

## IMPACT OF BRITISH OCCUPATION IN ASSAM

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Assam is the biggest state both in area and population and has the biggest political unit amongst the other North Eastern States. The State was ruled by different dynasties mainly by Koch, Kachar, Moran, Borahi, Ahom etc. over different parts of the present Assam. The British Government delayed too long in dealing with the north-eastern frontier.<sup>i</sup> The north-eastern boundary of Assam under the British regime did not possess the pre-requisites of a scientific frontier. Tribes lived on both sides of the Indo-Burmes border and they inhabited the hills on either side of the northern boundary of Assam. So, no uniform ethnic line could be followed in laying down our north-eastern borders. Moreover, due to their frequent migrations some tribes always crossed the frontier either way. Finally from 1826 to 1947, the year of India's attainment of independence Assam was under British rule.

Assam, perhaps, due to its non-political advantage to the Britisher till the threat from Burma came up remained isolated for quite a long time as compared to other parts of the country. In such a situation the primordial bonds based on the ethnic groups, blood, Kinship, customs and speech and ethno centrism was strong and the tribal population of hilly areas were hardly exposed to the outside world. The society and its social values and customs were pretty much intact till it was eroded or metamorphosed with the advent of East India Company in this region. The conditions radically altered during a rather brief period of British colonial rule. The First Burmese War ended with the Treaty of Yandabu, by which Burmese agreed to withdraw from Assam and the Ahom king ceded part of his territory to East India Company as reward for their help from Burmese aggression in their territory. This

gave an opportunity to the British to establish their control over the region leading to the extinction of Ahoms by 1838.<sup>ii</sup>

The annexation of Assam by the East India Company brought the people of this region into greater and deeper contact with socio-political currents that was then prevailing in the rest of the country. The main aim of the company, however, was to strengthen and expand the already existing frontier trade routes with the Kachins and the Chins and open commercial traffic with China through upper Burma.<sup>iii</sup> The effects of British commercial activity also had its repercussions on the social structure in Assam. The channels of contact and the levels of communication were further accentuated in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British set in motion a series of moves in order to establish a degree of political and administrative dominance over the plains as well as the hill people. The British policies and the activities of Christian missionaries who came into the region contributed significantly in creating a freeze effect on the communities and social formations. Colonial rule and missionary activities also contributed significantly in detailing the character and tenor of identity movements among the tribals and non-tribals. The British administration in Assam realized this fact that they cannot transform the existing system at a one go, they had to move slowly. This was very candidly highlighted by David Scott, the Agent to Governor General North East Frontier that 'change must be gradual or they were like to be change for the worst'<sup>iv</sup>

Assam was the frontier outpost of Indian civilization and was the meeting ground of peoples of different races namely Austrics, the Dravidians,

the Aryans and the Tibeto-Burmans. These races with the passage of time gradually got transformed into a plural society with a composite culture. The society developed on the ideas of Aryan but it had its non Aryan tinge also. The process of give and take of mutual assimilation and appreciation developed a composite Assamese Culture. The influxes of different peoples in Assam were assimilated into the social order of the inhabitants of Assam. In true sense 'each wave of influx brought in its own culture which being easily woven into the general cultural texture of the soil'.<sup>v</sup>

The society in Assam was archaic in character and feudal in structure, but only prior to the coming of British in this area. The dominant religion in Assam was Hinduism mainly because the area was never fully occupied by the Muslims and also due to the rule of Ahoms which, lasted for almost 600 years, who were primarily Hindu. The dominance of upper castes over the lower caste, the traditional division of the society into different caste and sections continued to exist emphatically over and above this, major section of the society was still tied to the upper class for their feudal obligations. They served the nobility as Paiks or as Laguas (Slaves).<sup>vi</sup> These commoners had no separate entity as individuals and any rights or privileges except the obligations to their masters. The Brahmins, the ruling nobility comprising mainly Dongorais and Gosains (including Kayasthas and Kalitas)<sup>vii</sup> acted as spiritual guide to commoners in Assam. It was not possible in such a feudal society to expect the prevalence of modern concept of individualism, individual rights and freedom. The society was mainly dominated by traditional and conservative institutions with unquestionable leadership of the Brahmins.

The social notions in Assam were changed to certain extent with coming of the British. The assumption of political power by the British Company contributed in the reduction of not only political powers but also curtailed the privileges of the ruling class. The new system broke the feudal structure of the society and drove away the privileges and rights of the erstwhile ruling class. It

although changed their position in comparison to the past but still in the society they could not be spared with task of serving their old feudal masters. The new system could not in any way destroy the age old divisions in the society, however, it definitely blunted the existing sharp edges of the caste system. Thus the advent of the British rule in Assam brought changes in the society with far reaching consequences many of which were not apparent at that time but felt gradually later on.

The ruling class mainly Gosains including Kayasthas and Kalitas were first to be affected by the changes brought out by the East India Company in Assam. The British administration broke the tradition of appointing nobles to higher post; their main consideration was administrative efficiency. They, therefore, considered highly necessary to employ 'men of real ability and business even of inferior rank.'<sup>viii</sup> Prior to the coming of the British, the governing class enjoyed the cream of the social life produced by the labour of toiling masses. The major sections of the Paiks were only to serve the governing class, as they 'together with their descendants from generations to generations became the property of the grantee and were forced to serve him in various capacities without being allowed any choice of their own in the matter. Under these circumstances, the whole State seemed to have been organized in such a way in which individual had only the right to live in exchange of their labour supplied to their masters for which they have no claims to any monetary remuneration.

With the establishment of the company's rule in Assam, Paiks were granted individual rights and now the cultivating class 'can all earn sufficient for their livelihood in their own villages and revealed the great disinclination to work as labourer and were relieved from the earlier system of the compulsory services of the nobles.'<sup>ix</sup> The settlement was to be made directly with the occupant cultivator and was made heritable and transferable. The term of settlement of land held permanently was ordinarily for ten years thus giving them guarantee against enhancement of assessment for the term of the lease. The British company abolished few feudal

privileges of the nobility and in 1842 they were prohibited from holding Loguas and Likos<sup>x</sup> who were domestic appendages. 1842 order emancipated the Laguas and Likos from the clutches of the privileged group. Maniram Dewan remarked that by abolishing this system the British Government had reduced the ruling classes to the level of other poor people.<sup>xi</sup> Abolition of slavery thus not only reduced the distance between the higher and the lower classes, but also exposed both the master and the slave to an atmosphere where they were made to understand the importance of living together in the society on equal footing. As soon as the legal relation between the master and the slave died away the financial stronghold of the aristocracy based on land, was severely disrupted.

The change brought out by the British Government in Assam had initiated a process of the sense of social equality. The advent of British power in Assam had atleast brought down all the castes and classes at the same level. Thus the lower graded persons such as washerman, barbers and cobblers were now being considered at the same level, whose services were highly demanding and now they could assert the utility and proper remuneration of their job. The orthodox Hindus though unwilling had to accept the new status.<sup>xii</sup> Further the practice of riding on Elephant and Dola or Palanquin by the upper section of society was disregarded during the British period. It leads to the gradual removal of distinction between higher and lower classes of the society.<sup>xiii</sup>

In Assam a class existed between the privileged nobles and Paiks, which formed the basis of the middle class in the society. Emergence of the middle class in the 19th century administrative centers in Assam was the direct consequence of the new taste of British administration and the spread of modern education. The pattern of growth and development of the Assamese middle class was similar to that of the middle classes in other provinces of British India during same period.<sup>xiv</sup> Under the British rule, there had been a total change in the life of the people, particularly of those who resided in the administrative centers. This was due

to the changes introduced by the British in every aspect of life, be in political, social, economic or cultural. This class primarily consisted of junior officials like Hazarikas, Saikias and Boras.<sup>xv</sup> They were denied the privileges enjoyed by the nobles but unlike the Paiks, were exempted from doing compulsory labour work. This section of society did not assert their rights to gain privileges and they adjusted to the changing circumstances. The Assamese society under British administration was now modeled on the English pattern. At the top position of the social hierarchy was a small contingent of Europeans followed by the middle class who comprised of officials, tradesman, lawyers, doctors, few well-to-do planters, next were peasantry and the laboring class.<sup>xvi</sup>

The number of administrative centres had begun to rise as the consolidation of British administration progressed in the province. The process of establishment of British administrative centres had begun along with the operation of the British to expel the Burmese from Assam. The British established their military camps or stations at some strategic places some of which became their administration centres in the later period. Gauhati was made the capital of Assam, centres like Rangpur, Goalpara, Biswanath to Sadiya were other centres of administration. The emergence of a place to become an administrative centre depends upon the convergence of various forces and factors. The British officials judiciously selected the sites of their administrative centres considering certain factors which varied from place to place. Any particular centre had to fulfill any one of the factors or any combination thereof. The British preferred the places which had an experience as pre-colonial administrative centres, because the inhabitants of such places were mostly nobles and officials of Ahom administration who could help the British in their administration.

Accessibility to river transportation was a very important factor considered by the British while selecting the sites of administrative centres. British administration introduced Railway, river transportation as the main mode of communication

between the places of the province. The British gave more importance to the river ports like Goalpara, Dhubri, Gauhati, Tezpur, Dibrugarh which were situated on the bank of the river Brahmaputra and could connect the places to Fort William at Calcutta.

The historical background of Assamese society clearly highlights that inspite of the racial diversities they maintained the basic cultural and political unity. They were able to conserve their traditional habits. The daily life of the Assamese bears testimony of their tradition like taking bath before eating, practice of eating rice from brass dishes on 'mother earth' after purifying the ground with cow dung and water. The ladies of the house of the family showed respect to the elderly male members by serving them first and having their children and themselves dined afterward.<sup>xvii</sup> The Assamese people had a common habit of chewing betel nut. They were so fond of it that they can spend a day without meal but 'Tamul' (betel nut) was unavoidable part of their food.<sup>xviii</sup> The 1861 revolt, protested against the rumour of imposition of tax on Betel and Betel Nuts apart from other taxes. The protest was forcefully suppressed by police and about eight tribal leaders were sentenced to death, this shows their love for their tradition.<sup>xix</sup>

The Assamese were highly fatalistic, which dominated their conscience to a very high degree. In case of ruin of crop due to flood or drought or any other misshapening an afflicted man blamed his fate, remarks like 'Mur Kopal Beya' which means my fate is bad was very common. In other words it shows that the daily life of the people of Assam was very much affected by religious believes and practices at every step. The person who does not follow the rituals and customs were treated as 'Mlechha' indicating that the person has lost his caste, could be considered as outcaste.<sup>xx</sup> This shows that the Assamese although accepted the certain traits of British reforms and thoughts but they never parted away from their tradition.

The villages in Assam were self sufficient social and economic units and the people were ease loving, simple and ignorant from the worldly affairs.<sup>xxi</sup> The most outstanding characteristics of the

people in the rural areas of Assam were in their kindness and sense of devotion to their relatives. They were very polite and always humble to their superiors. They usually, as mark of respect to elder and superior in caste hierarchy or the Europeans, shut their umbrellas as they crossed passed them. If any elder enquired of ones well being, his reply would always be 'Hozuror Anugrahat Bhale Assun' meaning 'by your honours' favour, I am fine'.<sup>xxii</sup>

In the beginning of the British rule the traditional practices were deeply entrenched in Assamese. But the gradual shift in their attitude was evident among the people in the Sadar Station or in urban areas. In these places social outlook got the modern attitude mainly due to the presence of the British officials and their families. These in turn enlightened their religious practices and improving their social position. Initially the British Government took the responsibility of the education for males just for the sake of administrative requirements. Since the women of Assam had a distinct place in the social, cultural, religious and economic life of the society. In Pre-British Assam, barring few exceptions of higher rank families, women did not get facilities of education. With the passage of time the Christian Missionaries with the support of the government established various schools for imparting education to the girls. Thereby with the gradual contact with English language and literature the knowledge of the Assamese people gained importance towards the western ideas and thoughts.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Christian Missionaries were very active in this region and played a major role in highlighting and spreading the awareness for education.

The emerging educated group learnt not only western sciences and literature but also moulded their very nature. They frequently mixed with Englishmen and adopted their technique of social behaviour. The inculcation of western thoughts, clothing and ideas could be easily seen in the Assamese officials who were posted in different branches of administration who were found wearing western shoes and dress while performing their official duties alongwith the Englishmen. The new regime thus worked for the social and educational

upliftment of the society. Social taboos were tried to be removed, the evils of slavery was also removed though not completely in practice but definitely in theory. Education played the most important part among the social reforms to improve the social stature of the masses. Thus a significant contribution of the British administration was the recognition of human value in Assam expressed in two ways, development of respect for the life of women and emancipation of the slaves.

Finally on analyzing the changes in the social structure of Assam, it clearly shows that the Assamese were able to maintain their culture and tradition intact till the advent of the British. The social system, perhaps, was transformed or rather the evils of the society were removed to some

extent but not to a full extent. It must, however, be pointed out that these changes in society were more apparent than real and drastic social or institutional changes was not possible. In other words, Assamese society in no way changed its basic character and any radical change in the native customs and habits was impracticable. Infact, the British government tried to avoid any immediate violent reaction from the people to their policies, the implementation of the social reforms was carried out gradually. The cleavage between the modern means and the traditional values were maintained to a great extent in Assam. It was, thus, clearly evident in the Assamese culture that they were adopting modern practices but they still were not able to part away with their tradition.

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