CHAPTER III

Early Contact with the British, Annexation of the Dimasa State and Administration

Early Contact with the British

The Dimasa kingdom, as it was bordering Sylhet in the east, had long trading relations with Bengal via Sylhet. The discovery of large numbers of coins in Sylhet has been discussed in the last chapter. The Brahmaputra and Surma vellies were two important trading routes between Bengal, Burma and China. These two routes formed a part of the South-West Silk Route facilitating trade since early the Christian era. As the Cachar plains formed an important part of the Dimasa monarchy, it had some control over the trade that passed through areas under it. In 1765 the East India Company received the diwani of Bengal. As the Company took over the diwani, it was confronted with challenges in many fronts from revenue settlements within the territories to managing relations, both commercial and political, with bordering principalities. Developments in the neighbouring regions soon attracted the attention of the EIC. Cachar attracted the notice of the East India Company in connection with a Burmese threat to Manipur soon after Plassey.¹

In 1773, Raja Krishnachandra ascended the throne of the Dimasa kingdom. He too was a religious person like Harichandra and paid no attention to the day to day affairs of the state. We have seen that the Dimasa royalty was already under the influence of

¹For details see H K Barpujari, Comprehensive History of Assam, Voll, Publication Board of Assam; Gunnel Cederlof, Founding an Empire on India's North Eastern Frontiers (1970 - 1840): Climate, Commerce, Polity, OUP, New Delhi 2013
Brahmanical Hinduism. However, they were not treated equally and the Brahmans and the other high castes would not take water from them. It is referred that one day Krishnachandra asked the Bormajumder of Bikrampur to take either the sword or glass of water, which the Raja had placed before him. The Bormajumder took the sword and said that this sword would protect his caste. Feeling insulted, the Raja called for an assembly of the Brahmans who suggested performing Hiraynagarva ceremony in 1790 for a proper position in the Hindu social fold. 'Accordingly, Raja Krishnachandra along with his brother Govindrachandra and the royal aristocracy entered the body of the gold plated statue of a cow. After emerging from the cow they were declared to have taken rebirth as pure Hindu of the Khatriya caste and the gold plate was divided by the Brahmans among themselves. (Guha: 2008: 72) The Brahmans were treated to a feast where Raja Krishnachandra and Govindrachandra served water to the Brahmans. 'The local traditions suggest that many of the Dimasa got admission to the fold of caste Hindu society through such ceremonies'. However their acceptability as Khatriya in the fold of caste Hindu society is not certain. 'There are evidences that the Brahmans who took water from Dimasa were charged with deterioration and contamination and called "Cachari-Brahman". Even the intermarriage between the two sections of the Brahmans was rejected'.

During the reign of Krishnachandra two Pirs attempted to establish their power in Khaspur. One Pir called Fherudupi reached the western border with a massive army. Without an adequate army to defend against the Pir, Krishnachandra sought military assistance from the East India Company. In the mean time many subjects fled to Srihatta or took refuge in the forest for fear of forced conversion to Islam. Krishnachandra
himself retired to North Cachar. The Company sent Kalyan Sing to suppress the Pir, who having expelled the Pir attempted to set himself up in Cachar. However this was averted with the arrival of the Collector of Sylhet. ‘This incident took place in between 1799-1800. Another Pir attempted to penetrate Khaspur through Bhuban Pahar but failed and the Pir left for Tripura through Hailakandi’. (Guha: 2008: 73)

During the reign of Krishnachandra, the Moamaria\(^2\) revolt broke out against the Ahom monarchy and a large number of Ahom subjects were given shelter by him. Particularly the Dembra of the Dimasa territory was a safe haven for the Moamoria rebels. This again soured relation with the Ahoms who demanded the repatriation of the rebels. A military face off ensued and Ahom general Haripada Dekaphukan defeated Krishnachandra and his Moamoria allies in a battle at the mouth of the Kolang River.

Krishnachandra was influenced by Hindu Vedic religion and engaged himself in construction of temples, tanks etc. ‘The Soner Mandir, temple of Khaspur was an important construction of Krishnachandra. He granted Devattor and Brahmattor lands to the Sebaits. He also granted Niskar land to Brahmans like Gopinath Sirumoni, Atmaram Bhattacharyya etc’.\(^3\) He was a patron of Saiva and Sakta faith. However he accepted the Vaishnavite faith after his marriage with Manipur princes Induprava. Krishnachandra undertook a number of pilgrimages to holy places like Navadwip, Varanasi, Mathura, Prayaga, Haridwar etc. He studied Sanskrit as well as Bengali and composed texts like Shyama Sangeet, Rasaleelamrita, Vasanta Bihar and Sri Gobinda Kirtan.

\(^2\)The Moamaria is a radical Vaishnava sect in Assam. Towards the last part, the Ahom monarchy faced a serious crisis due to the rebellion of this sect.

The Vaishnavaite movement of Sankardev also attracted the Dimasa Raja Krishnachandra. He visited Bishnudev Goswami, the Satradhikar of Dakhinpat Satra while he camped at Debar Satra at Kaliabor and engaged in religious dialogue and finally became his disciple. He donated 2090 Bighas of Debottor land to Satadhirak for the establishment of a Satra institution on the banks of river Kopili and Haria 1795, (1717 Saka) which later came to be known as Dakhinpat-Kachari Satra. A great number of Dimasa subjects converted to Vaishnavism by giving up their traditional faith. Thus Krishnachandra played a pivotal role in spreading the Vaishnavism and contributed towards the assimilation of the Dimasa into the Assamese society.

While the King was busy in religious and literary pursuits, the country suffered. Due to abstinence from the business of the state, the king could not apprehend forthcoming danger. Besides his expensive pilgrimages of Krishnachandra also drained his exchequer forcing him to seek loans from the British administration of Bengal. On the other hand, ‘relinquishing the duties of protecting the frontiers to the overlord directly affected the military strength of Cachar.’ Moreover, Krishnachandra’s marriage with the Manipuri princess, Induprava complicated the situation due to the political aspiration of his in-laws who became a part of the royal household.

Krishnachandra was succeeded by his brother Govindrachandra in 1813. His reign was an eventful and faced several internal and external pressures. The depredations and attacks of Manipuri princes, Burmese invasion and the revolt of Kohidhan and his son Tularam were major problems faced by Govindachandra. Due to these factors he had to abandon

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4 A section of people in Kampur and adjoining areas claim their Dimasa origin. They currently use caste Hindu surnames, i.e. Laskar, Mazumdar, Bora, and so on. It is said that they adopted Vaishnavism after Krishnachandra took initiation under the Satradhikar of Dakhinpat Satra and donated land for establishment of Dakhinpat Kachari Satra near Kampur.
his territory several times. Moreover external threats like Burmese aggression compelled
him to seek help from the British authority. The Burmese policy of imperial expansion
contributed to the end of the Company’s policy of laissez faire. (Barpujari: 1997: 70)

Govindrachandra tried to revive the economic condition of his state by distributing ‘titles’
to his subjects on payments. The Brahmans, Kayastha, Heedle, Patani, Nath etc, Hindu
and Muslim subjects had acquired four ‘titles’ such as Choudhary, Majumdar, Laskar
and Bhuyan. The costs of these titles were Rs. 100, Rs. 50, Rs. 25 and Rs. 15
respectively. The Raja also issued a Farman by mentioning the names of the title holders.
After two years, he issued an order called Avaya to many people. Such departmental titles
were Bara Khelma, Majumdar, Laskar and Bar Bhuyan, Suta Khelma, Nader Majumdar,
Laskar and Bhuyan etc. Through these efforts, he sought to enhance his finances. (Guha:
2008: 84) Fiscal austerity was introduced by reducing the salary and privileges of his
officers.

However, Govindachnadra fell prey to circumstances and faced many crises during his
reign, both internal and external. Govindrachandra appointed Kohidhan as in-charge of
the hilly tract of the Dimasa state. But Kohidhan revolted to declare his independence and
was assassinated by Govindrachandra. The banner of revolt was carried by Tularam the
son of Kohidhan who commanded a huge army composed of his hills subjects.
Govindrachandra’s effort to quell this uprising did not meet any success and the conflict
continued until it was mediated by Scott at the end of the Burmese invasion. But
Govindachandra had to part with territories to Tularam causing him loss in revenue. Even
Tularam continued to carry out sporadic depredations into the territory of Govinda
Chandra through Govinda Ram.
Another version of the story on Tularam Senapati, prevalent among the Dimasas of North Cachar Hills, informs us that Tularam Senapati was not a self-styled commander, but appointed by Krishnachandra due to his military skill. It is said that during a military expedition at Nagaon, he is said to have met with a wild elephant that bowed down raising its trunk before Tularam. Though this incident was regarded auspicious, Govindachandra opined ‘before his brother Krishnachandra that as the wild elephant saluted Tularam, the latter would try to capture the throne in due course’ and advised the Raja to put Tularam to death. ‘Krishnachandra did not believe this and told Tularam about Govindachandra’s view just before his death. While Govindachandra ascended the throne, Tularam left the Dimasa state for Sylhet. Tularam regrouped his armed forces and returned through Jayantiapur from Sylhet and declared his independence’.

Another problem faced by Govinda Chandra was adventurous Manipur princes who were struggling for the throne of Manipur. As a border territory, Cachar was bound to be affected by problems in Manipur. The rulers of Manipur would seek shelter in Cachar whenever they faced external aggression. Jai Sing of Manipur who had been three times earlier from his territory, had taken refuge in Cachar. The problem of succession after his death seriously affected Manipur and Cachar. One of the feuding princes sought Burmese help for securing the throne. The Brahmaputra valley was already under Burmese occupation and demanding submission of the Dimasa king as the Burmese considered the Cachar raja as a tributary of the Ahoms.

At the same time, the fugitive princes of Manipur who took refuge in Cachar, sensing the weakness of the Rajah of Cachar, got ambitious. In 1815, Govinda Chandra was given assistance of 25 sepoys to stop Chaurjit Singh from creating trouble in the border of
Cachar with the help of the Jaintia king. (Barpujari: 2007: 378) In 1817, Marjit Singh invaded Cachar and Govinda Chandra sought British assistance. On refusal he with the help of the fugitive Manipuri princes Chaurjit Singh and Gambhir Singh successfully defended the aggression. However, soon the princes with the help of Tularam plundered Cachar in 1818 and expelled Govinda Chandra to Sylhet. Meanwhile, Marjit Singh fell out with the Burmese and was expelled from Manipur. Thereafter, the three brothers apportioned the territory of Cachar amongst themselves and contacted the Company for recognition of their possession as protected tributaries of Cachar. This ambition for annexation of Cachar by the Manipuri princes culminated in the murder of the Raja at the machination of Gambhir Singh.

In 1820 the Raja of Cachar proposed to the British to amalgamate his territory with the district of Sylhet. But there was no concrete response from the British. The Company had its own problems to deal with. The diwani of Bengal brought along with it the huge task of revenue settlement, regulation of trade and maintain relations with disparate bordering states. One of the major problems for the Company was the absence of clear boundaries and conflicting claims over territories. When the Manipuri princes were fighting over the territory of Cachar, the Company was busy looking for ways of finalising the boundary.\(^5\)

It is to be noted that issue of boundary between Manipur and Cachar continued even after the Company took over the administration of Cachar. (Foreign Department, 1832, File No. 89 & 90) It invited representations from all the claimants and before anything concrete was resolved the Burmese launched an attack on Cachar. Finally, the Company had decided to enter into a treaty with the Raja on 6\(^{th}\) March 1824. The Raja agreed to

\(^5\) For detailed discussion on issues or boundary demarcation and difficulty faced by the Company officials, see Gunnel Cederlof, 2013.
pay an annual tribute of Rs. 10,000/- with a rider that a portion of the territory would be
annexed in case of default. The British in return would protect his territory from any
external aggression. The Company would interfere in case of maladministration of the
territory. The Company also entered into a similar agreement with the Jaintia king,
though no tribute was demanded from him. These arrangements with the petty
principalities adjoining the British district of Sylhet were to secure the eastern frontier
and thereby resist Burmese advance in the Surma Valley.

However, it was not only the Cachar that caused the Anglo-Burmese tension in the
region. In fact Cachar was only one of three theatres of war, the other two being in the
Brahmaputra valley and the Arakan. In the year preceding the signing of the treaty with
the Raja of Cachar, friction began in the south coast of Arakan over a dispute of the
strategically located island of Shahpuri. Manipur was already under Burmese control, so
was the Brahmaputra valley. The containment of Burmese expansion was crucial to the
EIC plans of reviving the old South-West Silk Route.⁶

The Burmese invasion of Cachar in 1823 set off full scale military conflict in the region.
The Burmese suffered a heavy lose in Cachar. Same fate was waiting in the other two
Burma renounced all its claims on the Brahmaputra Valley, Cachar and Jayantia. It
recognised Manipur as an independent entity besides ceding two provinces of Arakan and
Tenasserim in southern Burma. A war indemnity of Rs. Two crores were paid and a
British resident was stationed at Ava. The treaty also had commercial content besides
political. No custom duties would be collected on goods traded between the British

⁶ See Gunel Cederlof (2013)
territories except for collection of regular toll duties. British merchants would be accorded preferential treatment on trade.

Post war, the Cachar King, Govinda Chandra, adopted various measures to augment the revenues of his territory. But the war and the years of Manipuri depredations had depleted the population of the territory almost by half. Under the circumstances, he requested the Company to exempt the payment of tribute for the year 1825-26 and 1826-27. It was granted with conditions, the most important condition being that he was to construct a road across his territory facilitating communication between Sylhet and Manipur. The Calcutta authorities also tried to find out from the Raja whether he was willing to hand over Cachar to the Company as he was getting old, physically weak and with no heir. (Barpujari: 1997: 72) In 1827, Govindrachandra shifted his capital to Haritikar, also known as the Rajar-Tilla, on the banks of the Boro-Bokro or Barak River, where the river branches off as the Surama and Kushiara. Meanwhile, Govindachandra was under constant threat from Gambhir Singh who had occupied a part of his territory - Chandrapur Ilaka. The Company was bound by the treaty of 1824 to protect him from such act of aggression. Instead, the Company confirmed the possession of Chandrapur area by Gambhir Singh citing the need for ‘safe custody and transport of Military stores, between Sylhet and Munnipore’. (Foreign Political Department, 1829, File No.80)

On 24th April 1930, Govindrachandra was assassinated by a band of Manipuri mercenaries. Several members of his family were also killed and the palace was set on fire. The Company immediately assumed the administration of Kachar and placed Thomas Fisher, Quarter Master General of Sylhet, in charge of the territory in June 1830 ‘invested with power of magistrate and district collector’. This started the process of
annexation of territory of Dimasas that ended with the occupation of the territory ruled by Tula Ram Senapati in 1854.\footnote{For instruction about the distribution of troops in Cachar and on other points connected with administration of that \textit{province}, see File No. 39, Foreign Department, 1832.}

The end of the monarchy ushered in British rule marked with the systematic use of the area for the maximization of British economic and strategic military interests - the cornerstone of policies formulated by the officials of the company in the years to come. The Dimasa kingdom was fragmented and incorporated to the territory of the Company, distributed and redistributed into different administrative units as and when it suited the British. Migration was encouraged for the maximization of revenue, forcing the ruling community into obscurity and minority.

At the same time Dimasas were fragmented into different groups on grounds of religion and the geographical attributes of their habitats. The Hindu convert Dimasas inhabiting Cachar plains and the plains of present Nagaon district were enumerated as Barman and Hojai kachari respectively in the British ethnographic projects and census. Only those in the hill areas were known as Dimasas (also hill Kacharis). Overpopulated by the immigrants, Dimasas lost their lands to the latter and were pushed to impoverishment. The strange administrative mechanism under alien administrators added to their process of marginalisation.

**Annexation**

In 1830, the heirless Raja Govinda Chandra was murdered. With his murder, the British annexation of Cachar plains was a matter of time. The British interest in Cachar was rooted in their growing concern over the Burmese activities in Assam and Manipur. They...
were unable to agree to the suggestion that such a powerful nation should extend its territories right up to the frontier of Sylhet (Allen, 1905: 26) and were looking for a buffer between their territories and Burma. Although Govinda Chandra was rightfully restored his territory after the expulsion of the Burmese, by then the British interest in Cachar grew more and they would have been happier if the King had willingly ceded Cachar to the Company.\(^8\) This is evident from the fact that the authorities in Calcutta instructed Tucker to enquire whether he was willing to make over his territory to the Company after his death.\(^{(FSC. 1827, 23 November; Nos. 42-4; 30 May 1829, No.2; 3 july 1829, no.6)}\) In return, it was promised to relinquish the annual tribute for the remaining part of his life. Govinda Chandra refused the offer and offered in return, to adopt a child from amongst the families of the reigning princes of the neighbouring principalities.\(^\) (Banerjee: 1992: 63) While no assurance was given on adoption, effort to persuade the Rajah was continued with instruction from the Supreme Government which was inclined to offer purchase money twenty times the amount of the existing revenue of Cachar. Before a settlement was arrived at, Govinda Chandra was murdered. Interestingly the Rajah expressed his fear of being murdered during an interview with Scott in July 1829.

British interest over the territory of Cachar rested chiefly on military and economic consideration. The Secret Letter to the Court, 23 Feb 1824 para 38 cites how Cachar and its neighbouring principalities formed a part of a ‘general system of defensive arrangement for the (eastern) frontier’. Although treaty of Yandaboo had confirmed positions in North East Frontier of Bengal, the Company doubted the sincerity of the

\(^8\)In fact in 1818, Govinda Chandra offered merging his territory with Sylhet. The British were unable to take any concrete decision then. However, the post war situation had changed and the British were more than willing to take over the territory.
Burmese, and expected renewal of hostilities. The British Resident, Burney, wrote in Dec 1830, ‘The King and those about him are manifestly dissatisfied with the present state of things… not only the King’s Court but the lower ranks of the people… firmly believe that in the last war it was our turn to conquer, but that in the next contest it will be the turn of Ava’ (the capital of Burma). The Governor General lord William Bentinck, wrote on 24 June 1831: ‘…we must seek the best military position on the Ava frontiers and show that we are prepared, and as determined as prepared, not only to repel but chastise aggression’. (Banerjee: 1992: 377-9) The fall of the Dimasa Kingdom, was hastened by the imperial policy of the Company towards Cachar which was geared to utilise its economic potentialities, and its strategic importance of this kingdom which had attracted the attention of the East India Company ever since the Battle of Plassey. (Barpujari: 1997: 97)

The Company wished to use the fertile plains of Cachar for the purpose of feeding the troops in Manipur and beyond in case of war with the Burmese. According to R B Pemberton, an official of the Company who came to this part of the country as surveyor, the revenue of Raja Krishna Chandra was a lakh of rupees, as distributed as follows: the Cachar Plains Rs. 69,000; the North Cachar Hills Rs. 5000; hills subsequently annexed to Manipur Rs. 1000; Dharampur, which seems have been situated between the Kopili and Jamuna, Rs 25000. (Allen: 1905: 32) Pemberton was in favour of annexation since Cachar could be made to produce in course of a few years, a revenue nearly equal to that of Sylhet and also to be a granary capable of supporting of troops stationed in case another war with Burma. (Banerjee: 1992: 66) The Company decided to wait for the right moment to annex Cachar. After all Govinda Chandra was growing old and without any
issue to succeed him. Meanwhile the Raja was assassinated in 1830. In August 1832, Cachar was annexed to the British Indian dominion. (Barpujari: 1997: 97)

The issue of succession came up before the Company. There were several claimants to the throne including the King of Manipur. The fate of Kachar, however, depended not only on its internal dynamics, but also on the larger imperial designs in the region of South – East Asia. In any case, the administration invited claims, from aspiring parties and ‘sifting inquiries into their pretensions were held by the local officers under orders from the Supreme Government. (Banerjee: 1992: 65) Scott was of the view that awarding a lifetime zamindari with certain condition to Rani Induprabbha, the eldest queen of deceased Raja, at such an advanced age might mean that the estate would soon escheat to the British government. (Banerjee: 1992: 65) However Cracroft was against such an interim arrangement as it could lead to mal-administration and above all it was not desirable to delay the introduction of better system of administration in Cachar. He also questioned the validity of Induprabbha’s marriage with Govinda Chandra from the orthodox immigrant Hindu point of view, ‘although it was sanctioned by the prevailing custom of Cachar’. In Dimasa Customary Law the younger brother can marry his sister-in-law upon the death of his elder brother. The consideration of immigrant people’s point of view could possibly be only a pretext with the advantage of or policy of appeasing the immigrants. The second point will be discussed in the following pages.

Tularam’s claim was turned down since it was not supported by any evidence and to the current story the he was the son of a Manipuri slave girl by a khidmatgar in the service of the Cachar raj. But this did not appear to be important because the population of the hills belonging to the same tribe had accepted him despite his low descent. A note dated 9
April 1832 (Foreign Political Consultations, File No. 44) mentions that many disaffected local subjects of Govinda Chandra had migrated to area of Tularam. This showed his popularity among the local subjects.

Claims were also put forward by a few kacharis on behalf of Govind Ram, the natural son of Raja Krishna Chandra. However Govinda Ram himself made no claim and, as expected, he was not the choice of the Raj. Even the claim made by the forty *sempungs* (patri-clans) of their right to elect new rajahs from among themselves was rejected. While Foreign Secret Consultations Report of 1829 May 30, No. 4 (before murder of Rajah) mentions that according to the old custom of Cachar, the Raja and his ministers were selected by a Council known as forty *sempungs*, enquiries made by Fisher found no such instance of election of rajahs in the past history of Cachar. Instead it was the eldest son of the Rajah who succeeds him to the throne. The right of election if ever existed had become obsolete and Fisher thought its revival was likely to lead to civil war which was more than a benefit. It may be noted here that the British records informs that Suradarpa was elected by the forty male clans called *Sengphong* at the request of queen Chandraprabha who acted as regent till Suradarpa came of age to rule the state. (Barpujari: 1997: 57)

A claim to Cachar was also staked by Raja of Manipur, Gambhir Singh, a claim not justified by history or by dynastic basis. (Banerjee, 1992: 66) Conscious of this fact, he proposed ‘to farm out Cachar for a period of twenty years in return for annual revenue of fifteen thousand rupees’. (FSC, 25 November, 1832, No. 63) After much deliberation the Supreme government decided to annex Cachar on grounds of not having rightful heirs and also because it’s subject desired to be placed under the British administration.
Gambhir Singh was awarded the Jiri-Barak tract on condition that his thana from Chandrapur area would be withdrawn, he would not impose exorbitant duties on Cachar-Manipur trade, and communication between Jiri river and Manipur would be kept open round the year.

It is to be noted here that an enquiry instituted by the East India Company into the murder of the Govinda Chandra indicted Gambhir Singh along with his four accomplices. The accused were tried and sentenced to death by a jury. But the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment on the ground that the evidence was circumstantial and presumptive. Neither Gambhir Singh nor his bhandari was arrested. Instead of being punished, the Company winked at his act of orchestrating the murder of late Rajah and by confirmed his possession of Jiri-Barak tract, which was occupied forcefully before the murder. The involvement of the Company in encouraging Gambhir Singh is open to question. There was disapproval of its attitude towards Gambhir’s occupation of tracts of Cachar from the court of Directors: ‘....the same reason which existed against the granting of the whole of Cachar were proportionately strong against the cession of a part.....’ (Letter from Court of Directors, No. 14, 1834)

In 1832, the Company annexed the Cachar plains and Dharampur Pargana. (Foreign Department, 1832, July, File No. 15) The area between the river Kopili and Jamuna was fertile and contributed Rs. 25,000 thousands of revenue to the treasury of Karishna Chandra as reported by Pemberton. This was the second largest contribution after the

9Elsewhere, the Gaikwad of Baroda was severely punished for ‘his unproved charge of having tried to poison the British resident although the paramount power’s real purpose was camouflaged by the plea of the prince’s maladministration. Banerjee, A.C., 1992, p. 65
Cachar plains. This area was attached to the Assam valley while Cachar was put under the district of Sylhet. (Foreign Political Correspondence, 1832, 12 November, No. 46)

In 1832, the position of Tula Ram was confirmed in the hills section of the Dimasa Kingdom, though no formal agreement was signed. On 3 November 1834, a treaty was forced upon Tula Ram whereby he had to surrender the territory between the river Mahur and Diyung on the one side and the Diyung and Kopili on the other. It was a penalty for the violation of the agreement signed in 1829 by conducting raids into the Company territory against his adversary Govinda Ram. Penalty was imposed inspite of the fact that Robertson’s inquiries found extenuating circumstances in favour of Tula Ram. (Banerjee: 1992: 75) The remaining portion of his territory was annexed in 1854. With this the whole of the Heramba Kingdom became a part of the Britain’s empire in India. (Bhattacharjee: 1977: 69) The territory annexed was placed under a British Sub-Divisional Officer in Nagaon district. In 1866, with the creation of the Naga Hills district, the tract of land in the Dhansiri and Doyang valleys was transferred to the new district while the Kopili – Jamuna Tract remained with the Nagaon district. On the other hand a portion of the hills formed into a sub-division with Asalu as its headquarter under the Cachar district. At the close of the Naga incursion 1879-80, on the strong recommendations of the Chief Secretary of Assam, the office of sub-divisional headquarter was transferred from Asalu to Gunjung. This did not remove the difficulties faced by the sub-divisional headquarters of North Cachar Hills, most importantly, the lack of road and communications. In 1882, the administration had to face the revolt of Sambhudhan Phonglosa and the Head Office at Gunjung was destroyed. Consequently, the Head Quarter was shifted to Haflong, which was already a headquarter of railway construction.
It was also more strategically located and a light infantry was posted there to resist Angami attacks.

The cession of Jiri-Barak tract to Gambhir Singh, the attachment of Dharmpur to the Assam valley and South Cachar to Sylhet was the first instance of highhanded dismemberment of the Dimasa kingdom. The redistribution of administrative units was to adversely affect the entire community. The new regime had brought along it them a new administration. Being alien to this region, the Dimasa elite and the people could not take part in it, causing further alienation. Moreover, the annexation of Cachar also paved the way for the annexation of remaining Dimasa territories. Subsequently the whole territory under the erstwhile Dimasa kingdom was dismembered into several new administrative units. This distribution and redistribution of territories continued throughout the nineteenth century where in sections of the erstwhile Dimasa kingdom were attached to districts of Nagaon, Sibsagar and Nagaland. In post independent times, these territories were redistributed on occasions. In most of these areas the Dimasas constitute only a microscopic minority, due to immigration and also because of assimilation of certain sections with the Assamese caste society. We shall discuss this process in details in the following section. How this entire process came to shape the contemporary Dimasa society shall be discussed in the next chapter.

Post War administration of Cachar

The immediate British concern after annexation of Cachar was to increase revenue collection. The territory had suffered from the ravages of war for more than twenty years. Around half the population was reduced in this period. Since the hill tribes and the indigenous Cacharis were numerically small and too poor to develop resources of the
Pemberton describes the plains of Cachar as a fertile tract with great possibilities, which suffered from a want of population. Gunnel Cederlof points out, most reports by British officers were optimistic about Cachar's prospects and potential for improvement in the face of depopulation, poverty, and lack of control. The bleak situation, they argued, 'should not be mistaken for defeat; European skill and capital would immediately produce economic progress. The sparse population of the district had the advantage of reducing conflicts when European and Bengali agriculturists were to move in to settle and open up the land.' (Cederlof: 2013: 181)

South of the Barak there were, according to Captain Fisher's estimate, 1,711 sq. miles of the finest plains, almost wholly unoccupied, though the sites of numerous villages, which were densely inhabited during the reign of Krishna Chandra, were still discernible along the river banks. North of the river cultivation soon revived and a number of villages quickly sprang up on both sides of the Barak from Badarpur to Banskandi. (Allen: 1905: 32) This certainly could not have been possible without migration. Towards the close of 1832, levy on land was at the same rate as Sylhet, but the bari (homestead land), chara (garden lands), duties on ghats (excepting a few) were exempted. Monopolies were abolished. Revenue free rights for certain years on certain jungles, and marshy lands was also offered.

But there were problems encountered by the local administration however. There were constant 'raids' into the British territory by the Nagas and the Lushais.¹⁰ Second, the

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¹⁰ One of the major problem encountered by the British after they assumed charge of Cachar was raids carried out by different Naga groups. In one such raid four were killed, 'The heads of three of whom were carried away by the savages.' Note by E M Gordon, Commissioner, Dacca Division, Foreign Department
frequent floods devastated the entire country, and were followed by waves of cholera and Malaria. These were a constant irritation to the administration as it affected the soldiers and civilians alike. Finally, the administration had the problems of dealing with the demands of authorities in Calcutta, to whom Cachar formed only a part of a larger political design involving Myanmar and China. For instance, there were constant demands for supply of coolies to support various surveys and campaigns on political missions.

With the initial hiccups of the kinds mentioned above, the administration gradually succeeded in improving the situation and managed in attracting immigrants. Under British rule, there was a great expansion of population, and the plains, which in Captain Fishers' time were one vast expanse of jungle, were now being peopled almost to the limits of their capacity. (Allen: 1905: 34) The introduction of tea-farming brought in even more outsiders. According to an estimate by Pemberton, population in Cachar was roughly 50,000 in 1835. In 1855, it went up to 85,000.

**Table 1. Population of Cachar Plains.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>85,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>205,027</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>293,738</td>
<td>+ 43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>367,542</td>
<td>+ 25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>414,781</td>
<td>+ 12.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: B C Allen, Cachar District Gazetteer, 1905*

File No. 6, 7 and 8. Such raids were also carried out by the Kukis. (Foreign Department, February, 1834, 25)
Table 2. Population of Cachar Hills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>30,000 (est.)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>18,941</td>
<td>-5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>40,812</td>
<td>+115.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: B C Allen, Cachar District Gazetteer, 1905

Table 3. Comparison of Population Growth in all three sub-divisions of Cachar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-division</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% variation 1891-1901</th>
<th>% variation 1881-1891</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silchar</td>
<td>301,884</td>
<td>+12.7</td>
<td>+26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hailakandi</td>
<td>112,897</td>
<td>+13.0</td>
<td>+21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Cachar (excluding railway workers)</td>
<td>20,490</td>
<td>+8.0</td>
<td>-5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: B C Allen, Cachar District Gazetteer, 1905

Going by the figures shown in the tables above, one gets the rate of immigration that took place. In 1881 it was calculated to be only 13.6 percent of the gross increase that had occurred since the preceding census, due to natural growth. (Allen: 1905: 44) The number of persons born outside the state in 1901 was 101,252 or 24% of the population in the plains. Majority of these people were garden coolies and Begnali traders from that province. In 1901, the North Cachar hills housed 40% of outsiders who were engaged in railway construction. This massive immigration undoubtedly was the result of the policy that required more population to cultivate fertile plains of Cachar and Dharmpur area in the Kopili-Jamuna valley. While the Raj gained more on revenue front, it posed a threat...
to the survival of local indigenous peoples. The 2001 census depicts the grim picture of
the indigenous communities in resent district of Cachar and Hailakandi which constituted
the Cachar plains.

Table 2.4: ST Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cachar</th>
<th>Hailakandi</th>
<th>N C Hills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>18,631</td>
<td>821</td>
<td>1,28,428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population-rural</td>
<td>18,132</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>1,04,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population- urban</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>24,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of urban population</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total workers</td>
<td>7253</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>48,413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non workers</td>
<td>11,378</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>80,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main workers</td>
<td>4829</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>35,781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal workers</td>
<td>2,424</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>12,632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ratio</td>
<td>1003</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>947</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001, ST population

The era was also marked by large-scale emigration to Sylhet and the Naga Hills who are
largely agriculturist. In 1901, Cachar plains received 28,988 persons and sent out
7,259. There is reason to believe that the majority of the emigrants were from the
indigenous communities including the previous ruling community- the Dimasas. In the
1830s, there was a general exodus of the Kukis and they settled themselves in several
colonies in the North Cachar Hills and it continued even after the British annexation of
North Cachar in 1854. (Bhattacharjee: 1977: 211) In fact most of the Kukis were settled
in the area bordering the Naga Hills by the British to foil the constant Naga raids in their
territories.
The increasing immigration and emigration of indigenous population, as well as the substantial rise in population remarkably changed the demography of Cachar and other areas of the former Dimasa kingdom. This had important consequences for the polity, economy and society of the District. Influx of large-scale Bengali migration forced the indigenous ruling groups into a minority. Sizeable number of Bengali migrants was settled in the plains of Cachar even before the British annexation. But the occupation not only ended the monarchy, but it also displaced the whole class of nobility. They had no more control over land, revenue or trade. Since they were not acquainted with the new administrative system, their services could not be employed. As in the case of Ahoms, the Dimasa inability to serve in the unfamiliar and new administration caused great dissatisfaction in the community. They were replaced by Bengali immigrants from Sylhet and Bengal. This appointment of Bengali immigrants in administration was viewed by them as an invasion on their influence and authority.

Immigration from Bengal was not a case specific to the Dimasa kingdom alone. Thousands of Bengali settlers had moved into the Brahmaputra Valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the early decades of the twentieth century, British officers’ reports show their growing concerns at the rate of migrations and their impact on local tribal populations. This led to the formulation of the Line System which demarcated certain areas where the immigrants could neither settle nor buy lands. This Line System was later converted into Tribal Belts and Blocks. It gave some respite to the local communities from being swamped by migrating hordes from Bengal. Unfortunately, such mechanisms were not thought or applied in the Cachar plains to protect the local tribal communities.
Meanwhile, the loss of administrative participation as well as of lands to the new settlers aggravated the feeling of alienation. During a personal interaction with Nareswar Barman who emigrated to Karbi Anglong in 1940s mentioned landlessness as the main reason for outward movement of local communities. Many other such settlers cite same example. The alienation of land also might have been due to refusal of the local Dimasa community to settle lands under the new system. It is interesting to note that many Dimasa villages in Cachar still do not have land settlement on a periodic basis and are designated as forest village. This is one reason that their lands became vulnerable to grabbing by men of commerce.

It must be mentioned here that, traditionally Dimasas are not familiar with private land holding. Land is owned by the community. This system of a common property resource is not confined to the hills alone as many would like to argue. Even in the plains of Cachar, during the age of monarchy, land was theoretically owned by the king and distributed among khels (cluster of able bodied persons) who are supervised by various officials. The introduction of a new land system thus immensely affected the Dimasas who refused to settle lands under the new regime.

The administration, however, was too preoccupied with these issues. Their focus was on reviving Cachar into prosperity and a ‘rice-bowl’ so that it could feed enough men in uniform in case fresh hostilities with the Burmese. The fate of a few thousands of

11 As Late Nanda Mohan Barman, a retired civil servant, narrated Dimasas refused to settle lands under new system at par with the immigrants.

12 The Khel was a system of communal land holding in medieval Assam practised by the Ahoms, and Dimasa Kings. Though the supreme owner of the land was the King, a group of people could acquire the land for a definite purpose, such as elephant-catchi...
population weighed little where the larger imperial design of opening up trade with China through Burma was concerned. It was initially hesitant in annexing the Northern Hills Tract which they termed as North Cachar. This section was construed as an administrative irritant due to its rugged terrain, its vicious air which bore malaria and other deadly diseases, and the constant Naga raids. Tularam was settled to act as a bulwark against the Naga raids. But this tract of land was too strategically located for the British to leave it in the hands of a petty chief. It was the connecting block between the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley and construction of a road through it would provide a boost to rapid mobilisation of troops and supplies, not to mention the exploitation of abundant natural resources of the area. This would also help in making further inroads into the Naga territory. In the 1830s survey of North Cachar was completed by the British officers (Jenkins and Pemberton). In 1854, the whole tract of Tularam was annexed by the British, as mentioned above. In the later half of the nineteenth century, a strong need was felt for the construction of railways to connect the Brahmaputra Valley to Sylhet. This was started in the last two decades of the century.

Subsequent Administrative Changes

In 1874, Assam was constituted as a province under a Chief Commissionership. By then the population of the district of Cachar has gone up considerably. In 1872 it was 205,027 and 293,783 in 1881, it was a 43% increase in a decade with a substantial migration from Bengal. Even in the hills, the population of the railway workers were higher than that of the local population. However, the Scheduled District Act of 1874 adopted for the Hills Areas of Assam was also enforced in North Cachar Hills. This Act empowered the

13Foreign Department, August 1832, File No. 3 outlines the details of the areas to be surveyed.
Executive Government to exclude the tribal areas from the normal operation of ordinary laws of the country and provide them necessary protection to preserve and protect their way of life and living. In 1880, the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation was adopted. It was enforced in North Cachar Hills on 1911 along with the GaroHills, theKhasi andJayantia Hills, the Naga Hills and the Mikir Hills. Based on recommendations of the Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1918, the Government of India Act of 1919 empowered the Governor General-in-Council to include any territory in British India to be a ‘backward tract’. In January 1921, the North Cachar Hills was declared a ‘backward tract’ thus bringing the area under the direct administration of the Central Government.

Later, it was declared as an Excluded Area under the Government of India Act of 1935. Accordingly, it was administered by the Governor in his discretion without the advice of the Council of Ministers, and no Act of the Federal or Provincial Legislatures could apply to this area without the prior consent of the Governor, who could apply it with some exceptions or modification. The North Cachar Hills continued to be administered as Excluded Area in 1947.

Thus the special administrative arrangements for the hills areas of Assam was also applied to North Cachar Hills keeping it out of the purview of the provincial government in Assam. This deprived the Dimasas from exercising the right of sending representative to the Assam Legislative Assembly. As a result, several laws passed in the Legislative Assembly such as Opium Prohibition Act and the like, could not be extended in North Cachar.
Dimasas in Ethnographic Projects and Census

The expansion of British occupation in the nineteenth century and the revolt of 1857 transferred the whole territory of the EIC to the Crown. It also started a wave systematic effort at understanding Indian society, which has been termed by many as ‘colonial ethnographic projects.’ *The Linguistic Survey of India* by Grierson, *Ethnology of Bengal* by Dalton are some of the important studies carried out in this period. Census was started in 1972. The use of these ethnographic studies and census for development of the ‘colonial governmentality’ has been a matter of debate. Many nationalist Indians believed the census to be tool ‘to keep alive, if not exacerbate, the numerous divisions already present in Indian society’.  

Many British reports, such as that of Fisher, show that Dimasas were divided into several categories depending on their habitat and based on their religious practice. The yardstick adopted in this case was Hinduism. It had been mentioned in the previous chapter that Dimasa royalty has been under influence of Hinduism since the time of Kamrupa rule. This tradition continued till the establishment of the Dimasa kingdom in the Surma Valley. However, during the reign of Krishna Chandra, the royalty and a section of Dimasas newly adopted to Hinduism. Thereafter they began to identify themselves as Barman, and the Brhamins invented a genealogy of the Royalty beginning from Ghatokocha, the son of the second Pandava, Bhima. These sections of the Dimasa were identified as Barmans in various reports. However, it was not noted that they continued to speak the Dimasa language and other Dimasa traditional rituals. For instance, although in

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general they used the title of Barman, they did not surrender traditional clan names and continued to practice clan endogamy. The usage of matri-clans also continued. Nor did their conversion stop societal transactions with their hills counterparts in any way such as marriage. On the other hand, those in the Dharampur and Hojai-Davaka area were identified as Hojai Kachari. Only those living in the hills were returned as Dimasas.

Till date this division as envisaged by the British administration continues in spirit and form. The nomenclature of Dimasas living in Cachar and Nagaon, continue to be enumerated as Barman and Hojai Kachari. Also unchanged is the geographical divide imposed on the Dimasas and they continue to live under different modern administrative units. The level of political rights and other opportunities they enjoy differs depending on where they live. Other than the present North Cachar Hills District in Assam, they are pushed to a minority status for the reasons discussed earlier.

This separate enumeration of the Dimasas may be argued as the British policy of justifying the dismemberment of their territory. It was possibly a design of the British to lock these people into separate administrative units and there by check possible uprisings against the British in future. Jenkins wrote in one of his reports how important it was to confine the Kacharis into the hills. But, Jenkins also doubted if it would be possible to contain this ‘rude tribe’.

Whatever might have been the intention of the colonial rulers, it has had a significant impact on the community even if it failed at bringing divisions among the Dimasas. Social interaction between these groups continued in every sphere of life. When Sambhudhan Phonglo raised the banner of revolt in North Cachar Hills, he enjoyed wide support from his fellow tribes in the Cachar plains.
Thus were laid the pre-conditions for a potential for resistance and the subsequent move towards identity politics and their demand for autonomy. These are the themes of the following chapter which brings the study up to 2012.