FACTS BEHIND THE BRITISH COLONISATION OF ASSAM
One of the remarkable features of the nineteenth century was the feverish attempt of the European powers to extend their control over the rest of the world. It was a century during which increasingly large areas, incapable of offering resistance to the stronger powers, came into the grasp of European imperialism. The concern of remote lands became a matter of profound importance to European countries, and a scramble for colonies became paramount in European politics.

This expansion of European dominance, however, was not a novelty. As far back as the fifteenth century, Europe had had eyes on the non-European world and colonial empires had been founded by Spain, Portugal, France and England. The enormous importance of the discovery of sea route to India and America became evident in new trade routes, associated with bitter commercial and colonial rivalries which led to struggles among nations. Thus emerged a new merchant class resulting in a considerable acceleration of the growth of capital. This in turn was evident in the reorganisation of industrial and agricultural life. By the eighteenth century, however, these overseas empires appeared to be crumbling. The Spanish colonies in America had revolted and Great Britain, too, had lost her thirteen American colonies. The general belief engendered by these events was that once the colonies matured, it was only a matter of time before they severed ties with the mother country.

As the nineteenth century dawned and progressed, several factors had combined to create a new impetus for colonial expansion. This new imperialism was largely the result of the new economic order produced by the Industrial Revolution which initially took place in Britain and soon spread to the rest of Europe. The
century also witnessed the general application of mechanical power in manufacturing, mining and transportation.

It was, therefore, a period of momentous economic change. During this period additional demands for raw materials and food were created. New markets were developed to cater for increasing demands. Thus by the end of the century, the whole globe was knit up in an economy of world inter-dependence. These far reaching changes in the economic sphere were reinforced by a revolution in ideas with emphasis on liberty, equality and fraternity. The nineteenth century was the epitome of French achievement and advertisement of personal freedom combined with the new mechanical inventions which emanated from England. The result was the simultaneous removal of legal and physical disabilities. One important consequence of this was that the colonies acquired a new value and a fresh scramble occurred among the great powers for the unoccupied territories of the world. The general belief was gaining ground that the acquisition of colonies was a prerequisite towards recognition as a great power. Nationalism became very aggressive and patriotism developed from the love of one's own country into the expansion of that country.

Thus the European powers engaged themselves in a hectic colonial activity. The technique of penetration throughout the world was almost the same. The arrival of traders or missionaries heralded the beginning. Their activities often led to trouble which made official protection necessary for them. In this way situations developed leading gradually to a sphere of influence, then to a protectorate and finally, to full economic and political control of the country.
BRITAIN'S COLONIAL POLICY

Of all the European powers, Britain took the lead in colonial expansion. Her efforts in this direction were backed by her scientific and industrial power ever since the Industrial Revolution. During the nineteenth century she built up an empire which was the largest evolved under one crown. It comprised one-fourth of the world's habitable area with one-fourth of the human population. In this context it is necessary to understand that however urgently Great Britain may have needed machinery, she would not have been able to work out the experiments and install the plants without a considerable investment of capital. The accumulation of capital in Britain was rapid during the eighteenth century, and in this direction the importance of the colonial trade is especially marked. England had made large profits out of the products brought from India and her other colonies and was the foremost distributor of these goods in Europe. She had accumulated capital through the above said sale and resale and could afford to sink money in her own industries and wait for returns. Her banking was organised so as to make this capital easily obtainable and private persons with money were willing to enter into partnership with inventors.¹

Britain's economic relations with her colonies may roughly be divided into two phases, viz., the old economic policy pursued prior to the Industrial Revolution and the new economic system evolved after the Revolution. The rise of British power in India was the result of the development of that phase of capitalism

¹ L.C.A. Knowles, The Industrial and Commercial Revolutions in Great Britain during the Nineteenth Century, Chapter II.
which has been identified for its predominantly industrial character. This occurred in the nineteenth century. In general economic terms, the period which falls between the French Revolution of 1789 and the outbreak of World War 1 may be styled the nineteenth century phenomenon.  

The old economic system prevalent in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was largely national in character in which one nation could benefit only at the cost of another. Consequently, imports were checked by heavy protective tariffs while exports were stimulated by bounties on production or export and by retaining the exclusive possession of colonies as markets. The navigation laws of Britain, for instance, laid down that her trade must be carried in ships belonging to her. Trading companies were encouraged by means of the grant of monopolies for trading with definite areas. It was also generally believed that state control and directive of the economic activities of the nation was necessary. Above all, colonies were regarded as estates to be worked solely for the benefit of the mother country.  

From the outset, the colonial system of England envisaged two types of colonial possession. One consisted of the regions where white men could settle, rear children and make a home. These areas were fairly sparsely populated. The other consisted of densely populated tropical or semi-tropical areas which were forced to adopt a policy of free trade and which were

2 ibid, p 1  
4 If foreign ships could not frequent her colonies and if colonial ships could not trade with foreign countries, then manufactured goods were bound to come from or through England and tobacco, spices and sugar actually came to England.
governed by Britain almost autocratically for her own good. Of the two, the latter was considered by far the more important. The trading posts in India formed an integral part of Britain's trading empire during this period for disposal of her manufactured goods.

The effect of the successful rebellion of the thirteen American colonies was, however, to produce a great change in England's colonial policy. Colonies came to be regarded with dislike and distrust and a pessimistic feeling developed that colonies were of no use. This generally depressing outlook was accentuated by the agitation against slavery because the value of West Africa and West Indies was closely bound up with Negro slave labour. Echoing this feeling John Mills wrote:

England is sufficient to her own protection without colonies and would be in a much stronger as well as more dignified position if separated from them than when reduced to be a single member of an American, African or Australian confederation. Over and above the commerce she might equally enjoy after separation, England derives little advantage, except in prestige, from her dependencies, and the little she does derive is quite outweighed by the expense they cost her and the dissemination they necessitate of her naval and military force, which in case of war or any real apprehension of it requires to be double or treble what would be needed for the defence of this country alone.

As the nineteenth century dawned a distinctive change of attitude occurred and Britain became an active participant in the New Imperialism that followed. In India, the English East India Company had already done pioneering work by establishing trading posts in the

coastal areas. Trade gradually led to economic control and finally to political control. The general result was that large areas were acquired and opened up rapidly and new markets and sources of raw materials exploited at very little cost to the Imperial Government. Within a short while, India was transformed into a classic colony. This attractive and lucrative hinterland of Britain increased her appetite for more and more territories and she now looked around for expansion in the direction of virgin land. It was in this context that the British interest in Assam developed.

At the initial stages of colonial penetration the importance of Assam and the Eastern Himalayas was not only for its resources but also for its strategic location, the region having a common frontier with Tibet, China and Burma. The British search for overseas markets has to be seen in the context of economic condition of Europe in general and of Britain in particular. As European trade diminished, the vacuum was sought to be filled up by the development of trade with China, Tibet and Burma. Trade with Tibet, moreover, had an added

6 The English had come as traders, then they became armed traders. Soon they needed soldiers to defend their settlements, and, as the Mughal Empire disintegrated, spheres of influence became necessary if the Company was to survive. Slowly, the rhythm of Empire building had imposed itself on the simplicity of trade.

7 The permanent settlement in Bengal was enforced to leave the management to the zamindars and to ensure a fixed annual rental to the administration. The method was sophisticated further in the subsequent systems like Ryotwari and Mahalwari where the increased value of the land and resources were made to contribute further to the Company's exchequer without incurring additional liability for the Government. The development of waste lands was made the responsibility of the peasants themselves. In terms of political management also the burden of internal management in the early phases of expansion became the responsibility of the native rulers.
importance as it imported more than it exported and the balance was made up in gold and silver.\(^8\) As long as the chiefs of the Newar dynasty ruled over the petty kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon, a flourishing trade was in progress between India and Tibet.\(^9\) The Gurkha conquest of the Newar state disrupted the traditional trade between India and Tibet and an alternate route to Tibet became an urgent necessity. The East India Company needed the gold from Tibet for its China Trade. The growing demand for China tea\(^10\) called for a large exodus of silver as China developed no reciprocal fascination for any British goods. With the discovery of tea in Assam the problem of financing China tea receded into the background but by then the private British Indian traders, under the unofficial but active encouragement of the East India Company, developed a lucrative trade in opium with China. The opium trade was utilised as a channel of remittance from India to London. Thus the China trade became crucial in solving the balance of payment problem for India\(^11\).

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1740 - 13,02,545 lbs
1750 - 21,14,922 lbs
1760 - 22,93,613 lbs
1780 - 77,23,548 lbs
1800 - 146,93,299 lbs
1820 - 190,93,244 lbs
1840 - 300,47,049 lbs

The figures given below represent the quantity of opium that entered into China through Canton:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NO. OF CHESTS</th>
<th>VALUE IN DOLLARS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1811 - 19</td>
<td>4580</td>
<td>4,159,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819 - 20</td>
<td>4600</td>
<td>5,583,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820 - 21</td>
<td>4770</td>
<td>8,400,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821 - 22</td>
<td>5822</td>
<td>7,988,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822 - 23</td>
<td>7982</td>
<td>8,515,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824 - 25</td>
<td>8655</td>
<td>7,619,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825 - 26</td>
<td>9621</td>
<td>7,608,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1826 - 27</td>
<td>9966</td>
<td>9,610,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827 - 28</td>
<td>9475</td>
<td>10,356,833</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The larger British responsibility was due not so much to their bringing opium to China as to the official encouragement of cultivation in India, to the official control of sales in India for export, and to the interest in the trade as a source of revenue for the Indian Government. The continuation of the opium trade in China was so crucial to the mercantile interests that in 1839, when an extremely hostile attitude of the Chinese Government created an impression that the opium trade might collapse, a member of the Bengal Board of Custom, Salt and Opium lamented:

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Really in a financial and commercial view, I can imagine no occurrence in commerce of, perhaps the whole world which could, to all Indian and British interest, have been fraught with more serious consequences than the decline of the opium trade between India and China.

The search for an overland route to China was not given up even after the Opium War, which resulted in the opening up of the five ports to Europeans. As the Chinese Government was weak piracy on sea and river was rampant. The experiences of the Company at Shahpuri in the Chittagong frontier, on the eve of the First Anglo-Burmese war, might have also prevailed upon the Company to secure an alternative route.

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were an era of commercial exploration in the hill areas of the North Eastern Frontier. Several of the Company's servants were employed for extending the Company's geographical knowledge and information on the economic potentials of the frontier and beyond. Their enquiries revealed, among others, the use of Chinese, Tibetan and Burmese goods by the Khamtis and other tribes living in the plains of Assam.

The fond hope of extension of commerce to Tibet and China found expression in the words of Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier:

15 A.C. Banerjee, Eastern Frontier of British India, pp 229 - 238.
16 Board of Revenue Papers, July 1787, File No.23.
There is every prospect of our bringing all the races of hillmen bordering on this province under the same control as our Assamese subjects and at no distant period of opening out, through them, a direct trade with the Tibetan and Chinese province from which we are divided by narrow ranges of hills but from which we are absolutely shut out by the intractable rudeness of intervening mountaineers.

British commercial enterprises were excited at the prospect of getting thousands of new customers for the industrial products of Lancashire, Manchester and Yorkshire. It was also believed that "as Sadiya would have to be a forwarding agency between India and China, it would become a station of considerable importance and by its commerce attract enterprise and thus materially assist in opening out Upper Assam."  

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ASSAM

The acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal had brought the East India Company into direct contact with the medieval kingdom of Assam. The picturesque Brahmaputra Valley to which the Ahom Kingdom or Assam was limited, and which is our main area of study, extended from the River Manas in the west to the foothills of the Himalayas, bordering close on China with a length of almost eight hundred kilometres. The present work has been based on a study of the plains districts of the Brahmaputra Valley or Assam proper as it is generally known. These include the five districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Technically, Goalpara district also forms part of the Brahmaputra

18 ibid, File No.167 J of 1878.

19 ibid.
Valley but it has not been included in our study because both in economic and administrative structure, nineteenth century Goalpara had closer links with Bengal than with Assam. The dominant physical feature of the region was the mighty Brahmaputra which ran through the entire length of the valley, thus appropriately lending its name to it. The north and north-east of the valley is bounded by a range of lofty mountains inhabited by the Bhutias, Daflas, Abors, Mishmis and Singphos. From the Patkai Range on the east which bordered Burma, ran an irregular chain of mountains to the south-east, popularly known as the Assam Range, and peopled by the Nagas, Mikirs, Jaintias, Khasis and Garos. Beyond the hills, to the south and south-east, lay the kingdoms of Cachar and Manipur. Robinson, while commenting on the physical aspect of the country wrote:

...the beholder is at once struck with the perfect plain studded with numerous clumps of hills rising abruptly from the general level and surrounded by lofty mountains and intersected in all possible directions by innumerable streams and rivulets, which, issuing from the bordering mountains, at length empty themselves into the great channel of the Brahmaputra......the soil of Assam is exceedingly rich and well adopted to all kinds of agricultural purposes.

Owing to geographical factors Assam remained in isolation for a very long time. Prior to the advent of the East India Company, the territory was ruled by the Ahoms, a race from the northern Shan states of Upper Burma, who, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, crossed the Patkai and settled in the territory around Sibsagar and

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enthroned Sukapha as their first king. The country at the foot of the hills was occupied by the Moran and Borahi tribes whom they easily subdued. In due course they were assimilated with the Ahoms through intermarriage. During the following three centuries they brought under their effective control the more powerful Chutiyas and Kacharis and by 1536 the Ahoms were supreme in Assam. Yet, for centuries Assam continued to be the arena of warfare and forays. The emergence of the Koches in the West checked the expansionist policy of the Ahoms to a great extent, but their most formidable enemy were the Moguls. The history of seventeenth century Assam was, in fact, the history of Ahom-Mogul conflicts. In 1662 Nawab Mir Jumla advanced as far as Garhgaon, the capital, and compelled Jayadhaj Singha, the Ahom monarch, to cede Western Assam to the Moguls. In 1682, however, Gadadhar Singha (1681-1695) recaptured the territory and from then onwards Goalpara remained the frontier outpost of the Mohammadan dominions. The Ahom power reached its zenith during the reign of Rudra Singha (1695-1714). From then onward the monarchy showed signs of decay. The throne was occupied by weak and unscrupulous monarchs and every succession became a scramble for power. Taking advantage of the situation, the Moamarias, a socio-religious sect, rebelled in 1778, overpowered the royalists and dethroned the reigning monarch, Gaurinath Singha who was forced to flee to Gauhati from where he sent frantic appeals to the British for help. This came in the form of Captain Welsh's expedition and Gaurinath was once more enthroned in 1793. However, Welsh was soon recalled following the appointment of Sir John Shore who resorted to a policy of non-intervention. As a result, Assam relapsed into the former state of anarchy and internal strife.  

Matters came to a head when even the Court itself was divided. The **Buragohain** or Prime Minister, exercised undue influence over the young king, Chandrakanta (1811-18) and virtually ruled the country in the king's name. The **Barphukan**, the king's viceroy in Lower Assam, strongly opposed this personal rule of the **Buragohain**. The enmity between the two officers went to such an extent that the **Buragohain** sent a senior officer with an adequate force to arrest the **Barphukan** and bring him to the capital. The **Barphukan** got scent of this development and fled to Calcutta to seek British help. When this was not forthcoming, he went to the Burmese court at Ava for aid. Thus the Burmese, who were ever anxious to extend their dominions west-wards, made their appearance on the scene in 1817. A Burmese army crossed the Patkai, reinstated Chandrakanta in full power and returned with a large indemnity. But shortly after their withdrawal Chandrakanta was deposed and Purandar Singha was enthroned in his place. The banished monarch once more appealed to the Burmese who, in 1819, returned with a large force and replaced him on the throne. Soon, however, it became apparent that they intended to retain their hold on Assam. In 1820, Chandrakanta retired to Goalpara from where he began a series of abortive attempts to recover his lost kingdom.22

The Burmese unleashed a reign of terror in Assam. Villages were plundered and burnt, terrible atrocities were committed and the helpless people suffered untold misery. Meanwhile, the relation between the Burmese and the British had become strained and the latter, in their self interest, were compelled to abandon the policy of non-intervention.

By this time, the British had solidly entrenched

22 *ibid*, p 234
themselves in neighbouring Bengal and were in a comfortable position to direct their attention towards Assam. The British had, moreover, for long been interested in commercial intercourse with frontier kingdoms. The Burmese activities in those areas proved detrimental to the British commercial interest. Furthermore, the insecurity in the North-East Frontier threatened the security of Bengal. Therefore, the authorities at Fort William were compelled to enforce their influence in Assam. 23

In 1824, war was declared by the British Government against the Burmese and a force advancing up the Brahmaputra occupied Rangpur and forced the Burmese to retire to their own territories. In 1826, by the Treaty of Yandabo, Assam was 'ceded' to the East India Company. 24 In fact, this concept that "Assam was ceded" is a narrow interpretation of the Treaty of Yandabo by the authorities of the East India Company. Article 2 of the Treaty only stated that "His majesty, the king of Ava, renounces all claims upon, and will abstain from all future interference with the principality of Assam and its dependencies, and also the contiguous petty states of Cachar and Jyntea" (Jaintia). There is no mention of Assam, Cachar and Jaintia in any other article of the treaty. Article 2 also does not mention anything about the future arrangement for these states. The renouncement of all claims over these states by the king of Ava cannot be construed to mean that these states were ceded to the

24 For full text of the Treaty see A.C. Banerjee, op.cit., Appendix B.
British. This is further clear from Article 3 which provided that "To prevent all disputes respecting the boundary line between the two great nations, the British Government will retain the conquered provinces of Aracan, Ramree, Cheduba and Sandung; and His Majesty, the king of Ava, cedes all right thereto." If Assam also was to be automatically retained by the British by virtue of the Treaty of Yandabo, a provision of this nature should have been enacted. Moreover, Article 2 of the Treaty, treated Assam, Cachar and Jaintia equally. These three states, therefore, stood on the same footing at the close of the war in relation to Burma and the peace treaty. It was now left to the British Government to settle its terms with the legitimate rulers of these states. And it was here that the British discriminated between these neighbouring states of the North-East. Raja Govind Chandra and Raja Ram Singh had been installed in their hereditary thrones in Cachar and Jaintia respectively, but this right was not conceded to Raja Purandar Singh of Assam. As a matter of fact, this discrimination started before the declaration of the war against Burma. On the eve of the declaration in 1824, separate treaties were signed by David Scott, on behalf of the British Government, with the Rajas of Cachar and Jaintia whereby the rulers of these states placed their territories under the protection of the British Government and agreed to pay annual tribute. In return, the British Government assumed the responsibility of the defence of these states against external aggression. Accordingly, the rulers of Cachar and Jaintia were reinstated in their respective

25 ibid.
26 R.M. Lahiri, Annexation of Assam, pp 48-49; Gait, op.cit., p 341
27 For full texts of treaties see C.V. Aitchison, Treaties, Engagements and Sanuds.
thrones after the war. With Assam there was no such treaty obligation. The British Government, therefore, felt free to decide the future of Assam.

It is naturally intriguing as to why a treaty in the line of those with Cachar and Jaintia was not signed with the Raja of Assam in 1824. About the time that treaties were being negotiated with the Rajas of Cachar and Jaintia, David Scott had expressed the opinion that if the Ahom rule was to be restored, the British Government should reserve to itself the right of interference in the internal administration since he felt that "in view of the peculiar conditions prevailing in the Assam Kingdom, this departure from the general principle followed by the Company in its relations with the friendly states was not only justified but essential for the maintenance of order." 28 Scott was informed by the Supreme Government on 20th February 1824 that it favoured the restoration of Ahom rule. 29 Accordingly, in a proclamation addressed to the people of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Government observed." We are not led into your country by the thirst of conquest; but are forced, in our own defence, to deprive our enemy of the means of annoying us. You may, therefore, rest assured, that we will...re-establish...a Government adapted to your wants and calculated to promote the happiness of all classes." 30 The Supreme Government was, therefore, ready to restore Ahom rule after the expulsion of the Burmese.

29 Ibid.
30 H.H. Wilson, Documents Illustrative of Burmese War, No.32.
Nevertheless, for reasons best known to the authority, no treaty was negotiated with the Ahom ruler. On the contrary, immediately after the end of the war, the Supreme Government informed David Scott that "the Government did not consider itself pledged by any engagement or declaration to restore an Ahom Prince to the throne of Assam."\textsuperscript{31} Justifying this changed policy of the Government Sir Edward Gait wrote:\textsuperscript{32}

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

This was indeed a departure from the Government's earlier stand. Pending the arrangements for its future administration, the renouncement of the claims by the Burmese made the East India Company the defacto ruler of Assam.

Under British authority the administration of the province was entrusted to David Scott who had been appointed, in 1823, as Agent to the Governor General for the whole of the eastern frontier from Cachar in the south to Sikkim in the north. At the beginning the British did not think in terms of the permanent annexation of Assam; the resources of the province had first to be ascertained. However, in 1825, "with due

\textsuperscript{32} E. Gait, \textit{Op.cit.} p 283
consideration of economy and security" Scott recommended the permanent annexation of Lower Assam and the restoration of native rule in Upper Assam, i.e., the territory from Vishwanath to the River Buridihing. In July 1824, the President of the Board of Control had explicitly forbidden the Indian Government to extend the Company's territory. Yet, when he found that the course of the Burmese war had turned in the Company's favour, he told Amherst to take care in the treaty of peace to safeguard the company's eastern frontier by the acquisition of Assam, Cachar, Manipur and Arakan.  

The whole issue was looked at by the British from an economic viewpoint. It was estimated that Lower Assam would yield a revenue of over three lakhs, while most of the estimated one lakh from Upper Assam would have to be spent on reimbursing the royalty. Moreover, as Lower Assam had been more or less independently ruled by the Barphukan, it was assumed that the inhabitants would not resent the abolition of the Ahom monarchy and the imposition of British rule. Accordingly, in 1828, Lower Assam was annexed permanently to the British Dominion.  

Upper Assam was left in charge of Captain Newfville. For the administration of civil justice Lambador Barphukan was appointed coadjutor with Janardan Barbaruah of the revenue department. Scott was convinced of the necessity of making as few changes in the administration as possible. He, therefore, based his

33 Boards Secret Drafts, Vol.VI, 29 July 1824 - 3 August 1825.  
revenue system on the earlier *khel* system, the only difference being that in lieu of personal service and produce a poll tax of Rs.3/- per *paik* was demanded. Apart from a professional tax, the inhabitants of Lower Assam were also subjected to Rs.2/- per *paik* for which they were entitled to two *puras* of land each. However, well meaning Scott's arrangements may have been, they proved disastrous for the people. First, at a time when very little trade existed and market economy was practically unknown, "the introduction of money as a medium of exchange, without a substantial increase on the existing currency, inevitably fell crushingly on the ryots, for whom there was no alternative but to leave their hearths and homes and find shelter in the hills."  

Secondly, although the *khel* system was retained it could not possibly work successfully, because, during the Burmese invasions many members of the *khels* had died, and those that had survived had been widely scattered. Thirdly, in many areas, settlements were made with non-residents. When the stipulated revenue could not be realised, innumerable cesses were levied irrespective of the resources of the inhabitants.

All these resulted in a deplorable state of affairs. Neither the Government nor the people were satisfied. In fact, even after such an extortion, the revenue of Upper Assam hardly covered the expenses of the establishment. By the end of 1828 the discontent mounted to open rebellion. Repeated uprisings since then and the general administrative confusion convinced the British

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36 *ibid*, p 14.
Government of the necessity of restoring Upper Assam to a native ruler. Accordingly, in 1833, Purandar Singha was appointed as a tributary ruler of Upper Assam on condition that he would pay an annual tribute of Rs. 50,000 out of an estimated revenue of Rs. 1,20,000, obey the orders of the Political Agent and administer justice on the principles generally prevailing in the Company's territories. Purandar, however, soon defaulted his payments. In spite of repeated appeals for a remission in his tribute on grounds of large-scale emigration of the population to the adjoining low-taxed districts, the British Government did not consider his case. Hence, in order to keep his commitments with the British, Purandar was forced to resort to heavier taxation which obviously resulted in mass discontent. Purandar was, therefore, deposed and pensioned off, his territories reverting to British administration. With this the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley, or Assam proper, came under British rule in 1838. This was followed by the annexation of Sadiya and Matak in 1842.  

At this point it is necessary to consider the reasons which inspired the British to annex Upper Assam permanently to their domains. Ostensibly they did so to deliver the people from the "exhorbitant extortion" and "oppressive character" of Purandar Singha's Government. Had they given him a fair chance this situation might never have arisen in the first place, for "Purandar was elevated to the throne on the strongest recommendation of his capabilities and after a mature and protracted deliberation of as many as eight years by the authorities at Fort William." Political instability, therefore, was  

38 ibid.,p139
just an excuse for annexation. After all Assam had been politically unstable since the end of Rudra Singha's reign and the British could have annexed the state much earlier had they so desired. The actual reasons, therefore, must be sought elsewhere.

Captain Welsh's expedition in 1792 and the consequent Anglo-Ahom Commercial Treaty had opened up new economic vistas for the British. For the first time, they had received reliable information about the economic potentialities of the region. It appeared, therefore, that these possibilities could be converted into realities. The discovery of the indigenous tea plant in 1823 and the definite proof that tea could successfully be cultivated in Assam, convinced the authorities at Calcutta and London about the prospects of the commercial cultivation of tea in the region. The conviction was confirmed further when in South Cachar, which was annexed in 1832, the indigenous tea plant was first noticed in 1831. It is, therefore, not unlikely that similar commercial considerations which had resulted in the annexation of Cachar now worked behind the resumption of the administration of Upper Assam. H.M. Gupta is, therefore, probably correct in suggesting that the single factor responsible for influencing the Company in favour of annexation was the discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Upper Assam. The authorities were persuaded by the view of C.A. Bruce who commented that the people were unsure of the tenure of their land under native rule and advised that many more might be induced to take up "tea-grounds", as he called them, if the country belonged

39 J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in North East India*, p 189.

to the British under whom, they knew, they would be protected and permitted to cultivate in security.\footnote{41} Amalendu Guha also believes that the intention of the Raj, at this point of time, was to convert "Assam into an agricultural estate of the tea drinking Britons."\footnote{42}

As a matter of fact, from its original introduction in Europe, the supply of tea had been a Chinese monopoly. The tea trade in England had been entirely in the hands of the English East India Company, for as early as 1669 the import of tea into England from Europe was prohibited.\footnote{43} In 1833, however, on the renewal of its charter, the East India Company lost its monopoly of the lucrative tea trade with China. This was to have tremendously far-reaching consequences in the near future. Flora Annie Steel, while commenting on this event, wrote:\footnote{44}

What was the cause which led England to refuse a renewal of its Charter to the East India Company? It was the price of tea. Before this, all considerations as to whether the Company had done its duty to India or not vanished into thin air. Tea was a question for every Englishman's breakfast table. The price of tea was high and monopoly was, therefore, a bad thing for the consumer.

As early as 1785 Colonel Robert Kyd and Sir Joseph Banks, both tea-enthusiasts, had tried to interest the East India Company in the possibilities of growing tea in India, but the Company was averse to any such suggestion

\footnote{41}{H.A. Antrobus, \textit{A History of the Assam Company}, p 47.}
\footnote{42}{A Guha, \textit{Planter - Raj to Swaraj}, p 2.}
\footnote{43}{The trade was financed by the illegal export of opium from Bengal under the Company's monopoly. The phenomenal increase in the volume of illegal opium traffic alarmed the Chinese Government who threatened to put an embargo on the profitable tea trade if the opium traffic was not stopped. The East India Company could hardly afford to lose either of these.}
\footnote{44}{Quoted in Montfort Chamney, \textit{The Story of the Tea Leaf}, p 30.}
preferring the easy "exchange and barter" customs of the Far East to the risks and labours of opening out tea plantations. But having lost the monopoly in 1833 and with it the most valuable part of its activities, it was anxious to obtain an alternative source of supply entirely within its own control. As a result, great anxiety arose for the production of tea in India, if indeed such production was by any means possible. It was already known that tea would thrive under widely varying conditions. It had been naturalised in Brazil, Malaya and Java, but tea produced in these areas was very unsatisfactory. "Everywhere," wrote a correspondent, "it thrives as far as mere vegetation is concerned, but nowhere, except in China, has any effort been made to render it a profitable industry." Yet, in spite of this somewhat general feeling of doubt as to the success of tea growing in India, there were enough believers in the possibility. In January 1834, a Committee was appointed by Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of India, to study "a plan for the accomplishment of the introduction of the tea culture in India and for the superintendence of its execution." The Committee consisted of seven civilians, three Calcutta merchants, two native gentlemen and Dr. N. Wallich of the Botanical Gardens. Its secretary, C.J. Gordon, was sent to China to procure seeds, plants and persons skilled in tea manufacture. Although imported tea seeds initiated the

45 Tea from China accounted for about 1/10th of the total revenue of England and the whole profit of the East India Company. Michael Greenberg, British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42, p 3.


commercial tea cultivation in India, the growth of the tea industry owes its origin to the momentous discovery of the tea plant in Assam.

The credit for the first knowledge of the existence of the tea plant in Assam must undoubtedly go to Robert Bruce. As early as 1823, Mr. Bruce, agent of Purandar Singha, while visiting Garhgaon, learnt of the existence of the tea plant in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley from a Singpho Chief. He was promised a few specimens of the plant which were forwarded to his brother, C.A. Bruce, the following year. These specimens were sent by David Scott to the Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta for examination. They were pronounced to be of the same family but not of the same species as the tea of commerce. The matter thus rested there and no further enquiry was initiated. However, the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly brought matters to a head and the urgency of the indigenous tea plant was keenly felt. Thereupon, Jenkins, the successor of David Scott, deputed Andrew Charlton, of the Assam Light Infantry at Sadiya, to pursue the matter. These fresh enquiries, conducted by Jenkins and Charlton, and the reports and specimens submitted by them, eventually convinced the botanists, the Tea Committee and the Government of the identity of the Assam tea plant with that of China. Thus the evidence of the existence of the tea plant in Assam was conclusively established.

The discovery of the tea plant no doubt precipitated events, but it was not the only deciding factor. Meanwhile the existence of coal, oil, iron and other minerals had also been brought to the notice of the British and these, too, undoubtedly influenced their decision to a great extent.
The existence of coal in Upper Assam had been known from the earliest period of British occupation of the province. The first recorded notice was by Lieutenant Wilcox who, in April 1825, accompanied a party of the 46th Regiment up the Disang River to Borhat. He remarked that the hills in the neighbourhood of that place consisted of grey and yellow sandstone and that coal, too, was found nearby. However, he gave no details as to its mode of occurrence or the exact locality in which it was discovered. In a subsequent expedition up the Dihing River, Wilcox observed a seam of coal in the bed of the Buridihing at Supkong. Far to the east, the same explorer again observed a "thin strata of coal alternating with blue clay in the sandstone rock" on the north bank of the Dihing near Tumong Tikrang, a village South-West from the snowy peak of Dapha Bum. Between 1828 and 1837, C.A. Bruce, Brodie and Lt. Bigge all reported the existence of coal-beds in different parts of Upper Assam. Reports also came in of the discovery of petroleum springs, iron-ore, clay and ironstone in more than one locality.

Besides the above, the region had thick, rich forests abounding in sum, mulberry and other trees which fed a variety of silkworm. Many of the trees were also the source of important wood oils. The discovery of salt springs (which were already worked by the Nagas to a considerable extent) also held promise of great value if worked under European supervision. The economic potentiality of the region had thus been thoroughly ascertained.


50 Ibid., pp 273 - 276.
ADVENT OF THE MISSIONARIES

In the meanwhile, one more induction in the process of colonial modernisation of Assam was the advent of the missionaries. As has been aptly remarked, "the cross followed the flag", and the case of Assam was no different from colonial situations elsewhere.

From the very beginning, the East India Company had been sending out chaplains to India to look after the spiritual welfare of its Christian employees and, at the same time, to spread the message of Christ among the Indians. However, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the authorities in England realised that "in matters of religion the natives of India were peculiarly sensitive", and therefore, "any interference with the religion of the natives would eventually ensure the total destruction of British power" in India. Religious neutrality had, therefore, become the watchwords of the British authorities, and their attitude towards the missionaries ranged from one of Indifference to open hostility. As such, when William Carey (1761-1834), the first British missionary, arrived at Calcutta, he was prohibited from preaching there and had no option but to make Serampur his headquarters under the Danish flag.

In the early nineteenth century, however, a vigorous agitation was organised by the Evangelists, like Wilberforce, in collaboration with the Church Missionaries Society, the Bible Society and other similar

52 H.K. Barpujari, The American Missionaries and North East India (1836-1900), p-xi.
organisations, for sending out missionaries to India. By the publication of papers and pamphlets, they succeeded in creating and winning a favourable public opinion on their behalf. As a result, the Charter Act of 1813 included a clause permitting missionaries "to go and reside in India under certain conditions."

The immediate effect of this was the advent of English and American missionaries to India and the appointment of a Bishop at Calcutta. The Governor General was, however, enjoined to impress upon the officials of the Company the need for strict religious neutrality.

The newly acquired freedom of movement granted by the Charter Act encouraged the missionaries to venture into the North-Eastern Frontier of British India. Krishna Pal, William Carey's first convert, had been deputed to Assam for the spread of the gospel. From his headquarters at Pandua, in the Sylhet district, Pal carried on his mission and, by 1813, he is said to have had seven converts. In 1829, a branch of the English Baptist Mission was set up at Gauhati under James Rae with the patronage of David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier.

Soon after assuming office in 1834, Francis Jenkins, the new Agent to the Governor General, put forth a suggestion to the English Baptist Mission to open an establishment at Sadiya so that the quarrelling Khamtis and Singphos could be effectively pacified by the spread

53 ibid.,

54 N. Natarajan, The mission among the Khasis, p 60.
of the gospel. When no response from them was forthcoming, he extended the invitation to the American Baptists to establish a mission at Sadiya. The American missionaries had been inspired by the British Evangelicals with whom they had kept up a regular communication. The emergence of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Affairs in June 1810, had introduced a new era in American foreign mission enterprise. It had originated out of the 'pious seal' of five students of theology of the Andover Seminary who had declared their determination to go abroad for evangelization. Thus when the proposal for the establishment of a mission at Sadiya came up, the Board, which had decided "to enter into every unoccupied field and to extend their operations as widely as possible" sent Revs. Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter to commence a mission there. It was hoped that this would not only enable the Baptists to convert the frontier tribes into Christianity but also open up an entrance into the Celestial Empire of China. As Grammell has written.

The plan of establishing a mission in Assam was recommended by important considerations.....it was hoped that beneath the protection offered by the East India Company, the missionaries might join the caravans that yearly traded to the interior of China, and thus while the jealous mandarins were excluding foreigners from the ports, they might plant Christianity in the heart of the Empire.

55 Adoniram Judson, Luther Rice, Samuel J. Mills, Samuel Nott and Samuel Newell.

56 W. Grammell, A History of the American Baptist Mission, Beston 1850, p 211, Quoted in Barpujari, n 52, XIV.

57 ibid., Quoted in Barpujari, n 52, p 5.
Meanwhile, the Serampur Mission, which was in a languishing state, relinquished its operation in favour of the American Baptists. The annexation of Upper Assam in 1838 and of the Muttock area opened up to the Baptists the whole valley for evangelization.

The hopes of these missionaries, were, however, doomed to disappointment. The resources of the Assam mission were small and the Board felt that without a substantial increase in its revenue it must "either recall some of the missionaries or go deeper into debt." Added to this was the hostile attitude of the Khamits and Singphos which compelled the missionaries to move to Jaipur, and eventually to Sibsagar. Thus all hopes of moving on to China were dashed to the ground. As access to the Shans and Singphos continued to be difficult, the missionaries confined their activities to the people of the plains. Within a few years two other missions were established at Gauhati and Nowgong. However, even after a century, the membership of the mission in the Brahmaputra Valley stood at 845, of which 496 were Garos and 43 Mikirs. According to Professor Downs, only 92 of the plains Assamese were Christians.

Taking into consideration the total population of the Valley and the untiring efforts made by the Baptists, the small percentage of converts was definitely a sign of a failure of evangelization in the plains. The reasons were not far to seek. The fundamental difference between Christianity and Hinduism made the average Assamese

58 Domestic Circular, The Baptist Missionary Magazine, 1838, p261; Cited in Barputari, p52, XV.

unable to accept Christianity. Hinduism, after all, is not dogmatic but synthetic and comprehensive seeking unity, not in a common creed, but in a common search for truth. They were prepared to regard Christianity as true but only in the sense that Hinduism accepts every religion as a different true path to the same goal \(^{60}\). Nevertheless, the services rendered by these early missionaries cannot be undermined.

At this juncture it is important to analyse the motivations of both the missionaries and the Government in the evangelization of Assam. While the missions were primarily concerned with the propagation of the gospel, they did find the Government useful. "It lent prestige to their religion....provided financial support for their institutions and gave them government-granted monopoly on education in many areas." \(^{61}\) This was indeed an invaluable instrument of influence far beyond anything that such a small group of people could ordinarily have on an alien society. The motivation of the Government, on the other hand, was more political or commercial than evangelist. The different tribes in Assam were constantly at war with each other and, at times, carried their raids even into British territory. It was hoped that missionary activities in the area would not only effectively pacify the wild tribes but would also bring about a reformation of their feeling and habits through the christian religion. The missionaries, as it turned out, were rendering extremely useful pioneering service in the area, preparing the ground-work for an intense colonial penetration that was to follow.


\(^{61}\) F.S. Downs, *op.cit.*, p 42.
The authorities at Fort William had, by now, been thoroughly convinced of the economic potentialities of Assam and the necessity for its incorporation in their domains was acutely felt. Assam had held out promises of untold wealth and it was not expected on part of the Company to prolong the matter any longer. Upper Assam was, therefore, annexed and the new administrative system organised in such a manner as would promote the colonial interest.

The annexation of Assam was, in effect, its integration into a colonial state of Britain in India. It was much more than mere political control, for this state was to be the instrument through which the colonial system was enforced. In India, "Colonisation was the complete but complex integration and enmeshing of India's economy and society with world capitalism carried out by stages over a period lasting nearly two centuries."62 Assam was integrated into this system much later than Bengal, but the forces of colonialism had already been in operation in the region through capital and market. Political control only accelerated the process of faster mobilisation of its resources and ensured the security of British capital investment in the various enterprises under the protection of the state. The investment in plantations and mines that soon followed, accomplished the economic integration of the region with the rest of British India and through it, with the world capitalist order. The structural changes that resulted in the process involved changes not only in the economy but also in the pattern of social, political, administrative and cultural life. Gradually, the old order was eliminated to ensure the spontaneous outflow of resources and the growth of market for imported goods.

62 Bipan Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, p 25.