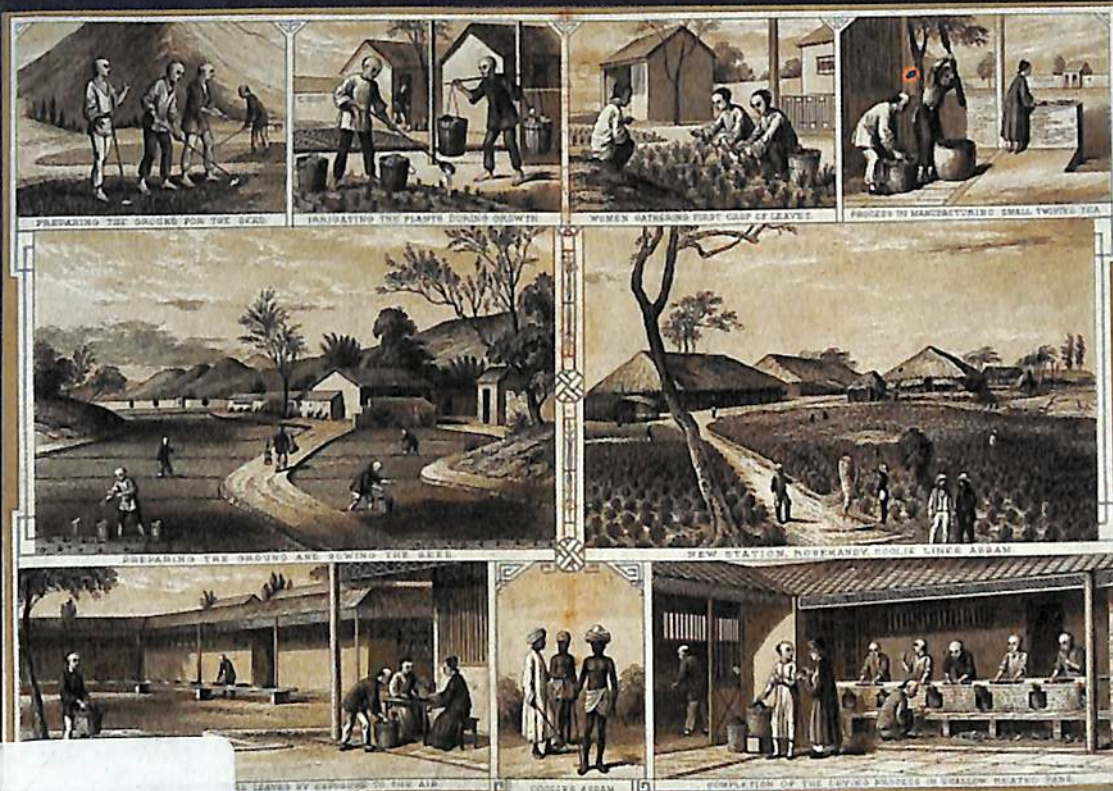




Orient BlackSwan

THE HISTORY OF Assam

FROM YANDABO TO PARTITION, 1826-1947



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Priyam Goswami



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For Ahan, Arav, Ayaan and Kabir

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PARTITION 1826-1947

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The external boundary and coastline of India as shown in the maps
in this book are neither correct nor authentic.

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Preface

This book deals with the polity, society and economy of colonial Assam from 1826 to 1947. Although, it has been primarily written keeping students in mind, I hope this book, with its extensive bibliography, notes and references will prove to be an engaging read through the history of this period, for all those interested in its study.

Though there are innumerable studies on multiple aspects pertaining to this period, many of these are research oriented and detailed micro-studies. I have made an attempt in this text to present the history of colonial Assam in a comprehensive and lucid manner, so as to trigger the readers' interest and curiosity. I shall consider my purpose served if the book is able to generate new ideas and questions in their minds.

The book has evolved from my research on the society and economy of colonial Assam and from the discussions and interactions that I have had with my students, throughout my teaching career. I hope that I have succeeded, even if only partially, in providing a cohesive and critical analysis of this period. Post Independence, the names of certain places have changed, for instance Gauhati is now known as Guwahati, Sibsagar as Sivasagar and Nowgong as Nagaon. For the purpose of clarity, the earlier names have been used in this text.

I owe a great deal to my students who inspired me to write this book, several of my friends and colleagues for their valuable suggestions, and my family for their constant support. I am also grateful to Orient Blackswan for taking the initiative in publishing this work.

Guwahati
April 2012

Priyam Goswami

Introduction

The annexation of Assam by the British bound her fate almost instantly with that of the other regions of the East India Company's domains in India. The transition from the old order to the new was swift and was characterised by a complete overhauling of the administrative machinery which brought about far reaching political, economic and social changes in Assam.

The Treaty of Yandabo (1826), which was signed at the end of the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824–6), marked the beginning of British colonial penetration into northeast India. Under the terms of the treaty, the King of Burma renounced his claim on Assam and the contiguous petty states of Cachar and Jayantia. The withdrawal of the Burmese provided the British with the opportunity to create spheres of influence in the region. In the decade before the war, the insecurity on the northeastern frontier had threatened the security of Bengal and it had, therefore, become imperative to ensure that the region did not relapse into further anarchy. Apprehensions of a renewed Burmese invasion loomed large and so, despite their earlier pledge that they would return once law and order had been restored, the British decided to stay on. Initial considerations of strategy, however, soon gave way to larger economic ones. Surveys and explorations conducted by a band of intrepid explorers and surveyors in the meantime had revealed the enormous economic potential of the region. This fitted in neatly with the British search for overseas markets. Nineteenth century England had seen a change from the phase of merchant capitalism to industrial capitalism, where emphasis shifted from revenue collection and trade to new forms of surplus appropriation. As European trade diminished, the vacuum was sought to be filled by the development of trade with China, Tibet and Burma. It was hoped that Assam would not only serve as a forwarding agency but also as a rich hinterland of Bengal as well. British commercial enterprises were enthusiastic at the prospect of getting thousands of new customers for their industrial products.

The annexation of Lower Assam in 1828 provided the British with a firm foothold that enabled them to extend their suzerainty in the

region very quickly. Within a decade, the entire Brahmaputra Valley and the neighbouring principalities of Cachar and Jayantia and the Khasi Hills were subdued. The control of the routes to Bhutan, Tibet, China and Burma followed soon after. Meanwhile, R. B. Pemberton, in his lengthy *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India* (1835), had given details of military and commercial routes that connected Bengal with Bhutan, Tibet, Sikkim, China and Burma through northeast India. The fond hope of extension of commerce to Tibet and China found expression in the words of Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General, Northeast Frontier, when he wrote:

There is every prospect of bringing all the races of hillmen bordering on this province under the same control as our Assamese subjects and at no distant period of opening out, through them, a direct route with the Tibetan and Chinese province from which we are divided by narrow ranges of hills but from which we are absolutely shut out by the intractable rudeness of intervening mountaineers.

With these high expectations, the Company embarked upon a determined process of penetration into a region that had remained practically isolated from the rest of the country for centuries. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Lushai Hills, the Naga Hills, the Garo Hills and the adjoining areas were also brought under British control. Colonial penetration into Assam and the neighbouring hill areas was accompanied by sweeping political, economic and social changes resulting in a spectacular transformation of the region within a very short time. Many of the changes were positive when seen in isolation, but when viewed in the overall colonial framework, it is apparent that they were part of the general process of underdevelopment. The former autonomy of the villages was eroded and indigenous crafts declined; the introduction of a monetary economy and systematic revenue maximisation led to escalating poverty while industrialisation resulted in dramatic demographic changes. Along with all these changes, came improvements in the transportation and communication network which broke down the isolation of the province, both physically and metaphorically, and opened her up to new forces, ideas and thoughts. The cumulative impact of all these was immense and far-reaching.

In any agricultural economy, progress in the agricultural sector must be concurrent with industrial growth if overall economic development

is to happen. In Assam, industrial growth and development had no links with the agricultural sector. Many of the village industries had died out under pressure from new forces, and the organisation of those that survived still remained very primitive. The position of the artisan with respect to capital or the fact that he also cultivated some land underwent no change. The worst effect of this decline in traditional crafts and the failure of new industries to take their place was that the economy of the province came under foreign domination. The tea plantations, coal mines, oil refineries and railways all undoubtedly implied significant changes; but viewed in its full spectrum, the development transformed the province into a raw material producing and capital absorbing region. This led to stagnation in agriculture, suppression of local industry and economic domination over the region by outsiders. The superimposition of the colonial economy on the traditional rural economy had its impact on the growth of urban centres as well. A distinct feature of industrialisation is the emergence of satellite towns in and around industrial areas. In Assam, industrialisation did not create links within the region. The tea, coal and oil industries procured all their requirements directly from Calcutta and had virtually no links with the surrounding areas, thereby sapping all possibilities of the growth of urban centres. In fact, even as late as 1941, the urban population of Assam was less than four percent of the total population of the province. Improved communication networks facilitated the active penetration of foreign consumer products in the local markets. Hence, the new townships that emerged were due more to the growth of commerce than that of industry and an important factor that determined the growth of an urban area was the construction of a road or a railway line in its vicinity. As the local economy was restructured and the control of the government on the land and resources solidly entrenched, Assam was systematically grafted into the scheme of colonial extraction and domination where enclaves of prosperity existed amidst a stagnant economy.

Colonial rule in Assam triggered a series of sweeping changes, not only in its polity and economy, but in society and culture as well. The British had brought along with them new institutions, knowledge, ideas, technology, beliefs and values. Within a few years of their occupation of Assam, they had laid the foundations of a modern state by surveying land, settling the revenue, creating a bureaucracy of officials, codifying the law and instituting law courts, introducing

Western education, establishing industries and a communication network, thereby opening her up to the outside world. In this setting, the activities of the American Baptist missionaries and the Bengal Renaissance had a profound impact on Assamese society. As the nineteenth century progressed, the changes became more and more perceptible. By the middle of the nineteenth century, they were distinctly visible. With improved means of communication and with hopes of greater employment opportunities, students began to leave for Calcutta for higher education. In Calcutta, they came into contact with the liberal ideas of the West which they enthusiastically grasped and brought back with them when they returned home. These youth, educated in English and imbued with 'modern' ideas, started the process of change in Assam. A wide variety of important issues were discussed and debated upon by the emerging intelligentsia and in the process, ideas and attitudes underwent a profound change. In course of time these ideas filtered down to the common man and although illiteracy was still rampant, the gradual infiltration of radical ideas instilled in the minds of the people a spirit of rational enquiry. There was a growing demand for social reforms and the eradication of certain social evils. A small section of the provincial population emerged to form the provincial elite, and it was this vocal group that took upon itself the task of organising public opinion. The emergence of the press and modern Assamese literature helped in the dissemination of ideas and information and this in turn resulted in the growth of a political awareness which found expression in the formation of a number of socio-political organisations.

Although there was a strong regional identity, no voice was raised for Assam's identity as wholly independent of the Indian one. Late nineteenth century Assamese literature had already created a framework alluding to the rightful place of Assam within India and *Sonar Asom* (Golden Assam) was never conceived as being outside *Bharat Varsha*. But the educated elite felt it necessary to infuse ideas of regional consciousness before they could begin thinking in terms of the larger Indian consciousness. Authors like Tillottoma Misra, (*Literature and Society in Assam*), Benudhar Rajkhowa (*Mor Jivan Dapon*), and Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan (*Assam Buranji*) etc., have written about it. Hence, the focal point of intellectual discussions of the time was the question of the existence of Assam as a distinct cultural, religious and linguistic entity, and until the beginning of the twentieth

century, the predominant concerns of the people were those relating to regional issues. The high rates of taxes, the question of immigration, the condition of the tea garden labourers and the language question were some of the major causes of apprehension.

The government's economic policies, in particular, had adversely affected the people and the peasantry had been reduced to penury. In course of time rural poverty became so acute that every assessment of land revenue raised a storm of protest. Attempts were made at the grassroots level to collectively resist the government's policy of upward revision of revenue. The *ryots* convened *mels* to give vent to their discontent. The *mels*, under the leadership of *gosains*, *dolois* or other influential people, were originally constituted as authorities on socio-religious matters. But gradually their base was broadened and was converted to *raijmels* or popular assemblies, for the redressal of all grievances. The popular *raijmels* were soon converted into more representative and more broad-based organisations. Known as *ryot sabhas*, they were formed with the active support of the Assamese intelligentsia. The emerging intelligentsia, however, was not in favour of the aggressive policy hitherto followed by the *raijmels*. Instead, it advocated constitutional agitation through prayers, petitions, memorials and public meetings and believed that only through such means could political awareness among the people be aroused. Thus, the *ryot sabhas* which followed were more leadership oriented unlike the *raijmels* where popular sentiment had dominated.

Newspapers and public associations also made their appearance simultaneously. These organisations advocated social reform, inspired the youth of the province to qualify themselves for higher positions, and worked for the all round progress of the society. The scope of their activities was broadened by the creation of the enlarged province of Assam in 1874 and soon after, began to develop political overtones. Jorhat emerged as the centre of activity. The *Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha* was founded in 1884 under the initiative of Jagannath Barua. Like most other organisations of the time, the Sabha did not believe in direct confrontation with the government, but nevertheless espoused the cause of the people even at the risk of displeasing the government at times. The Sabha contributed significantly to social and political awakening in Assam and paved the way for democratic and popular movements in the province. Although its focus was on the particular

needs of the province, it was able to establish strong links with pan-Indian aspirations. In fact, many of its members, including Debicharan Barua and Lakshminath Bezbaruah, attended the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress as delegates. However, after Jagannath Barua's death in April 1907, the differences of opinion between the members of the organisation widened and resulted in a virtual termination of its activities.

For some time the Assamese intelligentsia, led by Manik Chandra Baruah, had increasingly felt the necessity of a more broad based provincial organisation to articulate the wishes, grievances and aspirations of the Assamese people. The Assam Association was formed keeping these objectives in mind. The Association played a significant role in serving as the mouthpiece of the people of the Brahmaputra Valley during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Although the Association had been initially formed to focus on regional issues and to press for regional demands, it gradually merged into India's mainstream politics. Like the Brahmaputra Valley, the Surma Valley, comprising of the districts of Cachar and Sylhet, was also very active politically.

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the next thus saw a new awakening in the province. The common bonds established by British rule, a uniform administrative set up, improved means of communication, the impact of Western thoughts and ideas and above all, shared discrimination and frustration at every step, induced the people of the region to look beyond the provincial boundaries and establish a commonality of purpose with mainstream India. The Indian National Congress provided the common forum. It was in this backdrop that Assamese nationalism merged with mainstream Indian nationalism while maintaining a distinct Assamese identity.

The *Swadeshi* agitation, the Home Rule Movement, revolutionary activities, contemporary world events and the stirring speeches of nationalist leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal, all combined to create a new awareness among the youth. Students in Assam translated this awareness into action by creating a platform for concerted action on matters of regional and national interest. The Assam Students' Conference, founded in 1916, though not a political organisation, helped to create a cadre of student leaders who actively participated in the national movement that followed.

The Assam Association had been following the political developments in the country avidly but for most people the concept of *swaraj* was still vague and incomprehensible. The seventeenth session of the Assam Association held at Tezpur in December 1920, endorsed the Indian National Congress' August 1920 resolution on non-cooperation and stated that the object of the Assam Association was to work for the attainment of *swaraj*. This was symbolically reflected in the merger of the Assam Association with the Assam Provincial Congress Committee in 1921. From then onwards, Assam identified itself completely with the national movement. As in other provinces, in Assam too popular response to the repressive measures was massive and ordinances were defied openly even at the cost of severe repression.

With a large number of men behind the bars, women came out in thousands defying prohibitory orders to demonstrate their solidarity with the freedom struggle. Women's power had been strengthened in the meantime by the organisational activities carried out during the preceding years of the movement and the formation of the *Mahila Samities*. The Government of India Act 1935 inaugurated electoral politics in Assam. In the elections of 1937, the Congress under the leadership of Gopinath Bardoloi emerged as the single largest party. But the Congress decision to not form a government led to the formation of a coalition government under Sir Syed Mohammed Saadullah, the leader of the Muslim group in the Brahmaputra Valley. The subsequent fall of the Saadullah ministry in September 1938 led to the formation of the first ministry of Gopinath Bardoloi. Briefly, the entire decade was one of political instability in the province.

Assam was profoundly affected by the Quit India Movement. It had a strong popular base and attempts were made at several places to form parallel governments. Jinnah's demand for the inclusion of Assam in Pakistan was strongly resisted by the people of Assam and it was in this backdrop that the Assam Provincial Congress emphatically protested against the Grouping Plan of the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946). With the acceptance of the Mountbatten Plan, the anti-grouping movement in Assam came to an end. The focus of political activity now shifted to Sylhet where the referendum was held on 6 and 7 July 1947. The creation of East Pakistan left Assam virtually isolated, being connected with the rest of India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor. With Independence, came new challenges of fighting the colonial legacy of

under-development, facilitating economic development and bringing about social reform. In Assam, an additional problem has been that of immigration. Partition set in motion forces whose impact is felt even today. The northeastern region of India is home to a large number of tribal communities.

Table 1 shows the major geographical areas under discussion in the book and their position in modern India. It also gives the names of the major tribes that inhabit these areas.

Table 1: Major Geographical Areas and Tribes

| Area | Names of major Tribes |
|---|---|
| Khasi Hills (Now in Meghalaya) | Khasi-Bhoi, Lymngam, War |
| Jayantia Hills (Now in Meghalaya) | Pnar, Bhoi, Khyrniam, War |
| Garo Hills (Now in Meghalaya) | Awe, Chisak, Marchi, Dual, Metabeng, Atong, Chibok, Ruga, Ganching, Megham, Dussani, Cheani, Rabhas, Koch, Rajbongsi, Dalu, Mech, Hajong |
| Lushai Hills (Now Mizoram) | Chakma, Pawi, Ralte, Kuki, Dulien, Ralte, Poi, Jahao, Pankhup, Lakher, Paite, Falam, Tangur, Khuangli, Dalang, Sukte, Fanai, Leillul, Mar |
| Naga Hills (Now Nagaland) | Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Khemungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Yimchunger, Zeliang |
| North East Frontier Tracts (Now Arunachal Pradesh) | Abors(Adis), Apatani, Bugun, Galo, Daflas (Nyishis), Akas (Hrusso), Jingpho, Koro, Memba Meyor, Mishmis, Monpa, Nocte, Sherdukpen, Sajolang, Sartang, Tagin, Tai Khampti, Yobin |
| Assam | Bodo, Dimasa, Kachari, Karbi, Khamti, Khelma, Kuki, Hajong, Santal, Khamyang, Mising, Rabha, Singpho, Tiwa, Deori, Mech, Phake |

Decline of the Ahoms and the Emergence of the British

Chapter Highlights

- Early British interest in Assam
- First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–6)
- Treaty of Yandabo
- Britain's colonial policy

THE AHOM RULE

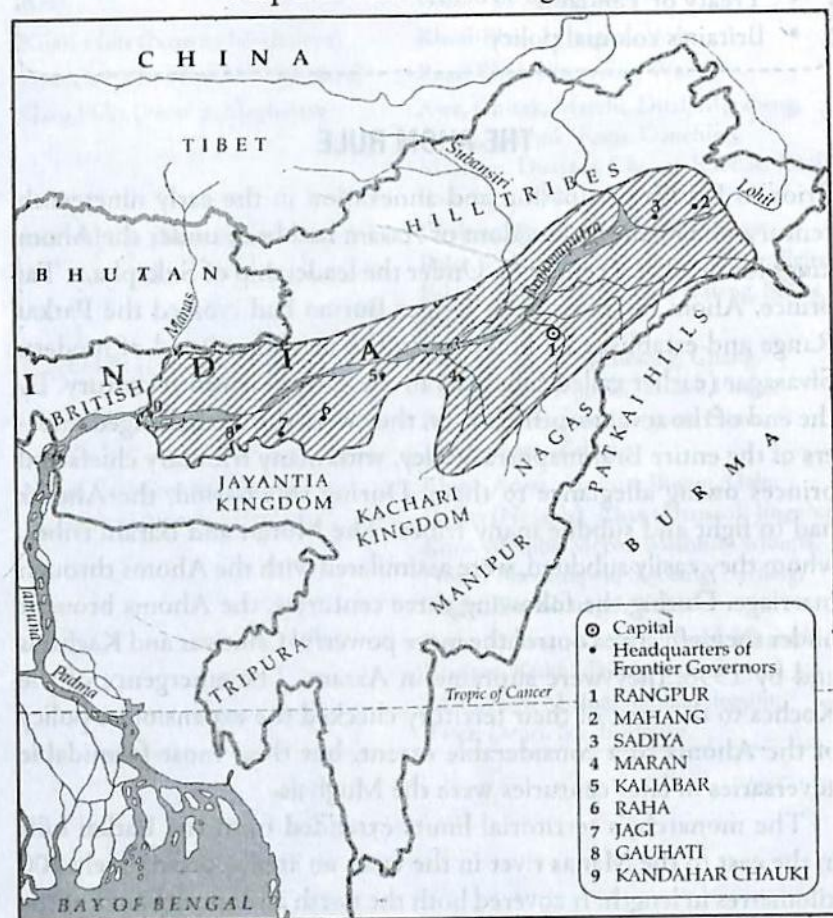
Prior to British occupation and annexation in the early nineteenth century, the medieval kingdom of Assam had been under the Ahom kings for nearly six centuries. Under the leadership of Sukapha, a Tai prince, Ahom migrants from Upper Burma had crossed the Patkai Range and established a kingdom in the neighbourhood of modern Sivasagar (earlier called Sibsagar) in the early thirteenth century. By the end of the seventeenth century, they were the unchallenged masters of the entire Brahmaputra Valley, with many tributary chiefs and princes owing allegiance to them. During this period, the Ahoms had to fight and subdue many tribes. The Moran and Barahi tribes, whom they easily subdued, were assimilated with the Ahoms through marriage. During the following three centuries, the Ahoms brought under their effective control the more powerful Chutiyas and Kacharis and by 1536, they were supreme in Assam. The emergence of the Koches to the west of their territory checked the expansionist policy of the Ahoms to a considerable extent, but their most formidable adversaries in later centuries were the Mughals.

The monarchy's territorial limits extended from the Patkai hills in the east to the Manas river in the west, an area approximately 800 kilometres in length. It covered both the north and south banks of the Brahmaputra. On the north, it touched the territories of the Bhutia, Aka, Dafla, Miri, Mishmi and Singpho tribes whose habitat covered

the area up to the foothills of the Himalayas, bordering Tibet. To the south of the Brahmaputra, the monarchy extended to the foot of the hills inhabited by the Nagas, beyond which lay the kingdoms of Manipur and Burma. Westward, on the southern border, were the principalities of the Khasis and Garos and the kingdoms of Cachar and Jayantia. While direct Ahom rule was confined to the Brahmaputra Valley, the monarchy's supremacy in the entire region was recognised in one form or another.

Assam remained virtually cut off from the rest of the world for a long time partly because of its geographical location, separated as it

Map 1.1: The Ahom Kingdom



Source: Adapted from Dr I. S. Mumtaza, *The External Relations of the Ahom Rulers with Special Reference to the Diplomatic Exchanges*, Unpublished Ph.d thesis, Gauhati University.

was by numerous hills and rivers interspersed by deep valleys, and partly because of the deliberate Ahom policy of isolation. Most of the inhabitants settled along the fertile banks of the Brahmaputra or on the banks of its tributaries. These alluvial plains were bordered by a wilderness of tall grass beyond which lay the inhospitable and impenetrable jungles. The mode of transport was primitive, the only means of communication being by country boat, elephants or *palki*. Wheeled traffic was unknown and even the bullock cart made its appearance only after the advent of the British. Under the circumstances, the Brahmaputra was the only highway that connected Assam to the rest of India. The journey to and from Assam was extremely long and tedious. The adverse climatic conditions were an additional problem.¹

Ahom-Mughal Conflicts and Advent of the British

The history of seventeenth-century Assam is the history of Ahom-Mughal conflict. In 1662, during an invasion, Nawab Mir Jumla, the Mughal *subahdar* of Bengal, advanced as far as Garhgaon, the Ahom capital, and compelled the ruling king, Jayadhaj Singha, to cede the western part of the Ahom territory to the Mughals. However, in 1682, Gadadhar Singha (1681-95) recovered the lost territory and from then on Goalpara remained the frontier outpost of the Mughal dominion. Ahom power reached its zenith during the reign of Rudra Singha (1695-1714). In the years following his rule, the monarchy showed signs of decay. Weak and unscrupulous rulers occupied the throne and each succession became a scramble for power. Taking advantage of the situation, and provoked as they were by the Ahom rulers, the Moamarias, a socio-religious sect, rebelled in 1788. The *burgandazes*, marauders from Bengal, who ravaged and pillaged the adjoining villages of Kamrup, aggravated the situation. The royalists were overpowered and Gaurinath Singha, the reigning monarch, was deposed. Gaurinath was forced to flee from his capital to take shelter in Guwahati from where he sent frantic appeals to the British for help.

BRITISH INTEREST IN ASSAM

East India Company and Trade with the Ahom Kingdom

The acquisition of the *Diwani* of Bengal in 1765 brought the East India Company into direct contact with the Ahom kingdom. Prior to

that, Major James Rennell, an official of the Company, had surveyed the frontier of Assam and collected information about the region.² He identified the Brahmaputra with the Tsangpo River. However, his efforts at gathering more information were cut short by the refusal of the Ahom government to grant him permission to enter the kingdom.³ Subsequently, several Europeans had tried their luck in trade in Assam with varying fortunes. Interestingly, the majority of the early European merchants trading in Assam were army men. For instance, Colonel James Mill of the Ostend East India Company, Jean Baptiste Chevalier, Commander-in-Chief of the French settlements in Bengal, Paul Richard Pearkes, an officer in charge of the English settlements in Patna, were all actively involved in the Assam trade. Several others followed these officers and soon, many of the Company's employees in Bengal were engaged in the highly profitable trade. Matters came to a head when Mir Kasim, the Nawab of Bengal, complained to Vansittart, the Governor of Bengal, of losses amounting to over 40,000 rupees in the trade with Assam, Rangamati and Karaibari because of the monopoly that the Company's employees had over the whole of the trade.

Alarmed at the notorious corruption of the English officials in Bengal, the Court of Directors sent Robert Clive as Governor of Bengal for the second time with full powers to reform the abuses in the Company's administration. In 1765 Clive set up a Society of Trade to compensate the civil officers for the losses they sustained because of the restrictions he had imposed on the practice of private trade and the acceptance of presents. The Society was granted the monopoly of trade in salt, betel nut and tobacco. The profits were to be shared in predetermined proportions. It was suggested that the Committee of Trade should appoint certain European agents to transact business in different parts of the country. Of the 11 agents appointed in 1765, three were to reside in the district of Rangpur: Hugh Ballie in Goalpara, Tom Lewis in Rangpur town and Hargreave in Chilmari. It was soon apparent that there was no demand for betel nuts and tobacco from Bengal as these were locally grown in Assam. Hence, in 1767, the Society relinquished its trade in these two items and confined itself to salt which soon became the most important item of inland trade. Meanwhile, the overbearing attitude and the mode of functioning of the Society of Trade attracted the attention of the Court of Directors. Realising that the lucrative trade with Assam would eventually open

up new markets for European commodities in the hills of northeast India, they decided to abolish the monopoly and open the trade to all persons. Thus, trade with Assam now acquired a new dimension and was viewed with renewed interest.

Increasing British Interest in the Region

In the initial years, the importance of Assam and the eastern Himalayan region was for its strategic location, as the region shared its border with Tibet and Burma. The British search for overseas markets has to be seen in the context of the economic condition of Europe in general and Britain in particular. Britain sought to encourage trade with Tibet and Burma. Of the two, trade with Tibet had added importance as it imported more than it exported, and the balance was made up in gold and silver. As long as the chiefs of the Newar dynasty ruled over the petty kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon, trade flourished between India and Tibet. The conquest of the Newar state by the Gurkha ruler King Prithvi Narayan Shah in the second half of the eighteenth century disrupted the traditional trade between India and Tibet. He adopted a 'closed-door policy' with regard to the British. The East India Company desperately needed the gold from Tibet to finance its growing China trade. Hence, an alternative route to Tibet became an urgent necessity. They believed that such a route might be possible via Assam.

Political instability in Assam, however, was not at all conducive to economic activities. When Gaurinath Singha appealed to the British for help in 1788, Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General, was not inclined to involve the Company in the internal affairs of a frontier kingdom especially at a time when Mysore was engaging his attention. Moreover, he felt morally bound by the directives of the Pitt's India Act that had been passed in 1784.⁴ The collector of Rangpur and the commissioner of Cooch Behar, however, emphatically pointed out the adverse effects that the disturbances had on the prosperous Assam-Bengal trade and the strong possibility of the anarchy in Assam spilling over to Bengal if such a situation was allowed to continue. Since the Raja had asked for aid and had agreed to pay for the troops, it was felt that there was no reason why the Company's government should not comply with the request. In the meantime, the Second Anglo-Mysore War had come to an end and this left the English relatively free to turn their attention to Assam. Thus, prompted by

'motives of humanity' as well as a desire 'to be better informed of the interior of the state of Assam, its commerce etc.,' Cornwallis decided to despatch a small contingent of troops under the command of Captain Thomas Welsh.

Captain Welsh and the Restoration of the Ahom Monarchy

Captain Welsh's expedition was sent into Assam in September 1792.⁵ Lord Cornwallis specifically instructed Welsh to enquire into the economic potential of the region and, in spite of his military pre-occupations, Welsh did not overlook the commercial object of his deputation to Assam. He had written to the Governor-General of his confidence that with restoration of peace and order in Assam, 'a new source of wealth and riches must flow to the Company' and that the Company would then be able to sell at least 100,000 lbs of salt in Assam alone. Gaurinath was reinstated on the throne shortly after Welsh's arrival in Assam. Kamrup was cleared of the burgandazes, the resistance of the Moamarias in Upper Assam was broken and some semblance of law and order was restored in the territory. However, a radical change in policy occurred following the appointment of John Shore, the new Governor-General. Shore was not prepared to take on any avoidable political commitment, especially in a region that lay outside the sphere of the Company's domain. Therefore, Welsh was recalled despite Gaurinath's repeated pleas for the retention of the British troops. As a result, Assam lapsed into the former state of anarchy and internal strife. The burgandazes reappeared and renewed their depredations in Kamrup and Darrang, while the Moamarias, the Singphos and the Khamtis, all raised the standard of revolt.

BURMESE INTERVENTION IN ASSAM

The situation deteriorated further when even the Ahom court was divided following the premature death of Gaurinath Singha. His successors, Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) and Chandrakanta Singha, (1811-18), were mere puppets in the hands of Purnananda Buragohain, the prime minister, who became the virtual *de facto* ruler of Upper Assam. Badan Chandra Barphukan, the king's Viceroy in Lower Assam, was bitterly opposed to this personal rule of the *buragohain*. Their enmity went so deep that the buragohain sent a senior officer with an adequate force to arrest the *barphukan* and bring

him to the capital. Having got scent of this, the barphukan fled to Calcutta to seek British aid. Being unable to successfully convince the British, Badan Chandra went to the Burmese court at Amarapura for help. The Burmese, who were ever anxious to extend their dominion westwards, made their appearance on the scene in 1817.

A Burmese army crossed the Patkai, reinstated Chandrakanta to his rightful position and returned with a huge indemnity and an Ahom princess for the Burmese monarch. However, shortly after their withdrawal, Chandrakanta was deposed and mutilated in order to disqualify him from claiming the throne.⁶ Purandar Singha, another scion of the royal family, was enthroned in his place. Chandrakanta once again appealed to the Burmese who returned with a larger force in 1819 under the command of Ala Mingi. After putting up a feeble resistance, Purandar fled to Gauhati and thereafter, took refuge in Chilmari in Bengal. Chandrakanta was reinstated on the throne by the Burmese.

Chandrakanta, however, soon realised that Burmese attitude towards Assam had undergone a change. In 1817, the Burmese had retreated from Assam content with a large indemnity, a princess and a vague acknowledgement of their suzerainty by the Ahom king. But the second time around, they appeared to have territorial designs. The new Burmese king, Ba-gyi-daw, was determined to make Assam a part of the Burmese kingdom. In the circumstances, Chandrakanta found himself being increasingly sidelined and a mere puppet in the hands of the Burmese. Without any hope of aid from any quarter, Chandrakanta was left with no option but to flee to British territory from where he made abortive attempts to recover his lost position. The Burmese king viewed these developments with serious concern and in 1822 sent one of his greatest generals, Mingimaha Bandula, with an army of 30,000 men, to cow Chandrakanta into submission. This virtually marked the end of Ahom rule in Assam.

Assam thus came under the control of the Burmese. Jogeswar Singha, another member of the Ahom royal family, was installed as the new puppet ruler but the *de facto* ruler was Mingimaha. They unleashed a reign of terror in Assam. They plundered and burnt villages and committed terrible atrocities while the helpless people suffered untold misery. David Scott, the Civil Commissioner of Rangpur, had highlighted the significance of these developments in his correspondences with the Company. As early as July 1822, he

had reported that, 'the Burmese, having obtained complete mastery of Assam and a person of that nation having been appointed to the supreme authority, the country may now be considered as a province of the Burman Empire'.⁷ Meanwhile, the relations between the Burmese and the British had become strained. The Burmese had not only plundered villages in Habraghat in Rangpur but had also encroached upon British possessions in Goalpara. It was also rumoured that Mingimaha was contemplating a full-scale attack on Goalpara. In 1823 the Burmese occupied the island of Shahpuri on the Chittagong frontier. They had forced Gambhir Singh, the Raja of Manipur, to abdicate and expelled Govinda Chandra, the Raja of Cachar. Burmese preparations for an impending three-pronged attack on Bengal made the situation all the more alarming for the government.⁸

Apart from being a security threat, Burmese activities on the frontier also hindered British commercial interests in the region. In such circumstances, the East India Company's government was compelled to review its prevailing policy of non-intervention.

FIRST ANGLO-BURMESE WAR 1824-6

In November 1823, David Scott was appointed as Agent to the Governor-General of the North Eastern Frontier in addition to his duties as Commissioner of Rangpur. Scott's continued reports of the alarming situation on the frontier convinced the Governor-General-in-Council of the necessity of adopting strong measures to punish and humble the Burmese.⁹ Reviewing the encroachments of the Burmese in Arakan, Assam and Cachar, the Council adopted a Resolution concluding that the activities of the Burmese, 'must be regarded as having placed the two countries in a state of actual war'.¹⁰ The British declared war against the Burmese in 1824.

Some of the British forces were led by Lieutenant Colonel Richards who advanced up the Brahmaputra and occupied Rangpur. Soon after, the Burmese were also expelled from Cachar and Manipur. Meanwhile, simultaneous campaigns in Arakan, Tenasserim, Pegu and Upper Burma had taken a heavy toll on the Burmese. The death of Mingimaha Bandula in April 1825 compounded their problems and by the beginning of 1826 the Burmese were no longer capable of offering any resistance to the British. When the main British army under General Archibald Campbell reached Yandabo, a village in the

neighbourhood of Ava, the Burmese capital, Bai-gyi-daw, the Burmese king, was prepared to accept any terms the British imposed on him. Thus, Bai-gyi-daw and the British signed a peace treaty on 24 February 1826 at Yandabo.

THE TREATY OF YANDABO

The Burmese and Assam, Cachar, Jayantia and Manipur

The Treaty of Yandabo contained several clauses but the only article in the Treaty that vaguely referred to the disposal of the Burmese conquests in the northeastern frontier of British India, was Article II.¹¹ It is generally assumed that under the terms of this Treaty, 'Assam was ceded' to the East India Company. But this concept of Assam being 'ceded' was a loose interpretation of the Treaty of Yandabo by the authorities of the Company. Article II merely stated that, 'His Majesty, the King of Ava, renounces all claims upon, and will abstain from all future interference with the principality of Assam and its dependencies, and also the contiguous petty states of Cachar and Jyntea' (Jayantia).

With regard to Manipur, it was stipulated that, 'should Gambhir Singh desire to return to that country, he shall be recognised by the king of Ava as Rajah thereof'. There is no mention of Assam, Cachar, Jayantia and Manipur in any other Article of the Treaty. The Burmese version of the Treaty is similar in substance although there is a slight difference in the wording. It states that the 'the King of Burma shall no more have dominion over, or in the direction of, the towns and country of Assam, the country of Ak-ka-bat (Cachar) and the country of W-tha-li (Jayantia)'. With regard to Manipur, it states that if, 'Gambhee-ra Sing desires to return to his country and remain ruler, the king of Burma shall not prevent or molest him, but let him remain'.¹²

From the clauses stated above, it is clear that neither version contains even an indirect recognition of the East India Company's right to establish political control over any of the above-mentioned territories. In the case of Assam, Cachar and Jayantia, the Burmese simply formalised their withdrawal leaving a political vacuum while committing themselves, 'to abstain from all future interference' in these territories. In the case of Manipur, they recognised Gambhir Singh's right to the throne but remained silent about his future relationship with the Burmese monarchy. Significantly, there was no

assurance that they would abstain from future interference in Manipur. The renouncement of claims over these territories by the King of Ava cannot be construed to mean that they were ceded to the British. This is further clear from Article III which provided that, 'to prevent all disputes respecting the boundary line between the two great nations, the British government will retain the conquered provinces of Aracan, Ramree, Cheduba and Sandung; and His Majesty, the King of Ava, cedes all rights thereto'.¹³ If Assam was also to be automatically retained by the British by virtue of the Treaty of Yandabo, a provision of this nature would have been inserted. Moreover, Article II of the Treaty treated Assam, Cachar and Jayantia equally. These three principalities, therefore, stood on the same footing at the close of the war in relation to Burma and the peace treaty. It was now left to the British government to settle its terms with the legitimate rulers.

The British and Cachar, Jayantia, Manipur and Assam

It was here that the British discriminated between the neighbouring kingdoms. While the right of Raja Govinda Chandra and Raja Ram Singh to their respective thrones of Cachar and Jayantia was recognised, this right was not conceded to the Ahom raja. As a matter of fact, this discrimination started before the declaration of the war against Burma. In 1824, on the eve of the war, separate treaties¹⁴ were signed by David Scott, on behalf of the Company's government, with the rajas of Cachar and Jayantia, whereby the rulers of these kingdoms placed their territories under the protection of the British against external aggression.

Cachar: Govinda Chandra of Cachar agreed to pay an annual tribute of 10,000 rupees and to allow British interference in the internal administration of his country.

Jayantia: No tribute was demanded of Raja Ram Singh, but he was required to 'assist [the British government] with all forces and to afford every facility in his power in furtherance of ... (its) military operations'. Like Govinda Chandra, he too agreed to accept the 'advice of the Governor-General-in-Council' in matters relating to the internal administration of his kingdom.

It appears that the inclusion of these two petty principalities adjoining the British district of Sylhet was part of the government's

general policy on the defence of the frontier. Therefore, when the war ended, the protected rulers were left undisturbed in their respective kingdoms.

Manipur: The case was slightly different with regard to Manipur. Although the loyalty of Gambhir Singh towards the British during the war was open to suspicion, it was generally recognised that he had played an important role in expelling the Burmese from Cachar and Manipur. Moreover, the Treaty of Yandabo explicitly recognised his claims to the Manipuri throne. Therefore, it was logical for the British to accept him as the ruler of Manipur. But the Treaty had remained silent on the status of Gambhir Singh in relation to the Burmese monarchy and this posed a problem. The British considered it unsafe to allow Burmese influence in Manipur to continue for they believed that it would expose the Sylhet frontier to renewed Burmese incursions. Major Burney, the British Resident at Ava was, therefore, asked to make enquiries and report back on this delicate matter. To their relief, the government was informed that the Burmese no longer demanded the allegiance of the Manipuris, but Burney was quick to point out that they insisted on the restoration of the Kabaw Valley, a hilly tract to the east of Manipur, which Gambhir Singh had occupied during the war. The British readily accepted this claim for they were confident that they would be able to persuade Gambhir Singh to hand over the territory to the Burmese.

Assam: The position of Assam at the end of the war was quite different from that of Cachar, Jayantia and Manipur. Although she had been clubbed along with Cachar and Jayantia in the Treaty of Yandabo, the British were not bound to her by any treaty obligation. Hence, once the Burmese renounced their claim on Assam, the British felt free to decide her future. One does question why a treaty along the line of those with Cachar and Jayantia had not been signed with Assam in 1824. In fact, as early as 1823, while recommending intervention in the affairs of Assam for the expulsion of the Burmese, David Scott had presumed that the Company's government would place a prince of the Ahom royal family who had the best claim on the vacant throne. He also felt that if Ahom rule was to be restored in Assam, the British should reserve the right to interfere in its internal administration because, 'in view of the peculiar conditions prevailing in the Ahom

kingdom, this departure from the general principle followed by the Company in its relations with friendly states was not only justified but essential for the maintenance of order'.¹⁵ The Company had then informed Scott that it indeed favoured the restoration of Ahom rule in the near future.

Even prior to the commencement of hostilities, the government had realised that any military advance into Assam would involve a long-term commitment to protect the inhabitants against the Burmese. Yet, they still did not contemplate an alliance with an Ahom prince. This was probably because they were unable to identify a suitable claimant to the throne. In any case, Scott was opposed to any immediate declaration on the installation of an Ahom prince. He was convinced that the people had lost all confidence in their princes on account of their, 'imbecility, cowardice and treacherous principles'. Accordingly, in a Proclamation addressed to the people of Assam in February 1824, the government observed, 'We are not led into your country by the thirst of conquest, but are forced in our own defence, to deprive our enemy of the means of annoying us. You may, therefore, rest assured that we will ... re-establish ... a Government adapted to your wants and calculated to promote the happiness of all classes.'¹⁶ It is clear that the government had no intention at this stage to extend their dominion but only wanted to ensure the protection of their eastern frontier.

However, with the defeat of the Burmese, other factors emerged that forced the British to revise their earlier position in relation to the Brahmaputra Valley. These factors were:

- Fears of a renewed Burmese invasion. It was also strategically important for them to ensure that the region did not relapse into anarchy.
- The newly discovered economic potential of the region. The East India Company was primarily a commercial concern and was, therefore, motivated by economic considerations while taking major decisions.

Hence, when the war came to an end, the Company's government informed David Scott that they did not consider themselves pledged by any engagement or declaration to restore an Ahom prince to the throne of Assam. Justifying this changed policy of the government, Edward Gait wrote:

Not only had the Burmese been in possession (of the Brahmaputra Valley) for several years in course of which they had overthrown most of the old administrative landmarks, but the people were also split up into many conflicting parties, and the elevation of any particular pretender to the throne would have resulted, as soon as the British troops were withdrawn, in a renewal of the fatal dissensions and civil wars which had prevailed for many years before the Burmese occupation.¹⁷

The decision not to reinstate an Ahom monarch was indeed a departure from the government's earlier stand. Pending arrangements for its future administration, the renouncement of the claims by the Burmese made the East India Company the *de facto* ruler of Assam.

BRITAIN'S COLONIAL POLICY

Background

Britain's activities in the northeastern region of India must be viewed in the overall context of her colonial policy. It is important to remember that from the outset, the colonial system of England envisaged two types of possessions:

1. The first consisted of sparsely populated regions, usually in the temperate zone, where white men could settle, and make a home.
2. The other consisted of densely populated tropical or semi-tropical areas which were forced to adopt a policy of free trade and which were governed almost autocratically to promote her commercial interests.

Of the two, the latter was considered by far the more important. One can see two broad phases in Britain's economic relations with her colonies, viz., the old economic order pursued prior to the Industrial Revolution and the new economic system that evolved after it. The rise of British power in India was the result of the development of that phase of capitalism that came about post the Industrial Revolution. This occurred in the nineteenth century.

The Old Order

The old economic system prevalent in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been largely national in character in which

one nation could benefit only at the cost of another. Consequently, imports were checked by heavy protective tariffs while exports were stimulated by bounties on production or export and by retaining the exclusive possession of colonies as markets. The navigation laws of Britain, for example, laid down that its trade must be carried in its own ships,¹⁸ while trading companies were encouraged by the grant of monopolies for trading with specific areas. It was also believed that it was essential for the government to control the economic activities of the nation. Colonies were regarded, above all, as estates to be worked solely for the benefit of the metropolis:

The New Order

As the nineteenth century dawned and progressed, several factors combined to create a new impetus among the European powers for colonial expansion. This imperialism, largely the result of the new economic order produced by the Industrial Revolution, initially took place in Britain and soon spread to the rest of Europe. It was indeed a period of momentous economic change. There was growing demand for raw materials and food while new markets were developed to cater to the increased production. Thus, by the end of the century, the whole world was knit in a globally interdependent economy. As a result, colonies began to acquire new value and a fresh scramble occurred among the great powers for the unoccupied territories of the world. The general belief gained ground that the acquisition of colonies was a prerequisite towards recognition as a great power. Nationalism became very aggressive and patriotism developed from the love of one's own country into the expansion of its territorial limits.

The Hunt for Colonies

The European powers began to actively look for colonies. Their technique of incursion was almost identical throughout the world. The arrival of traders or missionaries heralded the beginning. Their activities often led to trouble which made official protection necessary. From there it developed gradually to a sphere of influence, then to a protectorate and finally, to full economic and political control of the country. Of all the European powers, Britain took the lead in colonial expansion. During the nineteenth century she built an empire that was

the largest under a single ruler. It comprised one-fourth of the world's habitable area with one-fourth of the world's human population.

Factors that Helped Britain's Colonial Expansion

Britain's rapid colonial expansion was helped by many factors like:

- The rapid mechanisation of her modes of production due to the Industrial Revolution. This was possible because it had an accumulation of capital amassed from its trade with colonies like India. England had made large profits out of the products brought from India and its other colonies and was the foremost distributor of these goods in Europe. She, therefore, was in a position to invest in industries and wait for returns.
- Its banking sector was highly organised and made this capital easily obtainable.
- Wealthy individuals who were also eager to enter into partnerships with inventors.¹⁹

Britain thus became an active participant in the new imperialism. In India, the East India Company had already laid the groundwork by establishing trading posts in coastal areas. Trade gradually led to economic control, and finally to political control.²⁰ The general result was that large areas were acquired and opened up rapidly and new markets and sources of raw materials exploited at very little cost to the Imperial government. This lucrative hinterland of Britain increased her appetite for more and more territories and she looked around for expansion in the direction of virgin land. It was in this context that British interest in Assam developed.

The Burmese invasions changed the whole character of the Company's relations with Assam. The hitherto primarily commercial motive gradually began to develop political overtones. This became all the more pronounced during the Burmese War and the years following the Treaty of Yandabo. Indeed, the year 1826 is a very important landmark in the history of Assam. It witnessed the final collapse of the Ahom monarchy that had ruled Assam for over six centuries and marked the entry of the British who stepped in to fill the political void in the region. In a sense it was a beginning: the beginning of the transition from the medieval to the modern age.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. M'cosh, wrote that a large boat took between six and seven weeks to reach Gauhati from Calcutta though the post, which was conveyed in small canoes, rowed by two men (who were relieved every fifteen or twenty miles), reached Gauhati in ten days. J. N. M'cosh, *Topography of Assam*, Calcutta, 1837, p. 82.
2. J. Rennell, *Journals 1764-67*, cited in S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*, Guwahati 1949, (Reprint), 1974, p. 62.
3. The Ahoms were wary of foreigners and looked upon them with suspicion. They apparently feared, that these 'intruders' might conspire to create disruption in the kingdom.
4. The Pitts India Act had explicitly declared that 'to pursue schemes of conquest and extension of dominion in India are measures repugnant to the wish, honour and policy of this Nation.'
5. Foreign Department, Miscellaneous Records No. 8, Memoranda i, No. 7. Welsh was accompanied, among others, by Lietenant Robert MacGregor as Adjutant, Ensign Thomas Wood as Surveyor and John Peter Wade as Assistant Surgeon.
6. According to Ahom tradition, it was essential for an aspirant to the throne to be free from any physical scar.
7. H. K. Barpujari ed., *An Account of Assam and Her Administration*, Guwahati, 1988, pp. 54-5.
8. H. K. Barpujari ed., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. II, Guwahati, 1993, pp. 258-9.
9. H. H. Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War*, No. 25, Calcutta, 1827.
10. *Ibid.*, No. 22 (d).
11. For full text of the Treaty see C. U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads*, Vol. XII, (Reprint), Delhi, 1983, pp. 230-3.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 405, 408.
13. *Ibid.*, Appendix B.
14. For full texts of treaties see C. U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads*.
15. A. C. Banerjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India*, (Third edition), Calcutta, 1964, p. 355.
16. Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War*, No. 32.
17. E. Gait, *A History of Assam*, (Third edition) Calcutta, 1963, p. 342.
18. If foreign ships could not frequent her colonies, and if colonial ships could not trade with foreign countries, then the manufactured goods were bound to come through England; and tobacco, spices and sugar actually came to England.
19. L. C. A. Knowles, *The Industrial and Commercial Revolutions in Great Britain during the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1927, Chapter 2.

20. The English had come as traders and later became armed traders. Soon they needed soldiers to defend their settlements, and, as the Mughal Empire disintegrated, spheres of influence became necessary if the Company was to survive. Slowly, the aim of empire building was imposed on the initial quest for trade.

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