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THE DECLINE OF THE AHOM KINGDOM OF ASSAM: 1765-1826

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THE MUGHALS made repeated attempts in the 17th century to bring Assam under their imperial domination, but failed. After a series of advances and retreats since about 1615, the invading Mughal forces finally accepted, after the battle of Itakhuli in 1682, the Manas river on the north bank and a line 21 miles further eastward on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, as stable frontiers.[1] The tribal kingdoms of Jaintiā and Kāchār, which had common frontiers with both the Ahoms and the Mughals, were looked upon as their vassals by the former. The Mughal-Ahom, Mughal-Jaintia and Mughal-Kachar relations were subsequently inherited by the English East India Company, with its acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal Bihar and Orissa in 1765. The British expansionist thrust further eastward was at work since about this time, hastening in that process the collapse of all of northeast India's indigenous polities in due course. Their decline, however, was deep-rooted. The rot had set in long before the British appeared on the scene.

I

Regional historians have so far interpreted the Mughal failure in Assam as a sign of the latter's strength and vitality. They have also highlighted the chronological point that while the Mughals were undergoing a general decay and decline since about the close of the 17th century, Ahom Assam continued to flourish till about 1770.[2] No doubt, seeds of change sown by the almost century-old Mughal intrusion into the Assamese society did sprout during this period of relative peace. New arts and crafts, new crops and even new styles of dress were introduced. Coinage and monetization made headway; trade expanded; population increased. Above all, the cultural resurgence of the 16th-17th centuries continued to matter, even in early 18th-century Assam.

Yet it was also true that the administrative-military system of the Ahom variety of feudalism still, by and large, retained some of the institutional features of an antique tribal militia and that this system had undergone no basic change. Only in Kamrup district, wrested late in the 17th century by the Ahoms from the Koch-Mughal alliance, was the Mughal tax collection system retained in a modified form. It was the difficult terrain and dreaded monsoons, rather than the intrinsic strength of Ahom feudalism as such, that crucially explained the 17th century Mughal defeats in Assam. It is argued that Assam's apparent progress in arts and crafts or stability during the years 1682-1769 were therefore elusive.

The Ahom Kingdom by the mid-18th century was indeed already an over-burdened hierarchical structure, supported by a weak institutional base and meagre economic surplus. It had no standing army composed of professional soldiers recruited on cash wage terms or long-term basis. Instead, all adult males of eligible age came to serve for three months each by rotation to constitute a standing militia. These militiamen were known as paik of two categories, Chamuā (respectable) and Kānri (ordinary ranks). Both categories were organised into units of varying size under officers recruited from the nobility and petty officers of Chamuā category. Thus one-fourth of the militiamen (paik) were always on duty, while the rest formed the reserves, drawn upon only in emergencies. Every four neighbouring militiamen together formed a primary paik unit (got) so that, between them, its members could provide one full man-year of service to the State. Chamua paiks, being of superior status, were obliged to render only non-menial services, which were sometimes commuted into payments in kind or cash.

As against their obligations, the paiks enjoyed usufruct of a certain quantum of tax-free wet rice lands from the State. When a paik

was on public duty, his cultivation was looked after by the other three members of his primary unit. A hierarchy of high officers chosen from slave-owning aristocratic families were put in command of the militia divisions. In lieu of salary, each officer was assigned lands and a certain number of the paiks, for exclusive performance of his own personal work. The highest three ministers, appointed by the King from certain eligible clans — Burhagohain, Bargohain and Barpatragohain -- and two other ministers — Barbarua and Barphukan from other clans — together formed a supreme council (pātramantri) to advise the King. These ministers-cum-commanders were powerful enough to make and unmake Kings from time to time.[3] The Barphukan governed western Assam from his viceregal headquarters at Guwahati. Such a system was becoming increasingly inefficient and cumbrous, while the natural economy of the Kingdom was being slowly eroded by increasing trade and money circulation as well as by a progressive introduction in a small way of money taxation on landholdings etc.

Signs of a breakdown of the Ahom land revenue and militia system were already visible during the reign of Rajeswar Singha (1751-69). Though censuses of the paik population used to be taken from time to time, a large number of entrants into the eligible age-group always managed to avoid registration. Another popular method of evasion was opting for religious mendicancy or joining Vaishnava monasteries in remote areas as wasteland settlers. Even registered militiamen often succeeded in evading their irksome duties either by lawfully obtaining commutation of their obligations into a tax in cash or by making irregular compensatory payments to their immediate commanding officers. Because of such leakages, paik mobilisation in full strength proved to be already difficult by King Rajeswar Singha's times. To get out of this difficulty, he reconstituted the primary paik units (got). Three, instead of four, paiks were alloted to each, thus increasing the period of customary

service obligation of each militiaman from three to four months. The system became all the more unpopular because of this 33 per cent increase in the burden.[4]

The increasing alienation of State lands and paiks to the religious establishments to ensure their support to the regime during 17th-18th centuries created other problems. This was detested by the Ahom nobility, as it affected not only the supply of paiks for public purposes, but also for their personal work. Too many claimants for office and too inadequate an effective supply of paiks -- this was the feudal crisis of 18th-century Assam. During Rajeswar Singha's reign, the effective supply of paiks available for actual mobilisation was /reportedly only 80,000 while estimated State population was about 24 lakhs, and eligible adult male population was about 6 lakhs. Ongoing infighting within the Ahom nobility represented an element of this crisis.[5]

The brewing discontent led to the rise of the Moāmariās (also known as Māyāmaria or Matak), a non-conformist Vaishnava sect, as a popular force among the masses, particularly of tribal and low caste origins. The basis of the sect's popularity was its egalitarian and democratic outlook in social and religious matters. While the royal power proceeded to ally itself with Brahmanic conservatism, the followers of the Moamaria sect asserted their non-compliance by refusing idol worship, by upholding Sudra preceptors' rights to take even Brahmans under their spiritual wings, and by denying a mediating role to Brahmans in their simplified religions rituals. The followers of the Moamaria Guru were well-organised. They mobilised themselves in such large numbers on the occasion of building a new monastery campus for their Guru that the State authorities got frightened.[6]

The situation was already grave when Rajeswar Singha died in 1769. It was in his reign that "for the first time", writes Edward Gait

> "... we find high officers refusing to go on active service. The people were already priest-ridden and sectarian disputes had begun to strangle their patriotic aspirations. The Moamaria Gosain was brooding over his wrongs, and was secretly spreading disaffection amongst his disciples".[7]

Popular discontent came to the surface during the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769-80) when an important tribal chief of the Moamaria faith was unduly penalised for his alleged negligence in the matter of supplying his quota of elephants as annual tribute. In November 1769 the whole Morān tribe rose in revolt and, in the wake of their armed march towards the capital, there was a popular upsurge also involving the peasantry at large. After defeats in several battles, the royalist troops simply melted away or swelled the ranks of the rebels. The twin capitals of Rangpur and Garhgaon soon fell into their hands, and King Lakshmi Singha was imprisoned. For the first time since the founding of the Ahom polity in 1228, a non-Ahom commoner was elected to the throne. The new King, who was a disciple of the Moamaria Guru and was known as Ramākānta, struck coins in his own name in 1770 (1691 shakabda). All blue-blooded ministers and high officers were also replaced by ordinary commoners, mostly non-Ahoms.[8]

However, the situation changed within another few months. On 11 April 1770, a successful coup in Rangpur brought the old monarch back from prison to power. A general massacre of the Moamarias all over the Kingdom followed. In outlying areas the rebels held out for a few months more, but ultimately had to give in. A Sanskrit drama written by a court scribe, Dharmadeva Sharma, was staged at the royal court to

celebrate the restoration of the old regime. In this drama, the Civil War was characterised as a struggle between all the forces of dharma — i.e. Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism — on one side and the forces of adharma, "the slaughterers of cows, brahmans and children" as well as banditti on the other.[9] Not many details about the peasant rebels or their organisation are available. However, folk memory and available records, between them, suggest that the monastic organisation of the Moamaria Guru played a major role in the uprising and that women, too, participated therein significantly and in large numbers. Rukmini, for example, was an important woman leader who was sent by the rebel government to the Barphukan's (Viceroy) establishment at Guwahati, with an important political mission.[10]

The remaining years of King Lakshmi Singha were not free from palace intrigues and general discontent. For example, after his restoration in April 1770, 4000 paiks of Darrang were found staging a peaceful long march of several days' duration to Rangpur in the same year to protest against their new land revenue settlement. It was not before they got a royal stay-order that the paiks started returning home.[11] The principality of Darrang, though under the Barphukan's administration, was still nominally and jointly headed by two Koch princes on a hereditary basis. The Ahoms had created it in the early 17th century when they seized this portion of the Koch Kingdom, to forestall the Mughals. Darrang was since 1682 committed to maintain round the year a contingent of 6000 paiks at the Barphukan's Guwahati establishment.

Because of court intrigues and other aspects of the deepening feudal crisis, the administration of Assam became weak and degenerate by the late 1770s. So much so that Bengal-based European private traders were not at all afraid, on several occasions, to take their

armed boats and uniformed private armies almost up to Guwahati, despite protests by Ahom officials. M. Laval and George Lear in 1777 and Daniel Raush in the years 1782, 1791-92 and 1796 were known to have had illegally violated the frontiers with their armed boats, either with usual trading objectives, or in pursuit of their bad debtors. Even when this kind of rash action was not resorted to, the Bengal-based European merchants were in the habit of bullying and threatening the frontier customs officials of Assam, even on the latter's own home territory.[12]

Assam's political situation progressively worsened during the reigns of Gaurinath Singha (1780-94), Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) and Chandrakanta Singha (1811-18). The lingering Civil War divided the people of Assam into two camps — one, led by the Moamarias and representing broadly the peasant masses and the other led by royalists and representing the nobility. It intermittently plagued the eastern and central parts of the Kingdom during the whole period from 1783 to 1806. But the western parts also were not trouble-free. During the same period hundreds of armed freebooters -- disbanded soldiers, <u>bargandazes</u>, <u>sannyasis</u> and fagirs from the Company's territories -- entered western Assam and carried on their depradations on the people, either independently or as employees of some local chiefs.[13]

In April 1783 a group of Moamaria conspirators launched a daring night attack on the twin capitals of Rangpur and Garhgaon, but they were repulsed after heavy hand-to-hand fighting. This was followed once more by a general massacre of the Moamarias throughout the Kingdom, this time for a month and a half. "Even the water and the fish of the Brahmaputra", writes Maniram Dewan in 1838, "became tainted with the stinking smell of corpses. Half of the country was depopulated". After lying low for a couple of years thereafter, the Moamarias rose into an open rebellion again in 1785. At first the Moran tribesmen in their own jungly habitat

and the Dafla-Bahatiyas in Japaribhita revolted. Then the peasant masses throughout eastern Assam followed suit. They all roamed about burning and looting the houses of the nobles and the rich royalist monasteries. Armed rebel contingents went on taking village after village until they finally encircled the royal city of Rangpur.[14]

Royalist forces could not effectively halt the insurgency because of large-scale defections in their own camps. The situation was so critical that King Gaurinath and his courtiers had to quit the capital, Rangpur, on 19 January 1788. The King himself, accompanied by some ministers and officials, proceeded to the viceregal headquarters at Guwahati in western Assam, while Purnananda Burhagohain, the veteran prime minister (1783-1817) retreated some 36 miles south-west to Jorhat to build up a fortified defence line. The evacuated city remained in the hands of the Moamarias continuously for the next six years and, after a brief break, again for about three years. One Bharat Singha, a relation of the Moamaria Guru, was elected to the vacant throne of the fugitive king. There is evidence that he continued to strike coins in his name from 1791 to 1797.[15]

Concerted rebel actions were possible only in the eastern portion of Assam where the Moamaria Guru had numerous disciples among both non-Ahom and Ahom masses. Though successful in breaking up the Ahom feudal power in its very heartland, the rebels failed to break through and advance beyond the defence line set up by Purnananda with his base at Jorhat. Worse than that, the rebels could hardly set up a centralised administration even for the liberated area as a whole. What emerged from the popular challenge to the Ahom feudal regime was a loose confederacy of several egalitarian chiefdoms. While Bharat Singha ruled in the old capital and its vicinity, one Sarbananda was elected to rule in the habitat of the Moran tribe from his headquarters at

Bengmara (modern Tinsukia). Sarbananda, too, struck coins in 1794 and 1795. One Howha Tanti, alias Harihar, ruled over the Majuli island and its adjacent areas on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. In the ensuing chaos, the Khamti tribe which had recently migrated into the Ahom Kingdom from Upper Burma, occupied Sadiya and its neighbourhood.[16]

Central and Western Assam, too, were meanwhile caught into the turmoil. Members of the Ahom nobility and their retinues came in thousands as refugees to Darrang and Nowgong districts from eastern Assam. When they were found cultivating wastelands by forced labour exacted from the local people or committing various kinds of atrocities, there was widespread indignation against them. Because of the civil war-induced dislocations, there was also a severe grain shortage in 1789. As a result of all this, sporadic popular uprisings began to take place. These were led by disgruntled local chiefs and peasants, itinerant religious mendicants (bairāgi), impostors with pretensions to the Ahom throne, or even by brigands, pure and simple.[17]

To meet the crisis in Darrang, a people's assembly (rāij mel) was called at popular initiative, following an old tradition. Altogether 240 village elders (gaonburha) constituted the assembly. They directed both the 6000-strong contingent of Darrang paiks (stationed at Guwahati) and their two princes, Burha rajah and Deka rajah (then posted at Ghiladhari with a military assignment), to return home immediately to help their own distressed people. King Gaurinath was threatened by them with hostilities, if oppressions in Darrang were not stopped; and the Darrang paiks and their two princes, with social ostracism and harm, if the summons were disobeyed. What followed was a peaceful mass rebellion engulfing the whole of Darrang. Of its five leading spirits, Phatik Hazarika and Bhotar-Konwar were born in noble families, while the other

three — Sarup, Mainapowa and Kalia — were apparently ordinary peasants.[18]

The Rajahs of Darrang tried to justify their desertion by submitting that their people in distress needed their presence. But this explanation did not receive royal satisfaction. One of them, Hangsanarayam Dekarajah, was even suspected of conspiring with a powerful Chaudhuri, Haradatta Bujarbarua of Kamrup, to rise in revolt and occupy Guwahati. Royal troops were sent against the conspirators. Haradatta escaped arrest; but the Dekarajah was seized, brought to Guwahati and brutally executed. His son Krishnanarayan, then a young lad, and Haradatta then joined hands and decided to free Darrang and Kamrup of Ahom rule. All this happened towards the end of January and early in February 1790, before Gaurinath had shifted himself to Nowgong in the latter month.[19]

III

Anticipating troubles in Nowgong and Darrang, King Gaurinath had been trying since November 1789 to recruit mercenaries from the Company's territories with the help of Goalpara-based European private merchants like Hugh Baillie and Daniel Raush. Sent by Baillie, a large gang of such mercenaries were on their way to Gaurinath, but Krishnanarayan intercepted and succeeded in engaging most of them in his service. With three to four hundred barqandazes now under his command, Krishnanarayan stayed back; while Haradatta, Phatik Hazarika and Bhotar-konwar left for north Bengal with a view to return subsequently with fresh recruits. The gang of 700 barqandazes sent from Dhaka by Raush, unlike Baillie's recruits, however reached Gaurinath safely. With them as has already been noted, he moved over from Guwahati to Khutarmur in Nowgong in February 1790. He kept only 40 of these recruits with himself and the rest he sent to the Burhagohain on the Jorhat front. Later in March 1791 when Raush entered Assam, Krishnanarayan, too, left for north Bengal in his company

and finally returned to Kamrup with about 3000 barqandaz recruits in December 1791. In February 1792, he occupied north Guwahati thus posing a threat to the Barphukan's establishment at Guwahati on the south bank of the Brahmaputra.[20]

The vassal Kingdoms of Kachar and Jaintia had been approached by Gaurinath meanwhile for military help, but both had refused to oblige on the plea of their own immediate defence priorities. However, the friendly Kingdom of Manipur, whose relations with the Ahoms were very warm since 1765-70, responded favourably to his appeal. A 4000-strong infantry, together with a cavalry unit, led by King Jai Singha, alias Bhagyachandra (1759-98), reached Gaurinath's Khutarmur camp in December 1790 and was immediately sent to the Burhagohain with an escort. However, Jai Singha's attack on the Rangpur-based rebels was completely routed. He then hurriedly left leaving a thousand of his surviving soldiers with the Burhagohain, and on his way back learnt of yet another Burmese invasion of Manipur.[21] Incidentally, the Burmese had overrun the Kingdom many times since 1755.[22]

As stated earlier, Nowgong too like Darrang became a troubled area because of the atrocities committed by refugee nobles and their retainers. One notorious officer, Bakhar Bora, was killed there by angry villagers. Led by Sindhura Hazarika, a simple peasant with the rank of a petty militia officer, a crowd of Nowgong people surrounded Gaurinath's Khutarmur camp in February 1791. They forced him at first to change two of his ministers and then again to reinstate both within nine days before leaving him in peace. A few months later, rebels from Biswanath and Kaliabar under one bairagi rajah joined hands with local rebels and attacked the camp. Once more a fugitive, Gaurinath reached Guwahati (on the south-bank) on 11 June 1792. North Guwahati was then in

Krishnanarayan's possession, and Raush was camping in its neighbourhood since April 1792.[23]

In June a fresh batch of barqandazes, led by Hazari Singh and Bang Roy, arrived. When they joined forces with Krishnanarayan and thus posed a threat to Gaurinath, Raush tried to conciliate the former to his sovereign. But the barqandazes opposed this move. In three large bodies, they even fiercely attacked Raush's boats on 30 June 1792. Returning to Goalpara by early September, he informed Cornwallis of the serious situation in Assam and advised immediate British intervention.[24]

Already in February 1792, Gaurinath had applied for British help to Lumsden, the then Collector of Rungpore. After the latter, and now Raush, had written to him, Governor-General Cornwallis decided in favour of an armed intervention in Assam to oust the barqandazes. Since they had used the Company's territory as the springboard for their illegal entry into Assam and were mostly British subjects, the Company could hardly disown responsibility and refuse help. A small force of 360 sepoys, commanded by Captain Welsh, arrived at Goalpara on 8 November and proceeded upstream towards Guwahati on 16 November 1792.[25]

Guwahati meanwhile witnessed a dramatic incident. A few hundred armed fishermen from Pakurguri and Chelonghat, led by a 'lowborn' Ahom named Haidhan and the bairagi rajah, threatened the city. They occupied it on 18 November 1792 after Gaurinath had deserted it in panic the previous night. While fleeing downstream, the fugitive King met Welsh's fleet on 19 November and came back with him to Guwahati which was reoccupied on 25 November without any encounter. The bairagi rajah and his accomplice, Haidhan, were later brutally executed under royal orders against Welsh's advice. The next move of Welsh was to dislodge Krishnanarayan from North Guwahati by an armed action on 6 December.

Together with their hired barqandazes, both Krishnanarayan and Haradatta were forced to flee to the Bhutanese territory. On the New Year day of 1793, Welsh was able to write to Cornwallis that his first objective of clearing Assam of the Bengal barqandazes was achieved.[26]

Welsh's sepoys at no stage exceeded 720 (12 companies) in number, and they remained dispersed on Ahom territory for less than two years from 16 November 1792 to 3 July 1794. Neither side in the ongoing civil war showed any signs of organisation, genious or discipline. They were even incapable of using most of the excellent fire arms which they already had. Famine and depopulation persisted. Under the circumstances, the meagre force that Welsh had with him was enough to inspire awe and even to keep the delinquent King and his courtiers restrained under duress. One objective, lately added to the original one of expelling the barqandazes, was to restore internal order in Assam, through conciliation of the warring parties by peaceful means as far as possible. Of all the rebel leaders, only Krishnanarayan responded to the offer of amnesty and peace talks in this connexion. He returned to Guwahati, took his oath of allegiance to the King on 24 May 1793 and by mid-June was escorted to Mangaldai to resume his tributary status as a co-Rajah of Darrang. His position was to be that of a landholder, not of a ruling chief. His remaining mercenaries, about 400 in number, were disbanded and sent off.[27]

Welsh also pursuaded Gaurinath to enter into a trade agreement with the Company's Government on 28 February 1793 to establish liberty of commerce between subjects of Bengal and Assam. This agreement, however, did not work well as was already apparent even to Welsh himself; and this subsequently became more evident. After settling affairs in Guwahati, Welsn turned his attention to restoring the Ahom King to his authority. He advanced with his troops to the rebel-held

capital, Rangpur, and after a few encounters with the Moamarias restored it to Gaurinath on 18 March 1794. It was not because of any effective resistance he faced, but due to the delicate compulsions of a British policy derived from the clause of Pitt's Act of India, 1784 enjoining 'non-interference' in affairs of the Indian 'country powers' that Welsh took such a long time to reach the capital after entering Assam.[28]

The retirement of Cornwallis towards the end of October 1793 and his replacement by John Shore as Governor-General brought a big jolt in the situation. The latter firmly wanted to disentangle his Government from Assam affairs, though surely "without discredit and, if it can be effected, with some commercial benefit". In fact, Welsh received recall orders on 21 April 1794 even before his mission was completed. In May, when he was reluctantly getting ready for the withdrawal, and also later when he was in the last lap of his return journey, the King and his nobles sent frantic appeals to the Governor-General to stop his recall. Meanwhile, the Moamarias, led by Bharat, tried to retake the capital; but after several defeats in the suburbs, they dispersed. The British troops left Rangpur on 25 May, arrived at Guwahati on 30 May and, after a halt there for some time, they returned to the Company's territory on 3 July 1794. Within days of Welsh's exit from Rangpur, Gaurinath and his entourage had to fall back on Jorhat, leaving the capital once more to rebel hands. British aid in the form of arms and ammunitions, however, continued to flow into Jorhat in support of the tottering regime.[29]

IV

The expulsion of <u>barqandazes</u> from Kamrup by Welsh, as noted above, was only transitory. Haradatta Bujarbarua, Phatik Hazarika, Hazari Singh and a large number of expelled <u>barqandazes</u> re-entered Assam

with fresh recruits even before Welsh left the Kingdom. The big gang that entered Assam on 19 March 1794 in three separate bodies, under the overall command of Dyangir Bairagi, numbered about 2500 and included even Sannyasis and Faqirs. There were other infiltrators as well. Whether independently or in the employ of local chiefs, they all pillaged the countryside for several years and created conditions of anarchy all over Kamrup.[30] So bad was the situation that when Gaurinath died at Jorhat, leaving behind no male issue in late December 1794, prime minister Purnananda concealed the news for some days before setting up Kanaleswar Singha on the throne. On behalf of the other claimant, Brajanath, his father Bijoy Barmura Gohain tried to seize the throne, but failed. He then fled to Manipur and from there he pursuaded King Bodawpaya (1782-1819) of Burma to send an armed expedition in his favour. However, on being misinformed by Captain Cox that Assam was tributary to the East India Company, ultimately the Burmese King retracted his steps.[31] Incidentally, in course of one of his private trading ventures in western Assam, Daniel Raush was assassinated in January 1796 reportedly by some <u>targandaz</u> freebooters.[32]

The British intervention of 1792-94 failed to bring a total stop to the Civil War or even to the infiltration of armed freebooters from across the Bengal border. Nevertheless, it gave an opportunity to the old experienced prime minister of Assam to have a respite for reconsolidating Ahom pover by infusing certain reforms and by suppressing the rebels and bandits in another ten years or so. In that process, the <u>barqandazes</u> were all killed or driven out. Both Haradatta Bujarbarua of Kamrup and Simdhura Hazarika of Nowgong were captured and executed by 1796. About the same time, another rebel leader, Phophai Senapati, was also killed in action. Ejected from Rangpur, the Moamaria chief Bharat Singh was hotly pursued and then killed in action around 1800. About 1803, a serious conspiracy, involving some 500 people led by one

Panimuwa, was nipped in its bud. Gradually, the Moamaria and other rebel groups in different parts of Assam were thus suppressed, and the survivors were settled in new villages.[33]

Kachar had in practice long ceased to be bound by the old terms of vassalage to the Ahom Kingdom. This was evident from King Krishnachandra's (1790-1813) refusal to send back the refugee Assamese subjects settled within his domain and from his continued help to the Moamaria insurgents of Nowgong. Consequently war broke out between Assam and Kachar. It came to an end only in 1805 after the former's invading army had amply punished the latter by ravaging its richest countryside. For his allegedly inadequate cooperation during the Kachar campaign, Krishnanarayan was deposed, and replaced by Samudranarayan in the same year in September as the new Rajah of Darrang.[34]

The campaign against the last of the Moamaria chiefs, Sarbananda, whom the Moran tribe followed, proved to be more difficult. It had to be fought in the jungly terrain of Matak (present Dibrugarh district) where the tribe had already built up a polity of their own — a rude, egalitarian peasant democracy. The royalist troops won several battles. Yet harassed as they were by a protracted guerilla warfare, they had to accept a compromise. According to the terms of this compromise, Matak was to survive as a tributary chiefdom with full autonomy.[35] It remained so, until annexed by the British in 1842.

What contributed to the series of Ahom successes after Welsh's exit was the founding of a standing army of paid professional soldiers. This army was created during the decade 1795-1805 with a liberal supply of arms and ammunitions from the British. It consisted mostly of immigrant Hindusthani Sepoys to begin with and was trained by two

ex-soldiers of the Company's army. The number of its companies, each hundred-strong, was raised from five to eighteen in due course.[36]

Kamaleswar Singha, a mere puppet in the hands of his prime minister Purnananda, died of small pox on 17 January 1911 and his brother Chandrakanta was set up on the throne. Though still a young lad, the latter did not like to remain a cipher. His first conspiracy to get Purnananda assassinated having been foiled, he secretly appealed to Badanchandra, who was then the Barphukan at Guwahati, to rise up in revolt. As Purnananda got scent of the conspiracy, Badanchandra fled to Calcutta in 1815, and having failed to get the Company's help in the matter of getting rid of Purnananda, he went to Burma. The Burmese King readily promised help and sent a large army towards the end of the year 1816. The Assamese forces resisted, but were defeated in the battle of Ghiladhari in early 1817, and Prime Minister Purnananda Burhagohain, who was the ablest among his Assamese contemporaries, committed suicide.[37]

The Burmese occupied Jorhat, and after restoring Badanchandra to his office, and virtually making him all-powerful, returned to their country in April 1817. Then started a new phase of palace intrigues. Badanchandra Barphukan was assassinated. In the confusing situation Purandar, grandson of Bijoy Barmura, was set up on the throne in February 1818 in place of Chandrakanta, by the late prime minister's son and successor, Ruchinath Burhagohain. This being not to the liking of Burma, a second Burmese military expedition arrived in Assam in February 1819 to set things aright and restore Chandrakanta to the throne. The latter, however, did not like to remain a nominal ruler for long and fled. During 1819-1824 the Burmese commanders themselves ruled with the help of stooges. The brief reign of terror of the Burmese in Assam, causing large-scale genocide, tortures and the carrying off of thousands as slaves, is still remembered with horror in folk tradition. It was

man Purnananda Burhagohain had the appearance of a "miserable band of cowardly and undisciplined peasants amounting perhaps to six or seven hundred men, armed with awkward weapons which they dare not and cannot use".[41] The decline of the Ahom rule and its eclipse was therefore a painful process that dragged on for decades until the British were supposed to bring a change and even a hope for the future. It is therefore no surprise that some historians like S.N. Sen and S.K. Bhuyan are of opinion that immense good would have been done to Assam and much of the Assamese people's subsequent miseries could have been avoided, had Welsh's expedition not been summarily and abruptly recalled.[42]

One need not necessarily agree with this kind of speculation, but the fact remains that during the 1790s and the subsequent period under review, not only the reigning monarchs, but also some of their influential nobles were looking upon the Governor-General as a "go-brahmana-pratipalaka" and as their saviour. They even went so far as to offer their acceptance of a tributary status for Assam as price for British protection.[43] The ground for British occupation of Assam was indeed prepared long before, by British trading interests. As in many other areas, here too, trade preceded the British flag. In this context, the indulgence the Company gave to private European merchants engaged in the Assam trade since early 18th century,[44] the collection of all kinds of information through the Expedition of 1792-94, the appointment of David Scott as the Agent to the Governor-General on the North-East Frontier of Bengal on 15 November 1823 and the annexation of Assam in 1826 -- all these were but successive steps of a policy of colonialisation.

FOOTNOTES

1. James Rennell's map and memoirs cited in Edward Gait, A History of Assam (3rd rev. edn., 1963, reprint Calcutta, 1967), p.194. Rennell personally surveyed the border in 1765. See also S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826 (1st edn. 1949; 2nd edn., Guwahati, 1974), pp.62-3.

2. For instance, the chapter entitled "The Decay and Fall of the Ahom Kingdom" in Gait, op.cit., begins with the year 1780. Others like S.K. Bhuyan have found intrinsic values in the Ahom traditional institutions.

3. John Peter Wade, An Account of Assam 1800 (Benudhar Sharma, ed. Guwahati, 2nd edn. 1972), introductory chapter; Gait, op.cit., pp.239-56; Bhuyan, op.cit., pp.7-15 and 529-30.

4. Gait, op.cit., pp.173 and 249; Amalendu Guha, "Neo-Vaishnavism to insurgency : peasant uprisings and the crisis of feudalism in late eighteenth-century Assam" in Ashok Mitra, ed., The Truth Unites : Essays in Tribute to Samar Sen (Calcutta, 1985), p.43.

5. Amalendu Guha, "The medieval economy of Assam" in Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.1 c.1200-1750 (Cambridge, 1982), pp.495-98; Francis Buchanan Hamilton, An Account of Assam First Compiled in 1807-14 (S.K. Bhuyan, ed., 2nd edn., Guwahati, 1963), p.36.

6. Maniram Dewan, Buranji-Vivekaratna (Ms in Assamese dated 1838, Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati).

7. Gait, op.cit., quote from p.193.

8. Ibid., pp.196-7; Bhuyan, op.cit., pp.206-11; Shrinath Duwara, Tungkhungia Buranji or the History of Assam 1681-1806 A.D. (compiled 1804-06; S.K. Bhuyan trans. and ed., 2nd impression, Guwahati, 1968), pp.61-71.

9. Ibid., pp.73-76; Dharmadeva Sharma, Dharmodaya-nātakam (MS in Sanskrit, now lost); Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.211-16.

10. Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., pp.71 and 75.

11. Anonymous, Chronicle of Lakshmi Singha (MS in Assamese, Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati).

12. Letters in Bengali -- No.29 dated 4 Jaistha 1198 B.S. (1791) and No.30 dated 9 Magh 1713 Shaka (20 January 1792), both from Rudraram Barua, Kandar-chauki to Cornwallis in S.N. Sen, ed., Prachin Bangla Patra Samkalan, Records in Oriental Languages, Vol.1 (Calcutta University, 1942), pp.37-39; also, No.79, dated 22 May 1802 from Kali Sarkar to Wellesley, G.G. - in - Council, ibid., pp.88-89; Bhuyan, op.cit., pp.104-9, 187, 296 and 299.

13. For a narrative of the civil war, Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., and for an analysis of its class character, the present author's "Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency", op.cit.

According to Gait (op.cit., p.220) Gaurinath died on 19 December 1794, but according to Bhuyan (Anglo-Assamese Relations, pp.412 and 429), on 4 August 1795. We have accepted Gait's date, since one letter (no.905) from the Assam Rajah, received in Calcutta on 12 January 1795, refers to the installation of a new Rajah. See A.I. Tirmizi and K.D. Bhargava, ed., Calendar of Persian Correspondence: 1794-95, Vol.XI (NAI, 1969), pp.231 and 252.

14. Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., pp.90-105; Sātsari asam buranji (Seven Anonymous Chronicles in Assamese, S.K. Bhuyan, comp. and ed., 3rd edn., Guwahati University, 1969), pp.155-7; quote (trans.) from Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.219-26.

15. Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., pp.105-18; Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.226-27; Gait, op.cit., pp.202-5.

16. Same sources as above. According to some, Harihar and Howha were two different persons; the former ruled in Majuli and the latter, in parts of Lakhimpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra.

17. Wade, Account of Assam, 1800, op.cit., pp.259 and 261-65; Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.233-34, 270, 306-9 and 350-51; letter in Bengali No.40, dated 15 Paush from Barbarua and Choledhara Phukan to Governor-General, received on 5 March 1794 in Sen, Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan, op.cit.

18. Wade, Account of Assam, 1800, pp.261-65.

19. Ibid; Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.271-80.

20. [illegible], Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.232 and 273-80.

21. Ibid., pp.231, 233 and 236. According to Gait, Jai Singha came marching in 1792. But his date does not appear to be correct. See Gait, op.cit., p.324.

22. Gait, op.cit., p.323.

23. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.233-34 and 279-80.

24. pp.283-89 and 291-92.

25. Ibid., pp.290-92, 300-02 and 305-07; Gait, op.cit., p.206.

26. Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.308-15; Gait, op.cit., pp.207-10.

27. Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.327-30 and 343; Gait, op.cit., pp.212-13.

28. Gait, op.cit., pp.213-18; Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.338-46.

29. Shore's letter to Henry Dundas, 10 January 1794, quoted in Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., p.355; Gait, pp.216-18; letters in Bengali — No.41, from Swargadev to G.G., dated 4 Jaishtha 1716 shaka (1794); No.42, from Swargadev to G.G. dated 16 Baishakh 1716 shaka (1794); No.43, from Barphukan to G.G., received on 22 July 1794; No.74, from Swargadev to G.G., dated 6 Bhadra 1720 shaka (1798); No.81, from Rajah of Assam, dated 8 Asarh 1724 shaka (1802) - all in Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan, op.cit., pp.53-57, 83 and 90-92.

30. Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.376-78.

31. Letter in Bengali, No.986, dated 28 November 1794 in Calendar of Persian Correspondence 1794-95, Vol.XI, op.cit., p.245; Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., p.443.

32. Raush was reportedly murdered, according to some, by a party of faqirs in Darrang. Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.433-4.

33. Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., pp.138-43, 147-48, 165-66 and 194-95; Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.431-32.

34. Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., pp.175-76 and 195; Gait, op.cit., pp.223-28.

35. Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., pp.191-92; Gait, op.cit., pp.227-8; Hannay to Jenkins, 4 April 1839 and White to Jenkins, 26 January 1839, Foreign Political Proceedings, 14 August 1839, No.105 (NAI).

36. Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., pp.140 and 193; Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., p.437.

37. Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan, op.cit., pp.67-68; letters in Bengali from Chandrakanta Singha to the Judge of Rungpore, dated 28 Kartik 1222 B.S. and to the Barphukan, incompletely dated 29 Bhadra were both received in November 1815; Gait, op.cit., pp.230-38.

38. Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.466-511 and 552-53.

39. Ibid., p.506.

40. Quoted in Gait, op.cit., p.220.

41. Quoted in Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., p.413.

42. Dr. Sen on p.73 of the introduction to the text of Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan, op.cit., says: "If the letters of the Nazirdeo and the Dewandeo of Coochbehar and the Patromantris of Assam are read, then there remains no doubt that the extension of the British empire in India's north-eastern region took place at the instance of common people for their welfare and in the interest of (their) peace, order and prosperity" (trans. ours).

Also see Anglo-Assamese Relations, op.cit., pp.551-53, for Bhuyan's opinion.

43. For the relevant letters see Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan, op.cit., and Tungkhungia Buranji, op.cit., p.194.

44. European merchants' interference with the Assam trade, under the indulgence of the Company, compelled Nawab Mir Kasim to protest to Henry Vansittart and then to wage war against the British in 1763. See Henry Vansittart, A Narrative of the Transactions of Bengal 1760-64 (London, 1766; reprint Calcutta, 1976) pp.194, 200, 222, 244 and 258.

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