PLANTER-RAJ TO SWARAJ

FREEDOM STRUGGLE AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN ASSAM 1826-1947

Amalendu Guha

PEOPLE'S PUBLISHING HOUSE

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May 8, 1990

In memory of my Father
Jaminisundar Guha (1873-1950)
of Manipur

Foreword

The Indian Council of Historical Research was presented with a request from the Minister for Education and Social Welfare, which he had received in 1972 from Shri Raj Bahadur, then Union Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, and Shri K.C. Pant, then Union Minister for Home Affairs, for bringing out a series of books on the role of the central and state legislatures during our freedom struggle to mark the 25th Anniversary in 1972 of India's attainment of independence.

The Council gladly accepted this assignment, and Professor Manoranjan Jha's work on *Role of the Central Legislatures in the Freedom Struggle* and Dr Amit Kumar Gupta's book on *North West Frontier Province Legislature and Freedom Struggle* 1932-47 have already been published as a result of its efforts. The third book to come out in this series is the present work on Assam Legislature by Professor Amalendu Guha, Professor of Economic History at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. The book has been written in consultation with an Editorial Board for the entire project, under the chairmanship of Professor S. Gopal, but like all other authors in this project Dr Guha has been given complete academic freedom to express views based on his research.

Professor Guha has not only presented a detailed account of the evolution of the Provincial Legislature of Assam in the context of general political developments in the Province, but has also provided valuable background for an understanding of the colonial

socio-economic structure. He has discussed the politics of anti-imperialism both in the legislature and outside it, and marked shifts within the national movement in economic objectives and political ideas, particularly in the context of peasant, and labour problems. Thus, the book, which is based on massive research, may be read as an authentic record of the role of Assam in the development of the Indian national movement, with a focus not restricted only to the leading party in the national movement, but also embracing other trends and elements, all of which together struggled in their own ways for liberation from colonialism.

The author has utilised the broadest possible range of sources in the relevant regional languages in local archives and private collections, and given a very full bibliography of published literature. Also of note is his use of quantitative data and statistics in elucidating the role of colonialism in stultifying the development of society and economy in northeast India, as well as the role of anti-colonial elements in endeavouring to break through the colonial strangle-hold.

1977 is the centenary year of the birth of Tarunram Phookan, a leading nationalist of old Assam. Like Chittaranjan Das in Bengal, he mobilised the middle class of Assam to combat imperial authority both within the legislature and outside it. It is fitting that this volume, which recounts the nature of the broader mobilisation that followed, should be published in this year.

I thank the author and all those who assisted him in completing the work, as well as the members of the Editorial Board for scrutinising the manuscript of this book in detail and Professor Syed Nurul Hasan, the Education Minister, for sponsoring this project.

R. S. Sharma
Chairman
Indian Council of Historical Research

New Delhi
1 January 1977

Introduction to Reprint

A thoroughly revised second edition of the present work was what I originally contemplated. Years passed by after the first edition ran out of circulation, yet I could not extricate myself from my day-to-day research commitments to do the job. Nor is there any more hope left that I shall be able to fulfil my ambition soon enough. It is under such compelling circumstances that I have at last agreed to a reprint being brought out to meet the standing demand for the book, accumulated over the years.

Finally, I must thank both the Indian Council of Historical Research and the People's Publishing House (P) Limited for making this reprint possible. My thanks also go personally to Professor Irfan Habib and Shri N.C. Chatterjee for impressing on me that the book should be made once more available to the reading public.

Centre for Studies in
Social Sciences, Calcutta
Calcutta
1 May 1988

Amalendu Guha

A Sinha
May 8, 1990

Prologue

This book on Assam—i.e. present Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram—comes alphabetically first in a series in which the role of legislatures in the history of the freedom struggle and political change in the eleven Provinces of British India will be examined. I have stretched the period a little backward to begin from 1826, the year of British annexation of Assam, and have carried the analysis to 1950. The Frontier Tracts (present Arunachal) and the State of Manipur, which had some links with Assam, are however outside the scope of this study.

Historiography of modern Assam, as it stands today, practically stops at 1858. E.A. Gait, for example, devotes less than forty of the four hundred and odd pages of his book—a lucid work in the tradition of imperialist historiography—to the post-1858 period. He stops short of the Non-cooperation era even in its second edition that was brought out in 1926. K. N. Dutt's *Landmarks of the Freedom Movement in Assam* is but a bare 136-page outline, useful but inadequately documented. No other publication on the subject deserves mention here. Assam is one of those provinces where even an officially sponsored history of the local freedom movement has yet to come out. This lag therefore has forced me to look also for the wood so that I may not miss the trees. Chronicling has received no less importance in this study than analysis, particularly while dealing with the last phase of the freedom struggle.

My chief task has been to build the narrative chronologically for the century and a quarter under review and, at the same time, to treat it thematically as well. In the resultant periodisation, four distinct periods have emerged. Three chapters, one each, cover the first three periods—the years 1826-73, 1874-1905 and 1906-1920. The major task in these chapters has been to provide the background for an understanding of the colonial socio-economic structure that was shaken in the political turmoil of the Gandhi epoch to follow. In the remaining five chapters, covering this last period of about three decades, the emphasis has somewhat shifted from society and economy to the politics of anti-imperialism both in the legislature and outside it. The shifts within the national movement in political ideals and economic objectives, particularly in the context of the peasant and labour problems, have not been lost sight of.

The main focus, after 1905, has been on all political activities, centering round or opposed to the legislature that existed for the province. Hence, in my choice of source materials, over fifty thousand printed pages of relevant legislative debates and interpellations have been more important than unpublished government records for the same period. These have, of course, been supplemented by other usual primary and secondary sources. Proceedings of legislatures have one advantage that they carry not only the official but also the other versions of the events on record. Though not fortunate enough in my search for local private papers, I was nevertheless able to unearth a bundle of such papers labelled "leaders' correspondence" in the APCC archives of the Congress Bhavan, Gauhati. I have amply used this material to make up for the dearth of official records for the decade 1937-47 to which it relates.

Individual freedom fighters or legislators, not receiving adequate coverage in this book, were not necessarily persons with a marginal role in the history of the period under review. This only means that either the necessary information was not available or the relevant micro-details were not found necessary for answering the questions raised.

Writing about this pre-independence decade has been the most difficult, yet exciting part of my task. Many of the actors and witnesses of this stormy phase of our history are still present amidst us, with all their sensitivities to what concerns them. This makes the use of a range of relevant materials for this study all the more difficult. Despite this limitation, I have not been shy of devoting as much

as one-third of the space of this book to this decade. I am nevertheless aware that, for a proper assessment of the events of this decade, more research will have to be conducted at the grass roots level. Mine is a spade work in anticipation of future research.

Errors of fact or interpretation, if any, remain mine alone.

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
Calcutta
1 January 1977

Amalendu Guha

Acknowledgement

I am honoured that the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, which commissioned me for this study has accepted it for publication. For financial support during the three and a half years I worked on the book, I have a debt of gratitude both to the Indian Council of Historical Research as well as to the Centre for studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, I joined in November 1973. For promoting my release and for facilitating my taking up of the new assignment, my thanks are due to the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona.

I am grateful to Arvind N. Das, currently of the National Labour Institute, New Delhi and Manorama Sharma, of the Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam, for the research assistance they provided, each for six months, for collecting, arranging and even assimilating the materials. Thanks are due for their ungrudging help in the matter of access to some materials to Pabitrakumar Deka, A. C. Bhuyan and Homen Bargohain of Gauhati; and to Arun Ghosh, Kulanath Gogoi, Govindalal Ray and Anuradha Chanda of Calcutta. I take this opportunity also to thank my wife, Anima Guha, for sharing with me some of the stresses and strains that the writing of this book involved. The Cartography Section of my Centre is to be collectively thanked for preparing the map accompanying this book.

My friends and colleagues, S. K. Chaube, Amales Tripathi, Safiq Naqvi, M.S. Prabhakar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Bipan Chandra and Barun De read and commented on portions of the manuscript.

Their scrutiny helped me avoid certain errors of judgment and style at the stage of revision. Barun and Bipan influenced considerably the rewriting of my final chapters, through their seminal ideas on some important aspects of Indian nationalism. For editorial help at the final stage, I am indebted to A. K. Gupta and N. C. Chatterjee of the Indian Council of Historical Research. My thanks go to my countless friends on the staff of various libraries at Poona, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Shillong, Gauhati and Tezpur I visited in course of my work. My thanks also go to Sudhamay Sengupta, R. Girija and Gouri Banerjee who typed the manuscript.

Contents

TABLES :

Chapters 1—8

Appendices

A Note on Spelling

In matters of transliteration and the spelling of proper names, absolute consistency has not been aimed at. Anglicised spellings of several surnames (e.g., Barua, Borooah, Baruah, Barooah; Bardaloi, Bardoloi; Phookan, Phukan etc.) are varied in usage; such spellings in a person's name often underwent changes even within his or her own life-time. Hence, what has been attempted in this book is only to maintain the same spelling of a proper name all through, except in quotes.

In the matter of transliteration from Indian languages, all borrowed English words (e.g., 'Congress') have been retained in their original form, and a simplified system of transliteration has been improvised to avoid diacritical marks.

Abbreviations

ACOER	Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (1925)
Ad. Rep.	Administration Report (Annual)
AICC	All India Congress Committee
AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
ALAP	Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings
ALCP	Assam Legislative Council Proceedings
ALECR	Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22
AOC	Assam Oil Company Limited
APCC	Assam Pradesh (Provincial) Congress Committee
APTUC	Assam Provincial Trade Union Congress
AS	Assam Secretariat Files (at Assam State Archives, Shillong; now shifted to Gauhati)
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPI	Communist Party of India
DCC	District Congress Committee
DIR	Defence of India Rules
DPI	Director of Public Instruction
DHAS	Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (Govt. of Assam, Gauhati)
EBALCP	Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council Proceedings

GI	Government of India
IAR	*Indian Annual Register*
ICS	Indian Civil Service
IESHR	*Indian Economic and Social History Review*
ILCP	Imperial (Indian) Legislative Council Proceedings
Imp. Gaz.	*Imperial Gazetteer of India*
INA	Indian National Army
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
IPC	Indian Penal Code
ITA	Indian Tea Association
K.W.	Keep with (Certain confidential Home Dept. files were so marked)
L.S.G.	Local Self Government
M.L.C.	Member, Legislative Council
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
NNC	Naga National Council
OEHFM	Office of the Editor of the History of Freedom Movement, Govt. of Assam
Pol. Proc.	Political Proceedings
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RIAF	Royal Indian Air Force
RIN	Royal Indian Navy
RPC	Rajendra Prasad Collection
RTC	Round Table Conference
T. E.	Tea Estate

1

Under the Umbrella of the Bengal Presidency—1826-1873

BRITISH CONQUEST OF NORTH EAST INDIA

It was since the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal that the East India Company came into direct contact with the medieval kingdoms of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam as well as the tribal communities of their adjoining hills. These sparsely-populated territories did not yet have enough economic worth or surplus revenue-yielding potentiality to attract the attention of British annexationists. They had therefore been left undisturbed, until the Burmese invasion (1817-24) of Assam and the Cachar plains brought an end to this policy of indifference. In November 1823 David Scott, the magistrate of Rangpur and Civil Commissioner for the district of Goalpara and Garo Hills (formed in 1822), was also appointed Agent to the Governor-General on the Northeast Frontier of Bengal. "We have not come (here) to quench our thirst for the conquest of your kingdom", proclaimed a manifesto published in Bengali on behalf of the interventionist British-Indian troops, "but to destroy our enemies, interested as we are to protect ourselves".[1] The Burmese were finally forced to surrender their claim over Assam under the Treaty of Yandabo, 1826.

During the following decade and a half, the kingdoms of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam, along with their dependencies, and all the petty, independent tribal states of the Khasi Hills were annexed. Further annexation of the remaining hills was subsequently completed step by step in the face of stiff tribal resistance. The North

1. Quote from *Samachar Darpan* (In Bengali, Serampore), 17 April 1824; translation ours.

Cachar Hills were organised into a separate administrative unit, after their subjugation was completed by 1854. A part of the Naga Hills was annexed in 1866; the country of the Lhota Nagas, in 1875; of the Angami Nagas, in 1878-80; and of the Ao Nagas, in 1889. The Garo Hills, long under loose political control, was made a separate district in 1869; but the Garos could not be brought under full control until 1873. The Lushais (Mizo) were brought under control during the years 1871-89, but the formation of the Lushai Hills district took place only in 1898. The boundaries of the British power in Northeast India were in fact always moving, always in a flux, right upto its last days in India.[2] Nevertheless, the British province, that came to be known as Assam, took shape more or less by 1873.

The Raj appeared on the scene in the guise of saviours of the people suffering from a situation of chaos, lawlessness and oppression that had persisted since the 1770s, starting with the Moamaria Civil War and culminating in the Burmese occupation of the Assam plains (1817-1824). But it soon dawned on the people that the Raj had come to stay. Its purpose was to turn Assam into an agricultural estate of tea-drinking Britons and to transform local traditional institutions in such manner as to suit the colonial pattern of exploitation. People found out from experience that the new masters' immediate concern was the extortion of land-revenue even to the detriment of the welfare of their subjects. After assuming the charge of Assam from his predecessor in 1832, Robertson found "...its inhabitants emigrating, its villages decaying and its revenue annually declining". The Court of Directors were grieved to learn that "a dreadful extortion had begarred the ryots and rendered a large portion of Assam waste in which up to our conquest such a thing as jungle was hardly to be seen".[3]

2. For details of annexations, E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (2nd edn., Calcutta/Simla, 1926)—Chapters XIV and XV; S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826* (Gauhati, 1949); R. M. Lahiri, *The Annexation of Assam : 1824-54* (Calcutta, 1954); H. Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* (Shillong, 1967); P. C. Kar, *British Annexation of Garo Hills* (Calcutta, 1970); N. K. Barooah, *David Scott in North-East India: A Study in British Paternalism* (New Delhi, 1970).
3. Quotes are respectively from *Political Proceedings*, 23 July 1832, No. 90 and the letter from the Court of Directors, No. 14 of 1834, both cited by Lahiri, n. 2, pp. 225 and 235.

PEOPLES' RESISTANCE TO THE CONQUERORS

The Early Phase of Resistance

The old aristocracy that had lost its offices of profit was the first to react violently to the alien rule. The rebellions of Gomdhar Konwar and Rupchand Konwar in 1828 and 1829, respectively, were but attempts at a palace revolution by pretenders to the throne. These were quickly suppressed. For his role in the 1829 rebellion, Peali Barphukan was executed. The Singphos, a tribe on the Burma border, too, raised the banner of revolt during the years 1830-31. They were in touch with the organisers of the first rebellion and with the Khasi resistance leaders. However, it was the British ban on their slave-hunting operations in Assamese territory that had actually led them into this infructuous revolt. The Khasi War of Independence (1829-33), l d by U. Tirot Singh at the head of an alliance of the petty Khasi republics, was on the other hand, a protracted resistance movement of the entire people, employing guerilla tactics of warfare. Together with their people, the Khasi chiefs fought valiantly against the British, but had ultimately to surrender before superior arms.[4]

Captain A. White visited the Khasi country in connection with settling some succession dispute there in 1826. He was much impressed when he witnessed how the Khasi tribal democracy functioned. He had then seen an assembly of three to four hundred people in session, who "were entitled to vote on the question". While narrating this experience three years later, he wrote: "... their debates were conducted with much spirit and animation for 2 days and with an order, decorum and apparent courtesy which I have not seen surpassed in any European Society". Even as the hostilities started, White recognised in the Khasis

> "a people likely to show the same stubborn independence and hatred of foreign domination ...which the character of their Government was calculated to foster, being apparently founded on an extensive popular basis, the power of the Rajah being apparently checked by an aristocracy of a widely extended nature bordering upon democracy".[5]

4. Lahiri, n. 2, chapter III, particularly pp. 59-60. Also Gait, n. 2, pp. 301-3 and 324.
5. White to Swinton, Gauhati, 24 April 1829, *Foreign Secret*, 8 May, No. 11-12 (NAI).

National Revolt of 1857: Its Impact

The great national upheaval of 1857 also did not leave Assam untouched. Wild rumours that the end of the British rule in India was imminent spread all over the province. The Hindustani sepoys stationed at Dibrugarh and Gauhati as well as some members of the deposed local aristocracy became restive towards the close of July 1857. Contacts were established between soldiers' barracks and the followers of the Charing Raja who aspired for restoration. This was done through the efforts of Maniram Dewan (1806-58), then camping in Calcutta, and his associate Madhu Mullick, a Bengali Mukhtear. A plan was agreed upon, and preparations for the uprising went on secretly. Planters and missionaries became panicky; many of them left their posts to take shelter at Gauhati. Marwari traders and moneylenders buried their properties in apprehension of trouble. The Commissioner of Assam, in his despatch of 29 August 1857, asked the Bengal Government to send a European force "to save the province from the (impending) revolution".[6] Because of the loyalty of the Gurkha and local tribal sepoys of the Assam Light Infantry, the apprehensions were however belied. Large-scale arrests were nevertheless made. Many sepoys were court-martialled for mutiny and no less than twenty one civilians were tried and punished for treason. Maniram Dewan and Peali Barua were given death sentences. Madhu Mullick, Bahadur Gaonburha and several others were sentenced to transportation for life or long jail terms. Thus ended the attempt to dislodge the British from power in Assam. With the arrival of three 100-strong units of a British naval brigade from Calcutta, the situation further eased, much to the relief of the local administration and planters.

There could be no doubt about the national character of the attempted uprising. The persons accused of treason belonged to diverse social and ethnic groups. Yet they were able to unite together with the common objective of driving out the alien intruder and also of reducing the burden of taxation. The leader of the plot, Maniram Dewan, was a man of ability and vision. His well-argued critique of the British rule, submitted to the authorities in the early fifties, remains a remarkable political document. The bias of the leaders of the revolt was no doubt basically pro-feudal. Yet it was not altogether without a popular support. There is evidence that the

6. Cited in H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company 1826-1858* (Gauhati, 1963), p. 169; see also ibid, pp. 163-79. Gait, n. 2, pp. 326-8.

workers of the Assam Company—all Assamese villagers working under contractors—struck work to fraternise with the rebels. This is evident from observations made by the planters at the time. On the arrival of the naval brigade at Sibsagar, a reception was given to them by the local planters. The Calcutta Board of Directors of the Assam Company, in this connection, reported on 2 March 1858 as follows:

> "...whilst our private servants were cheerfully obedient to our co-operative proceedings with Government in the maintenance of order, the independent contractors for cultivating our lands, *the indigenous inhabitants of the neighbouring villages held off from the performance of their contracts* on the plea that they were not to be paid, believing that the Europeans 'were to be cut up'; so far from aiding Government in suppressing revolt, they remained utterly passive, many sympathising with their conspiring Rajah and the disaffected Seepoys. *Had an outbreak occurred, there can be little doubt that they would have sided with the rebels*". (emphasis ours).

The planters might have exaggerated their distrust of the natives. But the fact remains that the contractors and their labour gangs struck work and non-cooperated with Europeans in the maintenance of order at the crucial hour. Madhuram Koch, who was the leader of this labour strike, was sentenced to seven years' rigorous imprisonment on 30 January 1858.[7] A few months after the suppression of the revolt, when stories of assaults on respectable persons, the slaughtering of their cattle, arson and such other incidental outrages committed by British sailors of the naval brigade at Dibrugarh were reported in the press, a correspondent wrote to the editor of the *Hindoo Patriot* on 25 September 1858:

> "It appears from their manners and expressions that they, as if instruments of torture and cruelty, are employed to bend the unbroken spirits of a newly acquired territory to the yoke of subjection".[8]

7. Quote from an extract in H. A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company 1839-1953* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 96. For information on Madhuram, see B. Sharma, *The Rebellion of 1857 vis-a-vis Assam* (Gauhati, 1957), pp. 40 and 75; also by the same author, *Maniram Dewan* (In Assamese, Gauhati 1950), pp. 185-6.
8. *Hindoo Patriot* (Calcutta), 21 October 1858.

Peasant Struggles of a New Type

Two other uprisings of a local nature took place in the early sixties —one in the Jaintia Hills and the other in the plains of Nowgong— in the wake of a series of new taxation measures.

In the Jaintia Hills, people were not accustomed to pay any kind of money-tax in the past. When a house tax and the stamp duty were introduced in 1860, they rose in open rebellion. The revolt was put down with an iron hand; but people lay low for the time-being only. A fresh levy of the new Income Tax of 1860—insignificant though it was in its incidence locally—made the people apprehensive of further imposts. The introduction of the Licence Tax in January 1862 and attempts at confiscation of even ceremonial weapons of the people by a brutalised police force finally led to a more serious outburst of revolt in the same month. Led by their traditional chiefs, the Khasi people of the Jaintia Hills stood as one man. Two Sikh regiments and an elephant battery were moved into the hills, but the people "though armed with bows and arrows, fought bravely for their independence".[9] They did not surrender until November 1863.

The increase in land-revenue on the dry crop lands in 1861 was much resented to in Nowgong as in the three other affected districts. However, it was the 1860 ban on poppy cultivation that affected the peasant economy of Nowgong most, for it was the largest opium-producing district of Assam. The Income Tax Act, as amended in 1861, in fact did not touch a single agriculturist in Assam. Nevertheless, because of an information gap, it created misapprehensions about the Government's intentions. People knew that in the adjoining Jaintia Hills, peasants had already fought with arms against unfair taxes. At this juncture, the Bengal Government called upon its officers in Assam to report on the feasibility of a tax on betel-nut and *pan* cultivation. This led to an agitation in Nowgong, mainly in Phulaguri area inhabited by tribal people (Lalung).

In September 1861, some 1500 peasants marched to the district town. They demonstrated peacefully before the magistrate and presented a petition to him. It referred to the harm that had already been done to them by prohibiting poppy cultivation. It was prayed that no further taxes be levied on their betel-nut and *pan* gardens. The district magistrate treated the demonstrators casually and was

9. Gait, n. 2, pp. 328-9 for the quote and Bareh, n. 2, pp. 173 and 177. Also H. K. Barpujari, "Facts behind the Jaintia rebellion 1862-64", *Journal of Indian History*, 51—Part I (April 1973), pp. 141-8.

callous to their grievances. It was established through an official enquiry later that the said magistrate used to deal with ryots always in a highhanded and provocative manner and did not allow them even to enter his office compound.[10] They were even fined on several occasions for allegedly making noise within the court compound.

A *raij mel* (peoples' assembly) was thereupon held at Phulaguri in October. The assembly was scheduled to be in session for five days to ensure participation of men even from distant villages. Approximately, one thousand people assembled by 15 October. Five to six hundred people in that assembly were armed with lathis. A police party that had come to disperse it on that day was driven out, save one taken into custody by the people. By 17 October three to four thousand people assembled there. The police made yet another attempt to break up the assembly and arrested some of its leaders the same day. But after all of them having been forcibly rescued by the people, the police left the spot. Next day, a European officer, Lieutenant Singer, came with a police party and met the leading members of the assembly. They all reiterated—through a spokesman named Jati Kalita—their complaints about the ban on opium cultivation and their apprehensions about the income and *pan* taxes. They further added that, as the district magistrate had not attended to their grievances, they were contemplating in the *mel* as to the means of carrying their complaints before the higher authorities. Singer ordered them to disperse and tried to seize their bamboo lathis. He got himself inadvertently killed in this scuffle. The police force accompanying him fled in panic.

The news of Singer's death, accompanied by rumours of an intended attack on the town, reached Nowgong the same evening. The panicky district magistrate entrenched himself at the Treasury and sent a small armed force to the trouble spot. Their firing on the crowd led to several deaths. By 23 October all was quiet again with the arrival of fresh military forces from Tezpur and Gauhati. Narsingh Lalung and eight other peasant leaders, mostly tribals, were punished with long-term imprisonment or transportation. This episode of the people's heroic resistance to the increasing tax

10. This account is based on *The Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1861-62, pp. 65-67; the evidence of J. J. S. Driberg, Commissioner of Excise in Assam in the *Report of the Royal Commission on Opium*, 1893, Vol. 2, (London, 1894), pp. 300-1 and "Papers on Phulaguri Ryots", No. 891, Fort William, 31 May 1862 from Secy. to the Govt. of Bengal to Off. Commissioner of Assam, given as an appendix therein, pp. 459-60.

burden and bureaucratic mindlessness is still very much alive in folk memory as the "Phulaguri Dhawa". From this time onwards, the traditional popular institution of the *raij mel* was increasingly resorted to by the Assamese people for resisting the enhancement of land-revenue that took place periodically. The Phulaguri Dhawa was villified by colonial scribes as an uprising against the ban as such on poppy cultivation. (see Census of India, *Assam* Vol. I, 1891, page 231). But the available evidence reveals that such characterisation was a deliberate distortion of history. The Secretary to the Government of Bengal concluded that "the infliction of numerous fines on the people for their importunity in urging their grievances" on the district magistrate's attention was a major cause of the revolt. The tactless district magistrate was subsequently demoted to a lower rank, under the Lieutenant-Governor's orders.[11]

To sum up, the Assamese peasantry, unlike the Khasis, reacted to the new regime at first with mixed feelings. After half-a-century of chronic political chaos, the British measures at restoration of law and order appeared to them as a welcome phenomenon. But soon they began to feel the increasing strains of the progressive enhancement of land revenue and other taxes. The accompanying monetisation process that was suddenly enforced was also somewhat disastrous in its initial impact. The new masters ceased to collect taxes in kind or in the form of labour-rent which had been the erstwhile practice. In the given transitional situation of a deficient currency supply and extremely limited facilities of marketing farm products, this policy caused hardship and resentment. For, peasants failed to secure enough cash to pay their land tax. In the interiormost areas, even around 1850, peasants had to walk up long distances of two to three days' march to get their goods converted into cash.[12] Such a

11. Same as n. 10 and K. N. Dutt, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (Gauhati, 1958), p. 26.
See *Arunoday* (In Assemese, Sibsagar), 14 (Nov. 1861) for a comment by N. L. Farwell, condemning the uprising as futile adventurism. (We have used a later version of the spelling of the name of the journal). For a folk memory, see Benudhar Kalita, *Phulagurir Dhewa* (In Assamese, Deurigaon, Nowgong, 1961.)

12. Observation by a missionary in *Arunoday*, 9 (Jan. 1854). The scarcity of coins as circulating media of exchange continued till early fifties. For a corroboration, see T.K. Agarwala, ed., *Haribilas Agarwala Dangariivar Atmajiivanii* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1967), p. 14.
An anonymous letter published in *Samachar Darpan*, 18 June 1832, protested against the exorbitant rate of land revenue and unjust assessment. For problems of transition, see A. Guha, "Colonisation of Assam : years of transitional crisis (1825-40)", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (Delhi), 5 (June 1968), pp. 125-48.

situation naturally tended to inhibit any expansion of agricultural acreage.

PLANTER RAJ STRIKES ROOTS

Rob Peasants to Pay Planters

The Assam Company—the first joint-stock company of India to be incorporated with limited liabilities under an Act of Parliament in August 1845—was started in 1839. It remained virtually the sole planter in the field till 1850. By 1859 the Jorehaut Tea Co. and several individual enterprises started. The total number of tea estates under distinct proprietors was then fifty-one. The total acreage under tea plants in Assam proper increased from 2,311 acres in 1841 to about 8,000 acres by 1859, and the output of tea from 29,267 lbs. to more than one million lbs. However, the Assam Company still accounted for 60 per cent of the acreage.[13] Facing an acute labour shortage, the planter community urged upon the Government to further enhance the land revenue rates so that poor peasants could be flushed out of their villages to work for wages on the plantations. Yet another recommendation of theirs was to put a ban on the cultivation and sale of opium, the widespread consumption of which was believed to have made the local people apathetic to work.[14] The cultivation of poppy in Assam proper had almost trebled while the population had increased ten per cent or so under British rule between 1826 and 1853.

After some initial hesitation, Government responded favourably. A 15 to 30 per cent increase in the land revenue rates on the dry crop lands of four districts—Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Nowgong—was ordered.[15] It also put a ban on the cultivation of poppy in 1860, but the lucrative monopoly sale of north Indian opium, yielding a profit to the Government at least since 1851-52, was not discontinued. The sale price of this opium was however

13. A. Guha, "Colonisation of Assam : second phase 1840-1859", *IESHR*, 4 (December 1967), pp. 1-2. For the 1859 acreage figures, *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal*, Vol. 37 (Calcutta, 1861), pp. 33-35 and Memorandum of Campbell in *Papers Relating to the Tea Industry of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1873), Appendix D, p. 121.
14. Antrobus, n. 7, p. 99.
15. Barpujari, n. 6, p. 205. Also letters published in the *Friend of India* (Calcutta) as cited in an editorial comment of *Arunoday*, 10 (February 1860), in anticipation of the tax increase.

increased from Rs. 14 per *seer* in 1860 to Rs. 20 in 1862 and Rs. 23 by 1873.[16] People were thus forced to purchase high-priced Government opium, instead of growing it themselves. It appears that the prohibition of the cultivation of poppy—practically the only crop peasants could readily dispose off for a cash earning—and the raising of the opium price were both motivated not so much by humanitarian as by revenue considerations.

The land revenue rates were uniformly and arbitrarily doubled in 1868, throughout Assam Proper.[17] As a result of these enhanced rates implemented during the years 1868-71, the total land revenue demand there jumped up from Rs. 1001,773 in 1864-65 to Rs. 2165,157 in 1872-73. In some parts of Assam, people reacted to the new assessment by organising *raij mels* (peoples' assemblies). In Lakhimpur district, the people protested in a novel way. They surrendered so much of their land to the Government that the revised rates, though about double the previous rates in force, yielded an enhancement of only about 26 per cent in the total land revenue collection. This was at a time when the acreage under food-grains was failing to increase sufficiently to meet the rising local demand for food. Food prices were higher in Assam than in any part of neighbouring Bengal. Yet the relevant Administrative Report for the year 1871-72 commented: "The whole question whether low rates would lead to increase of cultivation is a difficult and doubtful one".[18]

Chattel Slaves Become Tenants

One of the few good things that the Raj did and was appreciated both by the planters and the people was the abolition of slavery in 1843. As an institution, slavery was not of mere marginal importance to the labour-short economy of the Brahmaputra Valley. An estimated five to nine per cent of its population appear to have been slaves and bondsmen, a considerable number of whom worked on agricultural farms. The abolition of slavery almost crippled the old

16. Barpujari, n. 6, p. 207.
Opium prices are from J. J. S. Driberg, "Appendix XXX—Historical account of the administration of opium in Assam", *Royal Commission on Opium*, 1893, Vol. 2, n. 10, p. 140.
17. The erstwhile Ahom territory, i.e., the districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Darrang and Kamrup.
18. Commissioner's order, vide letter No. 665, 14 Nov. 1868 as cited in K. C. Bardoloi, ed., *Sadaramiinar Atmajiivanii* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1960), p. 40. Also *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1872-73, p. 82 and ibid, 1871-72, p. 140.
For the reference to Lakhimpur, Mackenzie as cited in L. Barua's speech, 10 Sept., *ALCP* (1929), Vol. 9, p. 1069.

Ahom aristocracy. The Brahmin and Mahanta landowners who had long depended on their slaves and bondsmen for the cultivation of their *devottar, brahmottar* and *dharmottar* lands were also severely affected. The Brahmin slave-holders of the district of Kamrup even held a protest demonstration and submitted to the authorities a bunch of one thousand petitions seeking permission to retain their slaves and bondsmen. On the other hand, enthusiastic men like Radhanath Kataki, a Fauzdari Mohrur, were there to induce the slaves and bondsmen to address petitions to the Government for their liberation and then, to expedite action thereupon.[19]

Slavery, as an institution, was so deep-rooted in the contemporary Assamese way of life that it took decades, in the absence of a rehabilitation programme, to die out. Records do not suggest their large-scale opting out either for employment in tea gardens or as wage-labour in villages. The bulk of them appear to have emerged, in due course, under the prevailing conditions of land abundance and capital-shortage as poor tenants. The immediate aftermath of the abolition of slavery was therefore a break-up of whatever large-sized farms there had been if any at all, for lack of hired labour to take the place of slaves. In fact the process of transformation of chattel slaves into serfs and semi-serf tenants had already started long before the formal abolition of slavery. Besides, the practice of mortgaging labour to a creditor as a means of settling one's debt was never suppressed. The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859, was a new positive step towards strengthening this form of debt-slavery.

Colonisation Scheme of Jenkins

The Charter granted to the East India Company in 1833 marked the final ascendancy of the British industrial interests over the mercantile interests and had its full impact on the settlement of newly conquered Assam. The Charter, for the first time, allowed Europeans to hold land outside the Presidency towns on a long-term lease or with free-hold rights. This paved the path for a colonial plantation economy.

Even before the feasibility of tea culture in Assam had been firmly established, Francis Jenkins in his report, dated 22 July 1833, advocated for the settlement of Englishmen of capital on its

19. *Sadaramiinar Atmajiivanii*, n. 18, p. 40. See also A. Guha, "Land rights and social classes in medieval Assam", *IESHR*, 3 (Sept. 1966), pp. 230-5 for the roots of the institution.

wastelands. It appeared to him that a scheme of colonisation "offered a better prospect for the speedy realisation of improvements than any measures that could be adopted in the present ignorant and demoralised state of native inhabitants". His idea was to attract a class of European planters along with their capital who would produce sugarcane, indigo and such other plantation crops. "To obtain the full advantages that could accrue from European settlers, it appears to me", he said, "that the grants must be altogether freehold, subject to no other condition than the payment of a fixed and unalterable rate of rent and absolutely unencumbered with any stipulations in regard to ryots or sub-tenants".

Jenkins would not mind even the displacement of the local ryots from their lands through the operation of a discriminatory land revenue policy in favour of white colonists. For such a policy, according to him, would promote the long-run interests of the ryots themselves. He was afraid that "if the government assessments upon the natives were generalised and not heavy", they would not be available as tenant-cultivators under European superintendence and, therefore, the introduction of commercial agriculture would be inhibited. On the other hand, if the assessment on cultivation was heavy, the ryots would have no other alternative than working for the European capitalist farmers. Any shortfall in the total proceeds of land revenue resulting from the twin policies of squeezing the peasant holdings and granting substantial revenue concessions to planters—Jenkins believed—would be more than made up as soon as large quantities of wastelands were brought under tillage, and other improvements followed. The two premises of this colonisation thesis were: (i) that a large number of local peasants had no means to provide ploughs, seeds and cattle for themselves and (ii) that the colonists would be able to make necessary advances to the former for growing export crops.[20]

Land to the Planter: A New Slogan

The idea of introducing British enterprise, capital and skill in agriculture caught the imagination of the Board of Revenue and the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. Meanwhile the growing prospects of tea culture in Assam—the formation of the Tea Committee in early 1834, the starting of the Government Experimental Tea

20. Jenkins to Secy. to Govt. at Fort William, 22 July 1933, *Foreign Pol. Proc.*, 11 Feb. 1835, No. 90 (NAI).

Gardens in 1836 and the first successful manufacture of Assam Tea in December 1837—made Jenkins's scheme of colonisation all the more acceptable. In 1840, two-thirds of the Government Experimental Gardens were transferred to the Assam Company, rent-free for the initial years. To make the wastelands available for special cultivation on attractive terms, a set of rules were framed. These were known as the Wasteland Rules of 6 March 1838.

Wastelands on a fortyfive years' lease were offered to applicants on condition that a quarter of the area must be cleared within five years, failing which the land was liable to resumption. Indigenous aspirants were not discriminated against as such, but the Rules were apparently framed in a manner so as to exclude them from all concessional grants in practice. No grant for agricultural purpose could be made for less than 100 acres at a time and to one who did not possess capital or stock worth at least Rs. 3 per acre. Under these conditions only Europeans could avail themselves of the opportunities.[21] According to these Rules, one-fourth of a grant was to be held revenue-free in perpetuity. The remaining portion of the grant, too, was to remain revenue-free for the initial 5 to 20 years, the period varying according to the nature of the wastelands concerned, as is shown below, in a tabular form.

WASTELANDS SETTLEMENT RULES : 1838 AND 1854

Rules of 6 March 1838				*Rules of 23 October 1854*	
Three categories of Wastelands				*Irrespective of Categories of Wastelands*	
Under Grass	*Under Reeds & High Grass*	*Under Forests*	*Land Revenue per acre*		*Land Revenue per acre*
First 5 yrs.	First 10 yrs.	First 20 yrs.	Nil	First 15 yrs.	Nil
Next 6-8 yrs.	11-13 yrs.	21-23 yrs.	9 as.	16-25 yrs.	3 as.
Next 9-30 yrs.	14-35 yrs.	24-25 yrs.	Rs. 1-2 as.	26-99 yrs.	6 as.
On expiry of leases:			at per with rice lands		at per with rice lands
One-fourth of grant perpetually			revenue-free	One-fourth of grant revenue-free perpetually	

Source : Tabulated from information in B. H. Baden-Powell, The Land Systems of British India, Vol. 3. (London, 1895), pp. 410-15.

21. Revenue and Judicial letters from India and Bengal, 14 March 1837, No. 5, cited by Barpujari, n. 6, p. 212; Gait, n. 2 p. 359.

However, since the 1838 Rules did not go far in attracting European capitalists, these were revised in 1854 providing for a 99 years' lease on more liberal terms as indicated in the table. At the same time, the minimum area of land for which one could apply was raised to 500 acres. Later the limit was reduced to 200 acres and made relaxable even to 100 acres in special cases, if native applicants could satisfy the Collectors of their ability to bring ryots from outside Assam. These rules stimulated a land rush not only in Assam proper, but also in the districts of Cachar and Sylhet.

The wastelands settlement policy tempted the planters to grab more lands than what was required or what they could manage. This was because such wastelands provided them with much more resources than what land as a factor of production ordinarily denotes. They contained necessary housing materials including, in many cases, even valuable timber. Being transferable under the 1854 Rules, such lands could later be sold with an unearned profit. Above all, labourers could also be settled as tenants on the surplus lands of the plantations, like so many serfs tied to the soil. It was an additional bait to allure land-hungry tribal peasants from famine-stricken areas outside Assam to come and work at wages otherwise unattractive. Yet another motivation behind this perverse land grab policy was to keep away the prospective competitor from the neighbourhood.

To facilitate the land-grabbing, the system of fee simple grants was introduced in 1861 under which land was sold at rates ranging from Rs. 2-8 to Rs. 5 per acre. No clearance condition was attached to the fee simple grants. Leases under the former Rules were made commutable to fee simple at 20 years' purchase payable at the time of commutation. From 1862 onwards, grants were put on auction sale. From 1876 the sale of fee simple land was stopped and a new system of 30 years' leases, also on liberal terms, was introduced.[22]

About 0.7 million acres of land had been settled with the planters in Assam by 1870-71, but the area actually under tea was only 56,000 acres,—8 per cent or so thereof.[23] While the peasants paid annually Rs. 3 to Re. 1-8 annas per acre of their land holdings towards land revenue in 1870, the planters paid nothing at all for the major part

22. Gait, n. 2, pp. 359-60; Barpujari, n. 6, pp. 212-4. For the 1859 acreage figures, *Selections : Bengal Govt. Records*, 1861, n. 13, pp. 33-35.
23. Altogether 6,25,780 acres in Assam were held by the planters under concessional grants and 33,761 acres under ordinary settlement rules. *Report on the Land Revenue Administration of the Lower Province, 1870-71*, pp. 43-44.

of their holdings. They paid towards land revenue only a nominal rate of three annas to nine annas and, in rare cases, Re. 1–2 annas per acre, for the remaining part.[24] They were the biggest landlords in the countryside they dominated, but they paid the lowest average rates per acre of holdings. Not only did they employ wage-workers, but they also settled tenant-cultivators on their lands, so that in peak seasons the latter could provide them with casual labour. The planters usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the *jhum* (slash and burn) rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. They even disrupted inter-village communications by fencing in portions of the existing public roads and denying the right of way to the villagers. There were cases where cultivators' lands, not yet regularly settled, were sold as wastelands to tea companies over the heads of their occupants.[25]

Wage-Slaves on Plantations

The Assam Company in its early years paid its imported Chinese staff—some 70 workers at one stage—four to five times the wage rate paid to the corresponding categories of Assamese labour.[26] After the services of the Chinese workers were dispensed with in 1843, the local people remained practically the sole source of labour for the industry till 1859. The total labour force on Assam plantations in that year did hardly exceed 10,000 although the requirement for the province was put by the knowledgeable planters at 16,000 to 20,000 hands for current cultivation alone.[27] The most important source of recruitment was the Kachari tribe of the Darrang district. Besides, peasants of near-by villages in their slack season were also employed through contractors.

The wage-rate generally varied between Rs. 2.50 and Rs. 3.50 per month in the 1840s and early fifties, and it rose to Rs. 4 immediately after the revolt of 1857. In the absence of indentured labour till then, these wages in the given context were, on the whole, not unfair. This was because the local labour had a bargaining power. It is on record that the labour of the Assam Company struck work in 1848 and *gheraoed* the Superintendent's office to realise three months' arrears of their wages. They were able to secure an

24. Land Revenue rates on ordinary cultivation in 1870 are from Gait, n. 2, pp. 342-3. For the concessional rates see the table in the text above.
25. *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1867-68, p. 144 and ibid, 1871-72, Pt. I., pp. 143-4.
26. Antrobus, n. 7, pp. 383 and 388.
27. *Selections : Bengal Govt. Records*, 1861, n. 13, pp. 63-66 and 69-72.

assurance for no more default in payment of wages in future. Again in 1859, the Company's Kachari labour struck work for a wage increase. This time, with the help of the district magistrate, the leaders of the strike were apprehended, tried on the spot and punished on the plea that any stoppage of work before the expiry of their contract was illegal.[28] The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859, thus came to the rescue of the planters in the given situation of acute labour scarcity.

Conditions soon changed after indentured labour began to appear on the scene, and prices of wage-goods went on increasing. The labour policy of the planters and their Government was not to encourage a free labour market by offering competitive wages. Unlike the public works department and railways, the planters made the worst use of semi-feudal methods of reducing the free labourers to a kind of serfdom. In 1864, while a free labourer was able to earn a wage of Rs. 7 per month when employed by the public works department, the going rate of wages in the Assam Company's plantations was only Rs. 4 to Rs. 5. The average wage earned in many tea gardens was even as low as Rs. 3.50 per month. The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863 did not stipulate the minimum wage, but required the wage rate to be stated in the written contract. However, the actual payment was made proportionately to the amount of work done, according to a tariff of task work shown to the recruit in Calcutta.[29] Obviously the Act was passed merely for licensing recruiters and registering in-migrants —in short, to regularise the recruitment through *arkattis* (agents) that was going on for some time.

Statutory wages were laid down by the amending Act of 1865. Though the provision was formally abolished in 1870 by another amendment, it was re-enforced under the Inland Emigration Act of 1882, and the same statutory wages continued in practice upto 1901. The minimum wages so set were Rs. 5 and Rs. 4, respectively, for men and women workers above the age of 12. Child labour was to be paid Rs. 3 per month. The planters had undertaken to supply labour with rice at Re. 1 per maund. The relevant legislation merely provided for the supply of rice at a specified rate, to be included in the terms of the written contract. But once a rate was specified, it

28. Antrobus, n. 7, pp. 97-8 and 389; P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), pp. 304-6.
29. *Bengal Legislative Council Proc.*, 1865-67, p. 14. Antrobus, n. 7, p. 389.

had to be maintained. Planters soon began to violate their own undertaking and started charging around Rs. 2-8 per maund of rice supplied to labour. Thus they could lower the real wage by manipulating the stipulated price of rice. Even the nominal minimum wage could be lowered by varying the standard task. A commission of enquiry appointed in 1867 found that Rs. 3 per month was a fairly common earning for men, and that in most gardens minimum wages were not earned. There were even instances where the wage payment was kept in arrears for as long as six months.[30]

The Act of 1865 prescribed nine hours of work per day and six days per week. It also laid down that a contract must not extend beyond three years. But, for lack of proper inspection, these provisions of the Act were not observed. So was the case with the provision for a hospital in every garden. The afore-mentioned commission of enquiry found that, generally speaking, the protective clauses had broken down.[31] Desertion on the part of the worker was made criminally punishable under the Act, and even continued 'laziness' on his part was a criminal offence. The planter was empowered in his own district to arrest without warrant any worker alleged to have absconded from his tea garden, and this privilege he enjoyed right upto 1908.

Under the Amendment Act of 1870, the *sardari* system of recruitment was recognised, though not allowed to replace forthwith the *arkatti* (licensed recruiter) system. From that time till 1915, both the methods of recruitment were in vogue, side by side. Yet another amendment passed in 1873 permitted free recruitment outside the provisions of the Act of 1865, provided that the contract did not extend beyond one year. As the penal clauses could not be imposed on the labourers so employed, planters were not at all interested in this mode of recruitment. However, this provision indirectly legalised their old practice of inducing time-expired emigrant labourers to enter into fresh contracts under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (1859).[32]

By the mid-sixties, the policy of recruitment of labour from other provinces was well under way. Available early labour statistics are

30. Secy. to Govt. of Bengal to Secy. to GI, Home Dept. 3 Dec. 1866 and Agent to the G. G. and Commissioner of Assam to Secy. to Govt. of Bengal, 21 March 1867, *Assam Proc. Legis. Dept.*, Govt. of Bengal, August 1867, No. 15. *Report of the Commissioners on the Tea Cultivation of Assam*, 1868, p. 50.
31. Griffiths, n. 28, pp. 261-71.
32. Ibid, pp. 272-4.

imperfect. Nevertheless they are adequate to show the change that was going on in the ethnic composition of the labour force. Of a total plantation labour force of 34,433 in Assam proper, as reported by the Bengal Administrative Report for 1867-68, 22,800 or two-thirds were imported labour; and only 11,633 or one-third local. The total number of outside recruits, net of all wastages by way of deaths, desertion etc., stood approximately at 24,000 in Assam proper and 20,000 in Cachar on 31 December 1872.[33] Living far away from their homes and hearths and contract-bound, these labourers were undoubtedly the most easily exploitable and exploited section of the people.

Conditions of recruitment were inhuman. During the period of two years from 15 December 1859 to 21 November 1861, the Assam Company brought 2,272 recruits from outside of whom 250 or 11 per cent died on the way. Of a total of 2,569 recruits who were sent down the Brahmaputra in two batches during the period from 2 April 1861 to 25 February 1862, as many as 135 died or got drowned and 103 absconded. Of 84,915 recruits for Assam between 1 May 1863 and 1 May 1866, 30,000 died by 30 June 1866. This high mortality did cost the planters. For the price charged by contractors per recruit ranged from Rs. 12 to Rs. 20.[34] Men, women and children were enticed, even kidnapped, and traded like cattle; absconders were hunted down like runaway slaves. Under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859, Sections 490 and 492 of the Indian Penal Code (1860) and the Labour Act of 1863, as amended in 1865, 1870 and 1873, runaway workers could be punished by the Government alone. Yet the planters themselves generally disciplined such workers, inflicting upon them punitive tortures of all kinds. For labour was too precious to be sent out of their tea gardens to police and jail custody.[35]

MODERN POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: BEGINNINGS

Threshold of Modernisation

It was during the immediate pre-British period, 1770-1826, that the

33. *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1867-68, p. 204 and ibid, 1872-73, p. 390.
34. Note by J. W. Edgar, Off. Junior Secy. to Govt. of Bengal, 11 Sept. 1873 in *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*, 1873, p. XIX. *Proc. of Legis. Dept.*, Govt. of Bengal, 1863, No. 15-18.
35. Griffiths, n. 28, pp. 269-73; D. Chaman Lal, *Coolie : The Story of Labour and Capital in India*, Vol. 2 (Lahore, 1932), p. 5.

Assamese people had taken to the cultivation of poppy and the consumption of opium. During that period, their territory was devastated by prolonged civil wars, followed by the Burmese occupation; their population dwindled down to less than half of what it had been; their smiling fields were overtaken by jungles. In the first decade of the British take-over, these conditions continued to worsen under the burden of taxation and mismanagement. In the long run, however, the British rule made an attempt to play for some decades a developmental role, within its colonial limits. Was not the country to be prepared for meaningful, economic exploitation?

Although Jenkins's scheme failed to bring in permanent European settlements because of climatic and other reasons, European capital and immigrant Indian labour from other provinces nevertheless did settle down on the tea estates of Assam. Despite its limited linkage effects, the plantation economy also began to generate a network of secondary economic activities within three decades of its coming into existence. Administration was successfully prevailed upon by the planters to build roads and bridges and to ply steamer services on the Brahmaputra. Traders and bankers from other Indian provinces flocked to Assam and, in the absence of local business acumen, they provided the economy with the necessary, yet exploitative services of trading and banking. All these factors helped the rapid growth of the population of the Brahmaputra Valley—from an estimated one million in 1826 to about two millions by 1872—and of the economy as well. But the economic growth was almost entirely limited to its foreign-owned and foreign-managed sector. The base of exploitation for British capital was ramified and expanded. Alongside of it, missionary and administrative activities led to the founding of English schools and printing presses—an infrastructure, based on which a colonial bastard bourgeois culture could now germinate.

Dewan and Dhekial-Phukan: Two Trends

The beginnings of modern political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley can be traced from 1853, when Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) submitted their memorials to A. J. Moffat Mills who had come to enquire into the conditions of the province and to recommend measures for their improvement.[36] Despite his early collaboration with the British, Maniram—the last of

36. For the full text of the memorials, A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (Calcutta, 1854)—appendices.

the old aristocrats—had turned an extremist and had by then taken an anti-British stance. On the other hand, born in an enlightened Brahmin landowner family and educated in the Hindu College of Calcutta, Anandaram believed in the regenerative role of British rule and remained a loyal Government servant until his death. These documents reveal two opposite trends in the new political consciousness that was emerging. But both reflected on certain popular grievances that were going to dominate Assam politics for a century to come. Hence, the thoughts contained in them need a careful assessment, in the context of the times.

In one of his two memorials, Dewan pleaded for the restoration of the Rajah's domain in upper Assam as a Protectorate, which—once conceded in 1833—was finally resumed in 1839 on charges of maladministration. He resented the reduction of the upper and landed classes to the most abject and hopeless state of misery through the abolition of their offices, the liberation of their slaves and their unprecedented subjection to the assessment of land revenue. He protested against the appointment of several "Bengalees from Sylhet" and Marwaris as mauzadars when a number of respectable Assamese were already out of employ. It was pointed out by him that by the introduction of new customs, "innumerable courts, an unjust system of taxation and the objectionable treatment of the Hill Tribes, the consequence of which has been a constant state of warfare, . . . neither the British Government nor their subjects have gained any benefit". It was charged that the continued sale of *abkari* opium by the Government had made the people unfit for agriculture, and that the discontinuation of the puja at *Kamakhya* had invited calamities upon the country.

However, the memorial was not blind to the good aspects of British rule in Assam. It noted that by stopping such cruel punitive practices as the mutilation of one's limbs and the forcible abduction of virgins from private homes, by removing all way-side transit duties and by abolishing the system of forced labour for keeping roads clear for the Government, "the British Government has earned for itself inestimable praise and renown".

In course of the memorial, both an immediate stop to the sale of monopoly opium and a phased programme of gradual prohibition of poppy cultivation within twenty years were recommended. A cheaper and simpler system of administering justice through

panchayats was also advocated, alongside the restoration of native rule under British protection, at least in a part of Assam.

Dewan's political platform was no doubt a revivalist one, betraying his orthodoxy and basic loyalty to an outmoded social system. Nevertheless, he was not totally blind to the needs for change and for opening up of the country for exploitation of its resources. He admitted that the abolition of slavery and the introduction of modern schools would do good to the common people. Even though no concessional land grants were made available to him, he came forward to establish two small proprietory tea gardens of his own, which were confiscated by the state after his execution for treason in 1858. Incidentally, the second notable Assamese tea planter was Rosheswar Barua, who established about half a dozen tea gardens in the sixties, but could not survive the tea crisis of 1866-69. In the same crisis, sixteen Indian tea gardens in Goalpara district alone were literally nipped in their buds.[37]

Dewan did not subscribe to an ideology, progressive enough even in the context of his times, nor was he a very consistent freedom fighter throughout his career. But because of his role in the revolt of 1857, it is the anti-imperialist image of his that lives through peoples' memory—in folk-songs and modern patriotic literature. He had an entrepreneurial career which was objectively progressive. He was indeed a bridge between the old and the new.[38]

Dhekial-Phukan, on the other hand, was in every respect a product of the modern age of enlightenment. He got his inspiration from the contemporary 'Bengal Renaissance' and from what he read about England's material progress and Peter the Great's reforms in medieval Russia. He dreamt of days when reforms and material progress would surely dawn upon Assam. He reportedly wrote to Hemchandra Barua (1835-96), a confirmed atheist and young social reformer of the day:

> "A group of people styled as Young Bengal has emerged in Bengal and some people in Assam are absorbing what is good in

37. A. K. Sharma, "Asamar cah udyogat bideshii muldhan", *Sadiniia Navayug* (In Assamese, Gauhati), 30 October 1963, p. 27. *Bengal Ad. Rep.*, 1867-68, p. 207 and ibid, 1868-69, p. 191.
38. See for details A. Guha, "Impact of Bengal Renaissance on Assam 1825-75", *IESHR*, 9 (Sept. 1972), pp. 288-304.

them, but not their vices. My mind is full of joy at the sight of this germination".[39]

One of his publications in Bengali, *Notes on Laws of Bengal*, Vol. I (Calcutta, 1855), was modelled on Blackstone's commentary on English Law Digest; it dealt with such topics as principles of morality and law, human rights, liberty of the person and master-servant relations. This book and his articles in the Assamese periodical, *Arunoday* (1846-83), reveal his faith in the bourgeois values of life.

The memorial Dhekial-Phukan submitted also espoused the cause of the persecuted Assamese language. It had lost its rightful place to Bengali in local schools and courts in 1837 on the false ground that it was a dialect of the latter language. The battle for due recognition of Assamese as a distinct and separate language was carried on through Dhekial-Phukan's long-drawn efforts, alongside those of the American Baptist missionaries. As a result of the agitation, Assamese was finally recognised for use in courts and schools of Assam proper several years after his death, under the Bengal Government order of 19 April 1873. Bengali, of course, co-existed side by side. Besides, due to paucity of suitable books in Assamese, text-books published in Bengali continued to be in use in all high schools in the plains, at least for another two decades.

In the same memorial, Dhekial-Phukan also laid bare the existing evils of the administration and advocated for an increase in the number of mofussil courts and native judges, with enlarged powers for the latter. Like Dewan he, too, recommended the lightening of the tax burden and simplification of the complicated procedure in the law courts. In his opinion, the Bengal system of permanent settlement of land tenure would not suit the needs of Assam.

As to the opium policy, Dhekial-Phukan warned that the replacement of locally-produced opium by *abkari* opium, sold on a monopoly basis by the Government, would not at all lead to the eradication of the evil. He rather suggested that the sale of Government opium be discontinued forthwith and that local poppy cultivation be subjected to heavy taxation—the tax being enhanced progressively from time to time. Thus, the opium policy advocated by him was basically the same as Dewan's.

39. Quote from Padmanath Gohain-Barua, ed., *Jiivanii-Sangraha* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1969), p. 22. Translation ours.
For a biography of Dhekial-Phukan, see Gunabhiram Barua, *Anandaram Dhenkial Phukanar Jiivan-caritra* (In Assemese; 1st edn., Calcutta, 1880; 2nd edn., 1915).

New Politics: the Germination[40]

The two memorials discussed above indicate some of the major issues that churned the minds of the Assamese middle classes and peasants during the years 1853-73, by which time the so-called Bengal Renaissance had its impact on Assam. It was precisely because of this reason that, despite a conflict of interests between the immigrant Bengali babus and the indigenous *dangariyas* for administrative jobs, their mutual relations had not yet been embittered to the extent it was to be in later times. Assamese and immigrant Bengali adherents to the Brahmo Samaj had a social impact in the growing administrative townships. Gunabhiram Barua (1837-94), a pioneer of the new awakening, was attracted towards the Brahmo Samaj even before 1857, but was formally initiated to the new faith at Dhubri in 1869. True to his zeal for social reform, he married a widow in 1870 and got the marriage registered under the Act III of 1872 in December the same year. Padmahas Goswami of Jakhlabandha Satra was another important Assamese Brahmo who worte several books in Assamese in the early seventies to popularise the Brahmo movement. Yet another westernising influence on Assam was that of the resident American Baptist missionaries.

Contemporary Assamese public opinion was increasingly focused on three social evils of the day—(i) the plight of the widows of Brahmin, Kayastha and Daivajna castes, (ii) the prevalent practice of polygamy and (iii) the wide-spread addiction to opium. Intellectuals of the day boldly expressed themselves on these issues not only through the local press—there were three such periodicals in Assam proper in 1872—but also through creative literature. Educated people formed societies and circles for dissemination of scientific knowledge and ideas about social reforms. In the years 1857-59, the *Jnan-Pradayini-Sabha* (society for disseminating knowledge) was functioning at Nowgong, under the patronage of Dhekial-Phukan. Yet another society with the same name was formed in upper Assam in 1857, which held regular sunday study circles. Still earlier, towards the close of 1855, the *Asam Desh Hitaishini Sabha* was formed at Sibsagar for holding study circles every saturday. Poornananda Sharma Deka, a Mohrur in the Criminal Court, who was its secretary in September 1856, issued a circular urging upon the local people to represent their manifold grievances to the Lieutenant-Governor

40. Guha, n. 38.

Halliday, then camping in the district. It appears that the same Poornananda Mohrur was suspended from service for six months in the 1858 trial of the mutineers, for not reporting certain allegedly seditious proceedings to the Government.[41]

In 1872, the Assamese Literary Society was formed in Calcutta at the initiative of its Assamese residents. On behalf of this Society, Jagannath Barooah (1851-1907) and Manik Chandra Barooah (1851-1915), then studying in the Presidency College, submitted a memorial on 21 May 1872 to the Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, drawing his attention to the potential resources of Assam. The memorial urged upon him to connect the province with Bengal by a railway line—a proposal which was already under his consideration.[42] These activities reflected the dawning of modern political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar, by that time, were much more involved in the mainstream of Bengal politics. Nevertheless students therefrom, who were residents in Calcutta, asserted their separate identity by forming the *Shrihatta Sammilani* in 1877.

There was no official recognition of this growing political consciousness of the people even at the local level of administration. On 11 June 1852, one hundred and thirteen residents of Gauhati submitted a petition to the district magistrate for the introduction of the permissive Bengal Act of 1850 for the establishment of a municipal board. Accordingly, the first statutory municipal board came into being in 1853—an all-European board, with only three nominated members. No other board in Assam was constituted under the Act. When the question of introducing the Bengal Municipal Act of 1864 came before the Commissioner, he took the stand that Assam's prevailing social conditions did not permit the use of the Act. He asserted that Gauhati was nothing but a permanent camp of Government officials whose butlers and followers constituted the towns-people, and that Assam's towns were merely glorified villages, used as centres for policing the surrounding countryside. Nevertheless, due to insistence of the higher authorities, the Act was eventually extended to Gauhati in May 1865.

Rudimentary beginnings of local boards also had the same history. For example, the ferry fund earmarked for the construction of

41. Ibid, p. 302 and Dutt, n. 11, p. 126.
42. Extract from the memorial reproduced in P. Goswami, *Manikcandra Baruva aru teonr yug* (In Assamese, Gauhati, 1970), pp. 12-13.

roads and bridges was in every district administered by a small committee of nominated officials and non-officials. But the majority of the committee members were of course Europeans, excepting in such districts as Goalpara and Kamrup, where tea interests were minimal.[43]

At the Presidency level, Bengal had a Legislative Council formed in 1862 under the Indian Councils Act of 1861. But the representation on this Council was limited to the Bengal Division alone, to the exclusion of the Assam Division.

A SUMMING-UP AND PERSPECTIVE

The period from 1826 to 1873 was a period of transition for Assam's pre-capitalist economy into its colonial phase. British capital penetrated the economy and started building an infrastructure to sustain the exotic capitalistic set-up. Collaborating traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks from other Indian provinces came as camp-followers. Bullock carts, a novelty for the region, were introduced. The economy was monetised. The closed society was exposed to immigration of labour, new skills, new vices and new ideas. Marwari trader-cum- moneylenders monopolised the internal trade as agents of the British trading houses of Calcutta, who in turn worked for their metropolitan counterparts in London. Bengali clerks, doctors and lawyers, with the advantage of their early initiation to English education and the British-Indian administrative system, monopolised Government jobs and professions.

In this context, the new-born, rickety Assamese intelligentsia of the period found itself to be an insignificant minority in the 'urban' sector. Towns of Assam were still mere permanent camps of Government servants and traders or were just glorified villages, where non-indigenous elements constituted the overwhelmingly dominant section. This situation of a complete lack of urbanisation, alongside of the pre-capitalist production relations, was not, and could not be, rapidly altered by the new set-up. (See Appendix-I). Superimposed as it was on a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society of petty producers, the new plantation economy—subjugated to foreign capital and linked with immigrant usury and merchant capital—

43. V. Venkata Rao, *A Hundred Years of Local Self-Government in Assam* (Gauhati, 2nd edn., 1963), pp. 43-44.

could not bring in a radical transformation *within the local society itself*.[44] The start in modernisation was indeed a false one.

Under the circumstances, the extent of urbanisation that was achieved in due course was practically nil. The incipient Assamese middle class that was coming up was extremely small, weak and unconsolidated as a class. Links between the plantation economy and the surrounding peasant economy—both labour-short—remained tenuous and minimal. Except land, practically all other inputs of production for the expanding modern sector were brought from outside the province; capital and enterprise from the metropolis itself and labour from other Indian provinces. A dual economy, more precisely a multi-sectoral, plural economy, began functioning at different levels.

In such an unenviable and complex situation—a situation where tribalism and elements of feudalism persistently co-existed alongside new-born capitalist relationships—the early modern political consciousness was bound to be inhibited and get blurred by group rivalries at the court of the colonial masters. But outside it, the peasantry —traditionally unaccustomed to any kind of money taxation and now constantly in dread of the enhancement of land revenue and imposition of new taxes—kept up the smouldering fire of protest and hatred against the Raj.

The emergent middle-class took its own time under the circumstances to identify the root cause of many of the evils with Imperialism. How this happened in due course, how the safety-valve of controlled parliamentary activities was built into the political system, how sections of people got themselves increasingly involved in electoral politics, and finally how the freedom struggles fought outside the legislatures made inroads into the latter and *vice-versa*—all these will be narrated and discussed in the following chapters.

44. The pattern has been analysed in details elsewhere. See Guha, n. 12 and n. 13. Also by the same author, "Socio-Economic changes in agrarian Assam" in M. K. Chaudhuri, ed., *Trends in Socio-Economy Change in India 1871-1901* (Simla, 1967), pp. 569-622.

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A New Province *Sans* Legislature : 1874-1905

STRANGE BED FELLOWS: ASSAM PROPER AND SYLHET

The inconvenience of governing the Assam districts as a division of the unwieldy Bengal Presidency had long been recognised. Quite different local conditions and the unique position there of its European planters warranted the creation of a new province to ensure administrative efficiency. Accordingly Assam proper, together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and the other hills districts, was formed into a Chief Commissioner's province on 6 February 1874. Although vast in area, this new province with its small population of 2,443 thousands had a meagre revenue potential. To make it financially viable, the authorities therefore decided in September to incorporate into it the populous, Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet which, historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of Bengal. Even with this additional 1,720 thousand people of Sylhet, the new province was only about half as populous as the Central Provinces. The latter was then India's next least populous province.

A memorial protesting against the transfer of Sylhet on behalf of both its Hindu and Muslim inhabitants was submitted to the Viceroy on 10 August 1874. The memorialists based their protest on the cultural identity and historical association that Sylhet had with Bengal and the disadvantages of Sylhet's being yoked with a 'backward' region. They further apprehended that the district would have to put up with laws and institutions inferior to what it had been accustomed to in Bengal under the permanent settlement. The Government of India refused on 5 September 1874 to accede to their prayer. However, the petitioners obtained an assurance of no change