

**M. L. Bose**

# **Social History**

**of**

**Assam**

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*Social History of Assam* is that controversial work which created a sensation in the entire country for over two years before the beginning of Assam Movement since publication of its summary in the Journal of Historical Research, Dibrugarh University, in 1977. It is a pioneering work on the changes in the social structure of Assam in the British period on the background of pre-British social system. The book presents, on the basis of primary data, the social dynamics which ushered in a new egalitarian and cosmopolitan social structure in Assam which constitutes the present North East India. It analyses many of the roots of present social and political upheavals which are recurrent in present times all over the North East and has brought about the new states of the North East.

Dr. M.L. BOSE (b. 1937) is Reader in History, Dibrugarh University, where he has been teaching since 1967. He took his Masters of Arts in History and his doctorate from Jadavpur University. He has presented and published more than a score of papers in different Seminars and Conferences and learned journals. His earlier publications *British Policy in the North East Frontier Agency* and *Historical and Constitutional Documents of North East India* (both by Concept, 1979) and *Development of Administration in Assam* (Concept - 1985) made his name known to a wide reading public.

## SOCIAL HISTORY OF ASSAM

**By the same author**

1. **British Policy in the North - East Frontiers Agency**  
(Concept 1979)
2. **Historical and Constitutional Documents of North Eastern India**  
(Concept 1979)
3. **Development of Administration in Assam with special reference  
to Land Revenue - Justice and Policy (Concept 1985)**

# **SOCIAL HISTORY OF ASSAM**

*Being a study of the origins of ethnic identity and social tension during the British period 1905-1947.*



**M.L. BOSE**

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*Dedicated to the Students  
of  
Dibrugarh University*

## Prologue

On the publication of a summary of this book in the *Journal of Historical Research*, Dibrugarh University, in July 1978, a serious tension was created in both the campus of Dibrugarh University and Dibrugarh town. Meetings were organized by all sections of the University community and public meetings were arranged in the town. The circulation of the article was stopped and the distributed copies were called back. Gradually the tension spread all over the State when news was published in the newspapers. A social tension was created by the article which had only tried to analyse the causes of tension in the British period.

Much of the tension, probably the entire situation, was due to rumours spread by some persons who had read the article but who did not have historical knowledge and understanding of the matter. The rumour had offended the sentiment of many people who were led to believe that the author of the article had tried to malign the Assamese people and created disharmony among different communities. Not only that, the author was believed to have tried to prove the numerical minority of the Assamese people in the State and to have held the Ahoms responsible for many social evils in the Brahmaputra valley. The rumours were reinforced by the withdrawal of the article from circulation, and an appeal to the Assam Sahitya Sabha for redress by some teachers of a Department of the University. An emergency meeting of the Teachers' Association of the University condemned the author without examining the context of

the article, and requested the authorities to call back the original report from the Indian Council of Historical Research on the alleged ground that it contained many distorted facts, and asked the author to return the money he had received from the I.C.H.R. for the Project.

The University authorities, under pressure of circumstances and insistence of some members of the Executive Council, had no alternative but to ask the author and the Editor of the Journal not to resume duties after reopening of University on the charge of academic indiscipline and called for an explanation from the author why proceedings should not be initiated against him for writing the article containing "gross distortion of facts" with a view to creating communal discord.

When the University debarred the author and the Editor from joining the duties, the matter was reported in the newspapers from Delhi, and editorials supporting the author started appearing in the *Times of India*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Mainstream*, *Radical Humanist*, etc. as also in the local press. There was clear appreciation of the authors treatment of the subject and the allegations against him were dismissed as baseless. Then came a wave of all-India protests against the action of Dibrugarh University by teachers of different Universities of the country and by the Indian History Congress, Indian Council of Historical Research, Indian Council of Social Science Research, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, and many such organizations. The Chairman, University Grants Commission, expressed concern over the issue and the Chancellor of the University called information from the University on the proceedings of the matter.

In the meetings at Dibrugarh, in course of discussions, to avoid tension it became clear to many that it was not the author who had tried to create a social tension but some people had seized the issue to create disturbances in the state. Thanks to the sagacity of the students of Dibrugarh University and its teachers, the tension was defused by the distribution of xerox copies of the original report which practically killed the mischievous rumours and restored to some extent the reputation of the author which some interested people had tried to undermine by malicious and false propaganda.

The Teachers' Association of Dibrugarh University now changed its stand on the issue. A new idea and principle of "academic freedom" now gained popularity and people held that if the article at all contained any aspersion on Assamese society, the author should have the academic freedom to write what he considered correct.

The publication of this report in the form of a book, it is hoped, will remove all misunderstanding regarding the article. In fact its publication was suggested long back during the wave of trouble over the article by one of my well-meaning friends. But as the situation was very tense in Assam at that time I did not like to go ahead with the idea and, moreover, I was under an obligation to the I.C.H.R. whose permission was necessary for publication in the present form. Now that the situation has been eased through the untiring efforts of the peace-loving citizens, and members of the University, I take the opportunity to publish the book and place the same before the reading public.

A word must be said about the book to keep the record straight. I have not altered the contents of the report, though I feel the work needs to be done in depth. But in the book I have put the references at the foot of every page to provide for the reader a ready reference to the sources of information. Re-arrangement of the first three chapters has been done, changing the original structure of the report submitted to the I.C.H.R. to make the book a little more systematic.

Dibrugarh

March 31, 1986.M.L.Bose

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Swami Bangobinda Parampanthi who kindly loaned me a typewriter for typing out my work, and our Librarian-in-charge, Mrs. S. Das, who very kindly provided books for completing the references.

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## Introduction

A paper of research type was prepared by the author and was presented in a Seminar organized in the Department of History of the Dibrugarh University sometime in April 1973. The paper was well received, and subsequently published in a research journal SHODHAK issued from Jaipur, Rajasthan, in 1973, and was reprinted in the Journal of the Assam Political Science Association in 1974.

The original paper entitled "The genesis of Ethnic Identity and Social Tension in North-East India" had emphasized the social and cultural unity of the north-eastern people and had taken a stand that before the advent of the British, there was no social or communal distrust in North-East India and there was no linguistic problem, no communal riot ever took place, nay, there was no ethnic or race consciousness among the people of the region; separatist and mutually opposing and hostile race or ethnic consciousness and factional feelings began to germinate and raise their ugly heads only during the British regime as a result of the systematic persistent propaganda and encouragement given by the Anglo-Indian Administrators and scholars alike.

The paper tried to analyse the data found in some government reports and publications, following the usual Indian tradition of putting all blame on the British Administrators and scholars for everything bad in Indian life, and prove that ethnic consciousness and communal rivalries had resulted from systematic attempts to sow the

seeds of discord by the imperialists. The general acceptance of the paper in all quarters and ready acceptance of it as a basis for further investigation into the subject by the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi (ICHR) by providing funds prove that it was quite in tune with the thinking of the scholars of the time.

Be that as it may, the project director proposed to study the origins of race consciousness and separate social and linguistic consciousness among the people of North-Eastern India during the British Period, especially of the period 1905-1947, on the basis of literary and archival sources. North-East India which is the erstwhile State of Assam had been a political unit of the British Indian Empire where several socio-cultural and linguistic groups and tribes were administered for over a century and thus gave these diverse communities a unique chance to live together in a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation to the British rule. But the "divide-and-rule" policy of the British Government was also applied to Assam and the Administrators fostered divisive tendencies and encouraged factionalism in the region. The result was that communalism, factionalism, race antagonism began to divide the society into segments.

## SOURCES

From the last quarter of the 19th century the different ethnic groups and social groups began to be organized. These organizations focussed their especial problems and suggested their origin and solutions through memoranda, pamphlets and other publications. In the annual meetings and conferences of special groups and communal organizations, printed lectures and addresses of their leaders were distributed. For example, the Ahoms of Assam formed an association in 1893, published memoranda and lectures and through their leaders tried to establish their separate identity as a minority and secure redress of their grievances. The Assam Association similarly made organized efforts to protect the interests of Assam. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, through its publication, tried to rouse Assamese nationalism and the Muslim League and many tribal organizations distributed leaflets and pamphlets to propagate their special and particular identity and interests. The Government sometimes appointed committees to investigate particular problems and the

reports of these committees highlighted the warring interests of several groups. The Assam Administrative Reports and Census reports emphasized the divisiveness in society. The debates in the Assam Legislative Assembly sometimes spread communal tensions. Some leaders published booklets to catch the attention of the people. Local magazines and newspapers published articles which pointed out peculiar interests of different people. These provide ample material of study to understand the attitude and origin of the divisive organizations and their spirit.

No attempt has so far been made to study the origins of these consciousness and social tension in the area from an academic point of view. The Government of Assam had appointed a committee after the disturbance of 1960 to report on the language problem, and the findings tried to only correlate the factors of disturbance in the post-independence period. Therefore, the necessity to study the origins of the problems by a study of the above mentioned sources in the British period which prepared the ground for the post-independent partition of Assam into a mosaic of North Eastern Council, remained.

#### SCHEME OF STUDY

The project proposed to (i) study the political developments in North-East India, i.e. Assam, (ii) draw a picture of pre-British socio-cultural conditions in Assam; (iii) study the growth of population in the modern province of Assam, (iv) study the dynamics of social and cultural change and draw a socio-cultural profile of modern Assam and (v) to trace the origins of ethnic identity and social tension in the new environment.

#### THE PROCEDURE FOLLOWED—METHOD OF STUDY

The project having been sanctioned by the ICHR the project director started the investigation into the subject in depth. As there was no provision for an investigator or assistant in the project, the director had to carry on the work single-handed. For the collection of data on the topic, the director, therefore, planned to visit the State Central Libraries of Assam and Meghalaya in the first phase and side by side explore the archives of the above States in Gauhati and

**Shillong.** Subsequently tours to Calcutta were undertaken for a study in the National Library, West Bengal Secretariat Library and West Bengal State Archives. Finally, the National Archives in Delhi was visited. The tours were undertaken either availing leave from the University or during the Puja and summer vacations. (The project director expresses his gratitude to the immediate past and present Vice-Chancellors of Dibrugarh University for allowing him to avail leave without prejudice to his teaching assignments). It should be mentioned that long gaps in between tours made it a little difficult to pursue the study with sustained energy and action.

The methodology followed was the usual historical method of studying or rather scanning, books, journals, pamphlets and newspapers in the different libraries and exploration of the archival materials related to the subject matter. The Census of India Reports of the year 1874-76 to 1941 and Secret Police reports together with Government proceedings particularly were surveyed to collect relevant data for the study. The shifting of the capital of Assam to Gauhati from Shillong made it a little difficult to collect all relevant information from all the departmental proceedings preserved in the Assam Archives as many papers could not be had for consultation. However the best possible use was made of the material available.

## Epilogue

Situated in the North-East corner of India and isolated from the rest of the country except through the window to Bengal, Assam through 122 years of British rule developed into a small province. No other province of India presented such diversified physical features and climatic peculiarities as did Assam in British Indian Empire. The home of myriad tribes and races, Assam accommodated Indo-Mongoloids, Indo-Aryans, Austro-Asiatics and even Negrito people. Languages of Aryan, Tibetan, Austric and even Chinese family were spoken in this province.

The British penetration into the Ahom kingdom in 1826 resulted in the gradual annexation of the contiguous territories of native princes and hill tribes. The Ahom kingdom was submerged in the overwhelming territories of the Lushai, Naga, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia and sundry tribes of North-East Frontier which were attached to it. If by Assam we mean a province where those who speak Assamese live application of the name of Assam to the new province of British India seemed quite paradoxical.

The population of Assam which was considerably thinned by the internal wars and external aggressions, at the close of the Ahom period, was increased considerably by the immigration of different races from different parts of India. With the establishment of British rule, Bengali office employees from Bengal came to serve the new Government; the people of Rajasthan came to the new economic environment to trade in the British province; labourers

were imported to serve in the plantation and mining industries; people of Nepal found in Assam good grazing grounds and market for their dairy products. The population of the province increased by the addition of the neighbouring hills and plains were thus further swelled by immigration.

The socio-cultural profiles of Ahom Assam underwent considerable changes. The development of the Administration in Assam and establishment of industries brought about fundamental changes in the Assamese society. Towns and Bazars sprang up throughout the length and breadth of the country. The Assamese society which was homogeneous and vertical in structure now became heterogeneous in composition and parallel in style. Birth and caste which determined office and status and conferred social privilege and distinction now no longer conferred any right to office, position, distinction; postal and telegraph services, cinemas and theatres widened the outlook of the people. Society in British Assam was cosmopolitan in composition and catholic in outlook.

The new society of Assam upheld a variegated pattern of culture. Towns and bazars built with brick, mortar, sand, cement, wood and iron with sanitary and water fittings presented a new look. Centring round the new urban areas people now took to new modes of living, social gatherings, festivals, and recreations. Life had now more diversions and comforts.

Nevertheless in the new environment of socio-economic-culture percolated fissiparous forces of discord and antagonism which rent the society into segments and prepared people for a struggle of political division in the post-independent period.

The population of Assam in the British period was a conglomeration of diverse people with a separate culture and heritage. As a result of new education and environmental development however, the diverse people of India were politically united to fight against the alien rule. An Indianism not opposed to local variation and quite in harmony with regionalism had tended to develop. In Assam the diverse social interests formed themselves into organizations to further their class or community interest exclusive of national interest and received encouragement from the Government.

The economy of Assam revolutionized by Imperialism did not benefit the Assamese directly. The benefits were reaped by the British merchants who had come from outside Assam, and clerical and inconsequential technical jobs were monopolized by the Bengalis. Even the labour class was cent per cent non-Assamese. The landed property was the only means practically at the disposal of the local people with which they could procure modern amenities, comforts and recreations. When land no more could provide all that aspired for by the people, economy forced the people to look for opportunities elsewhere. But other economic opportunities and social positions had already been appropriated by non-Assamese people. The development of education and research had extended the horizons of knowledge and once the backward sections became aware of past social inequality they claimed a better status. Community within community began to be created when the Government posed as friends of the depressed communities and provided special facilities and safeguards for them.

The Government administrative measures roused jealousies and ethnic consciousness and antagonism among people. The addition of Bengali-speaking territories to Assam compelled people of both the communities to prove their separate identity and socio-cultural differences. The same logic was applied in later phases by the tribal people under the influence of western culture to prove their distinction and separateness from the plains people.

The political parties in North-East India could not unite all the sections of the people and launch a united movement for national liberation. In fact all geographical areas and races and communities had not received new education equally and were not economically well off. Naturally their responses to national overtures differed. Moreover Government sympathy for the depressed sections held them aloof from political leaders who were held as caste Hindu exploiters.

The investigation carried on by the present project had limitation of time, resource and personnel. Therefore, the result is not up to the mark. The nature of the work has been exploratory rather than research based. But the findings, it may be held, are substantive. If further investigation is carried on each of the items spelt out in this

work, more unknown factors of social dynamics may emerge and give us directions in which priority for development should be given for removing regional imbalances and eradicate social tensions.

**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

**DEVELOPMENT OF ADMINISTRATION IN ASSAM**

With Special Reference to Land Revenue  
Justice and Police 1874 - 1920

1985; XII+123p.; 23 cm.; Rs. 125 \$ 25

*The Development of Administration in Assam* between 1874 - 1920 is a significant study in the growth of government in the smallest north-eastern state of India. The problem of administration of such a remote and heterogenous population spread over inaccessible hills untrodden by educated people, tribes who did not know what government was in modern political society, can be easily understood by students of political science. The British conquered without any knowledge of the territory and the people grappled with the problem of administration over almost a hundred years and beginning with a rough and ready Non-regulation system gradually brought the people under their government and made them know what was administration and law in the modern world. In 1920 the province was made fit for an advanced type of Regulation Government. The Chelmsford Reforms Committee recommended the formation and Governor's province in this North Eastern part of the Indian Empire.

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