the Mechpara *zamindar* always evaded paying his share to the Karaibari *zamindar*, which compelled the *zamindar* of that estate to lodge with the British authority complaint against Rana Ram Choudhury. Eventually, his relations with the British East India, company were strained. "He is a villain", wrote Baillie (the Collector of Rangamati), to Board of Revenue on October, 23rd, 1778, "who commits deprecations and robberies both in the river and his neighbourhood, and contumaciously refuses to come in though I have sent repeated perwarahs to that purpose".¹³

At the head of a band of 500 *Barkandazes*, led by one Raghunath Singh, Rana Ram Choudhury attacked the Company's residence at Goalpara, but he was repulsed by Baillie who with 29 men, with rank and file, offered stiff resistance to him. Being hopelessly frustrated in his attack on Baillie, Rana Ram Choudhury retired to the hills. No sooner the supreme authority had heard of his attack on Baillie, than it was ordered that the *zamindari* of Mechpara be confiscated and put up to sale. Nothing was definitely known if he was apprehended or imprisoned; his property was confiscated. Rana Ram died sometime in February, 1770. However, at the request of Rani Ram's mother, Baillie recommended to the Government that Mahi Ram, the eldest son of Rana Ram,

should succeed to his father's *zamindari*. On July 21, 1970, Mahi Ram Choudhury was allowed to succeed to his father in the *zamindari* of Mechpara.¹⁴

Control of the Garos and Sayer Compensation : As referred to above, formerly the *Choudhuris* of Mechpara held, under the Moghuls, the low areas of the Garo Hills on the South of the estate, and it was their principal duty to repress the incursions of the Garos. As all the cotton came from the hills, the *Choudhuris* of Mechpara established in all the important passes *Hats* or Markets. These *Hats* were well guarded by the *Barkandazes*, armed retainers of the *zamindars*, to which the merchants of the plains resorted. The *Choudhuris* collected from these merchants and the Garos alike dues either in cash or in kind, which formed one of the main sources of their income.¹⁵ By the time when the estate was settled in perpetuity, the British Government abolished these dues called sayer by compensation to the *zamindar* of Mechpara. an amount of Rs. 677/- per annum being fixed as compensation.¹⁶

Intervention of the British Government in bringing the Garos under the subjection of the estate : In Mahi Ram Choudhury's time (1790-1882 A. D), the Garos made incursions into the plains within his *zamindari*. The headquarters of the estate was removed to Jaleswar in consequence for the Garo incursions in 1222 B. S. Mahi Ram Choudhury invited the intervention of the Government, and with the help of the British Government he brought the Garos under his subjection. In recognition of this assistance he agreed to pay 25 per cent of the income derived from the tract known as "A" *Mahal* to the Government. He was a pious *zamindar* and made several grants of land for the maintenance of the family idol, *Madan Mohan*.¹⁷

Mahi Ram Choudhury recovered the taluk of Goalpara which had been sold by his father. He was succeeded by his son Prithi Ram Choudhury (1822-1874 A. D.). The headquarters of the estate was ultimately shifted to Lakshipur, which remained as *Rajbari* till the acquisition of the *Zamindari* by the Government of Assam. Prithi Ram Choudhury planned this town, planted trees, opened a fruit garden and settled in it artisans and Brahmin Priests. He was the most distinguished *zamindar* of this family and the estate reached the height of prosperity under his management.

The British Governor conferred on him the title *Rai Bahadur*. On the 19th of July, 1857, Governor General Canning granted him a *sanad*. He rendered services to the British Government by providing *coolis* and making other provisions for the force engaged in the expedition against the Garos. Government conveyed him thanks for it.¹⁸

After the death of *Rai Bahadur* Prithi Ram Choudhury dissensions among his sons brought the estate to embarrassing condition. It was most likely that the law of primogeniture prevailed in the Mechpara Estate till the death of Prithi Ram Choudhury. After his death there was a dispute among his seven sons regarding succe-

ssion to the estate. Consequently, the estate was partitioned into separate managements.

Administration of the Court of Wards : Perpetual family squabbles had utterly ruined the management, which was divided into four. It involved the tenants in all kinds of difficulties. The situation became so menacing that Rabindra Narayan Choudhury, one of the proprietors, had to approach the District Judge for an order regarding the appointment of a common manager under the provision of the Bengal Tenancy Act. The Judge allowed reasonable time to the proprietors to appoint a common manager ; but as they failed, the judge handed over the estate to the Court of Wards, vide his order No 9 of 6-3-1917.¹⁹

The Government by Revenue Department Notification dated 8th April, 1917 ordered assumption of the charge of the estate by the Court of Wards under Section 95(a) of the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885, and, under the provisions of the Bengal Court of Wards Act, 1879 on the 14th April, 1917, A. J. Laine, the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara assumed charge of the estate on behalf of the Court of Wards.

The following statement shows the names of different shareholders with their respective shares as registered in the Dhubri Collectorate before the administration of the estate was taken by the Court of Wards :

Sl. No.	Name of the Proprietors	Respective shares			Previously constituted share		
		Re	A	P	Re	A	P
1.	Bholanath Choudhury	0	3	0	0	3	0
2.	Rabindra Narayan Choudhury	0	2	9	0	4	9
3.	Gobinda Priya Choudhury	0	2	0			
4.	Jitendra Narayan Choudhury	0	2	9			
5.	Rajendra Narayan Choudhury	0	0	11		5	6
6.	Jatindra Narayan Choudhury	0	1	11			
7.	Surendra Narayan Choudhury	0	6	11			
8.	Narendra Narayan Choudhury	0	0	5-1/2			
9.	Nagendra Narayan Choudhury	0	0	5-1/2			
10.	Satyendra Narayan Choudhury	0	0	5-1/2	0	2	9
11.	Prabhat Chandra Choudhury	0	0	5-1/2			
12.	Jajendra Narayan Choudhury	0	0	5-1/2			
13.	Dhirendra Narayan Choudhury	0	0	5-1/2			
	Total	1/-			1/-		

During the time of the assumption of the charge of administration by the Court of Wards, three names were substituted in the list of the proprietors of the Mechpara Ward's estate. i.e, Durgeswari Choudhuranee, wife of Jitendra Naryan, in place of Jitendra

Narayan, Pramila Kumari, wife of Dharendra Narayan, in place of Dharendra Naryan and Krishna Kamal, second son of Gobinda Priya's daughter in place of Govinda Priya²⁰. On 22nd Feb. 1926, Rajendra Narayan died and the name of Sourindra Narayan, son of the deceased, was substituted in the list of the proprietors. ¹ Narendra Narayan died on 19th of Nov. 1931. His sons, namely, Girendra Narayan (aged 21 yrs), Sailendra Narayan (aged 19 yrs), and Arun Chandra (aged 7 yrs) inherits $\frac{1}{2}$ pies share of the whole estate. ²² After the death of Robindra Narayan, his sons namely, Ranjit Narayan, Jay Narayan and Surjya Narayan inherited his share of the estate.²³

Conclusion : The foregoing paragraphs give a historical account of the growth, development and functioning of the *Zamindari* of Mechpara. Of the *Zamindars* of this estate, Rana Ram was distinguished one. He was imbued with an independent spirit, the spirit to keep his estate free from the imperialist's trap. In deed, he played a heroic role in that juncture of the country's history when the British colonial rule of the pre-permanent settlement was marked by a series of unrest, which engulfed almost the whole of the newly acquired British territory. The rebellion of the Sanyasis spread from Shrihatta district to a number of districts in the north-east and from Khulna - Murshidabad districts to Birbhum in Bengal and Champaran district of Bihar. The revolt of the Sanyasis was clearly an anti-imperialists struggle.²⁴ The peasants uprising of Sherpur (1783) assumed the character of an armed rebellion.²⁵ Though started from different premisses, Rana Ram's attack on the company's factory at Goalpara was undoubtedly an anti-imperialist struggle. Like Noab Mir Quasim, being defeated in the engagement, Rana Ram retired to the jungle and breathed his last there sometime in February 1790. Thus Rana Ram was a saga of anti-imperialist struggle. We should not forget that Rana Ram was in all intent and purposes, an independent chieftain. Like Terrut Sing of Nungklow Rana Ram could not bear the burnt of the British domination, he took arms to throw off the imperialists, yoke. In fact he was the first amongst those who stood for freedom in the North-East. But unfortunately for reasons best known to the authors Rana Ram Choudhury has gone unnoticed in the Political history of Assam.

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