THE PROBLEM OF LABOUR IN ASSAM
( 1826—1901 )
INTRODUCTION
Assam lies in the north and east corner of the Republic of India. It is situated between the twenty second and the twenty ninth degrees latitude north and between the eighty ninth and the ninety seventh degrees longitude east. At the beginning of the period under review, the valley of the Brahmaputra or Assam proper extended from the river Manah to the foot of the Himalayas close up to the frontier of China with an area over thirty thousand square miles. It was bounded on the north by the hills occupied by the Bhutias, the Akas, the Duflas, the Abors and lastly the Miris; on the north-east, Mishmi hills which sweep round the head of the valley, was inhabited by the Singphos and the Khamtis. States of Cachar and Manipur situated on the south-east corner of her boundary. In her southern frontier there lies the so-called Assam range occupied by the Nagas, the Jyntias, the Khasis and westwards in succession the Garos. Thus, geography had imposed a formidable (mountain) barrier on her contact with rest of the world. The Brahmaputra, which runs from the north-eastern corner of her boundary towards the south-west, formed the highway of communication with the rest of India.

Over the greater part of the region the rainfall

exceeds 200 cm., while Cherapunji in the Khasi hills, with a normal rainfall of 1,080 cm., is reputedly the rainiest spot in the world. Heavy floods, presence of an expansive water surface with a forest clad hill terrain resulted in excessive precipitation. Extreme humidity and heaviest rainfall made the climate of Assam enervating. The vegetation is always luxuriant and the valley is clothed with extensive tall Savannah grass lands or with dense forest of an evergreen type. Her hill-tops are open grasslands with trees and shrubs. 'In the foreground are to be seen fields of waving rice of vivid green during summer season, but changing to rich gold as the harvest season draws near.....round the edges.......are groves of slender palms, broad-leaved plantains and feathery bamboos.......while further back is often to be seen the dark green primeval forest ....The view is bounded.......by the bluest of the hills....At all seasons of the year the country looks fresh, cool and green' Nature has, thus, lavished all her beauties in Assam.

The province is also very rich from faunal point of view. She has primitive Arthropod, which has remained unchanged through millions of years. She has also flying

lizards, pinkheaded ducks (now said to have become extinct), golden langurs (Hanuman Monkey) and numerous rare birds of exquisite beauty. The Brahmaputra contains the gharial, a large crocodile which grows to a length of up to 6.5 meters. The province has the largest number of great Indian one-horned rhinoceros. In her hills could be found tusked elephants, big pythons and tigers.

The Province is, thus, not only a land of excellent scenic beauty to the tourists and a paradise to the hunters of all ages for her rich floral and faunal characteristics but also the largest forest state of India for her valuable timbers and mineral resources like coal, oil and limestone.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

This picturesque valley was ruled prior to the advent of the British by the Ahoms, an offshoot of Tai or the great Shan stock of South-East Asia. In the early part of the thirteenth century, under prince Sukapha the Ahoms migrated from the Shan regions of Upper Burma to Upper Assam through the Patkai range and gradually established themselves as conquerors of the entire Brahmaputra valley in course of

6. Ibid, P.274.

7. The Friend of India, Editorial, 6 September,1866, also News item, 11 July, 1867, Ward (Mrs) S.R., A Glimps of Assam, Pp 75-77.

8. Barpujari, H.K., Assam : In the days of the Company, P.3.
the next three centuries. From the beginning of the seventeenth century the Ahoms incurred displeasure of the great Mughals and hostilities commenced with them which continued with occasional breaks till the close of the century. It was Ahom King Godadhar Singha (1681–1696) who finally expelled the Mughals from Assam and extended the boundary of his Kingdom as far as the river Manah. From the later part of the eighteenth century, however, the Ahom monarchy was on the decline. Since then the Kingdom was occupied by several weak and unscrupulous rulers. The Moamaria tribes of Assam under the leadership of their Gosain rose in open rebellion against the Ahoms. Their repeated revolts and frequent insurrections brought untold misery and sufferings to the


* The Moamarlas were the worshippers of Krishna and denied the supremacy of the Brahmins and had no regards for the orthodox tenets of Hinduism. They refused to take to the worship of Durga which was the court religion of Ahoms. Animated by a spirit of sectarian zeal, the Ahom Queen (wife of Sëb Singha) inflicted a sore wound on their religious feelings by compelling them to worship the image of Durga and put the distinguishing marks of the followers of that deity on their foreheads. They bore the insult silently until they had gathered strength. They rose in open rebellion since the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769–80). For details see Bhuyan, S.K., Anglo-Assamese Relations (1771–1826), Chapter VI, parts I & II.
common people. To make matters worse, the Moamarias drove Gaurinath, the reigning Ahom monarch (1780-95) from his capital. Being unable to drive out the Moamarias from his capital, Gaurinath implored the assistance of Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General of India (1786-1793), and the latter despatched under Captain Welsh British troops into Assam. Welsh reinstated Gaurinath on the throne, but the condition of the state became precarious with the withdrawal of the British force. Hill tribes like the Duflas and the Khamtis also challenged the Ahoms which was followed by sabotage activities of the disaffected nobles and chiefs. This was, however, suppressed by prime minister Purnananda Buragohain when he became the de facto ruler of the kingdom after the death of Gaurinath. But soon a conspiracy was set-on foot against the domineering prime minister. A prominent conspirator, Badan Barphukan, even went in person to Burma and succeeded in persuading the Burmese ruler to send a force to get rid of the Buragohain. This was achieved with the help of the Burmese who exacted a large indemnity from the anti-royalists. With the removal of the Burmese troops, the supporters of the deposed prime minister undid the works of the Burmese which made the king of Ava furious. The latter

once again sent army under Ala Mingi, which forcibly occupied the Kingdom. Already laid waste by insurrections and civil wars, the ruin of Assam was complete during the repeated invasions of the Burmese. The latter inaugurated a reign of terror, during which plunder, devastation, murder and desecration were the order of the day. This endangered the East India Company's territories in the east. On the suggestion made by David Scott, the Joint Magistrate of Rangpur, Lord Amherst, the Governor-General of India (1823-28), declared war against the Burmese early in March 1824 and finally drove them from Assam. Thus, at the hour of worst peril, the British came as deliverer of the people of Assam. Under the terms of the treaty of Yandabo (1826) Assam came under the rule of the East India Company.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In spite of her vicissitudes, Assam maintained her traditions and culture through the centuries. The Ahoms, although foreigners, slowly adopted the religion and customs and also the language of the conquered. In the beginning, Tantrik Hinduism was prevalent in Assam. Sankardev, the eminent social and religious reformer of the 16th century,

13. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
brought about a Vaisnava revival in the kingdom. Before long the impact of Saktism was also felt in Assam. King Jayadhvaj Singh (1646-1663) embraced Hinduism and later Rudra Singh (1669-1714) for the first time performed Durga puja. The latter invited a learned Brahmin of Nadiya to his court and acknowledged him as his spiritual Guru. Ahom nobility also gradually followed the royal example. Under the Ahoms a great degree of religious toleration was prevalent in Assam.

The Assam kings in general were generous patrons of the Assamese language and literature. They encouraged historical literature known as Buranji. Culturally, although Assam is much closer to Bengal and Orissa, no matrimonial relationship nor any other social ties existed with Assam. The people of Assam developed certain peculiarities in pronunciation and grammar and a sense of separate culture and entity existed amongst the population.

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18. Phukan, Hiren, Assam Buranji (1829), Edited by J.M. Hattacherjee, Appendices P. 38.
20. Phukan, H., Assam Buranji (1829), Appendices P. 38.
21. Ibid.
ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

In fact, the Assamese society maintained their exclusiveness. The repeated invasions of the Muslim left a tragic memory in the minds of the Assamese and their rulers. Entry of the outsiders was discouraged by the Ahom rulers. Foreigners always entered into the province in the past either as fortune hunters or as invaders and this explains the reluctance of the local inhabitants from welcoming any outsider whom they called 'Bengal' or exploiters. As such, foreigners were scrupulously denied admission into Assam. The province, therefore, remained almost out of contact with the rest of India during the days of the Ahoms. Rumours were afloat in the neighbouring provinces that it was a land of magic and incantation where outsiders got transformed into sheep. In view of this fact, and particularly in the absence of any transport, immigration into the province became insignificant.

Assamese society, therefore, had to become independent for its existence. Efforts were made by the Ahom rulers from time to time to make their subjects self-sufficient and industrious. Memai Tamuli Barbarum, a minister of some reputation of Raja Pratap Singha (1606-1644), introduced the system of compulsory manual work for every able-bodied inhabitant such as...

making of bamboo baskets for the males and spinning of certain quantity of thread for the females. Such compulsion resulted in raising of a good handicraft industry in the province. It is also recorded that among the Assamese there were good weavers, spinners, potters, workers in bamboo, wood and cane. The precept of the dignity of labour was manifested in the Assamese Society and even women acquired high-mark of craftsmanship in weaving and spinning. The art of making cotton cloths was practised in every home and was regarded as one of the must be needed qualifications for women at the time of marriage. Dignity of labour was also recognised in the other field of social life. Agriculture was regarded as a noble profession by all excepting the Brahmins. Even the people near about the capital depended for their living on the products of their own agriculture and cultivation. The Ahoms laid strong emphasis on intensive cultivation. The inhabitants grew almost all the articles of domestic consumption in their own fields. Even long before the period under review there was a regular trade between Assam and Bengal through her Chokey under an Ahom official called Duaria Barua. It appears even from the official record that from the very early times her textile and

26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
valuable forest products found a market not only in the neighbouring province but also in the countries beyond her frontiers.

WORKS OF PUBLIC UTILITY UNDER THE A霍MS.

The Ahom rulers executed various projects of construction during their best days. Many-useful-and Magnificent public works such as highways, embankments, large tanks, bridges were undertaken and some of these are still in existence. Besides construction of a good number of temples of various sizes with exquisite beauty dedicated to the various Hindu gods and goddesses, the Ahom rulers also built their own palaces befitting their dignity and power. These were executed under the supervision of an officer known as Changrung Phukan. This was made possible primarily due to working of a peculiar system of land tenure known as the Pyke system. Under this system the free population was divided into Khels (Clans) of thousands, of hundreds, of twenty and sometimes also to lesser numbers according to caste or callings. These were again sub-divided into gots(squads) of three persons. Out of the

29. Ibid.

* It is not possible to give fuller details of the public works executed under the Ahoms. However, some of the finest specimens may be mentioned. Of the temples Sib-dole at Sibsagar occupies an area of four and a half acres and also contains two cells. Another Vishnu temple at the same place occupies an area of two and a half acres having a height each of forty cubics. The city of Rungur contained a palace of seven stories along with some of its stories built underground. In Gorgaan, Royal palace was surrounded by a brick wall about two miles in circumference.

three persons or Pykes one was always to attend royal duty in rotation and the remaining two were to stay at home to arrange food for the third on duty. During the times of emergency caused either by war or for doing some important public works all the three persons of a squad, of course, were compelled to work for the state. There were two types of Pykes i.e. Choomooa and Korres. Choomooa Pykes were composed of more respectable class and were not pressed into doing ordinary manual duty. As for remuneration each Pyke used to get two purahs of land free of rent from the state. The revenue of the state was evidently paid in terms of personal labour. With the help of such a mighty labour force the Ahom rulers could undertake innumerable projects of construction in their kingdom. For the existence of such institutions there could emerge no labour problem during the pre-British days.

However, for the skilled workmen the Ahom rulers had to depend by and large on the imported artisans. But efforts seem to have been made to become self-sufficient even in this respect also. In addition to this, the Ahom rulers patronised

31. A.S.File No. 298 (Bengal), Matthie to Jenkins, 15 February, 1835, No. Nil, Paras 208-209.

32. Ibid.

33. A.S.File No. 298 (Bengal), Matthie to Jenkins, 16 February, 1836, No. Nil, Paras 247-251.

34. A.S.Vol. No. 5 of 1840, No. 1797, Carstin to Secretary Military Board, 24 October, 1840, also A.S.File No. 298 (Bengal), No. Nil, Matthie to Jenkins, 15 February, 1835, Para 238.
indigenous skilled workmen in their state. Further, it is also stated that the Ahom Government maintained a regular guild of stone cutters under the supervision of Silakuti Barua.

After the treaty of Yandabo, 1826, Assam was ruined of its prosperity. "The large tracts once inhabited by a happy and prosperous population had been converted to extensive and unwholesome jungles and ceased not only to be the haunts of men but had become hostile to human life." The population of this province which was estimated to be twenty four lakhs during the period of Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) had reduced to only six lakhs on the eve of the period under review. Many inhabitants took refuge in the neighbouring countries and descendents of them are still to be found in Cachar and also in the East Pakistan. Therefore, the British authorities in Assam had the arduous task of restoring peace and tranquillity in the deserted province. At the beginning when Assam was conquered it was a liability rather than an asset to them. During the vast desolation and consequent collapse of trade and agriculture in the country there remained, in fact, no source wherefrom revenue might be derived by the state. On the other hand, the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826) had already taxed heavily the exchequer of the East India Company.

35. Allen, B.C., Census of India, Vol. IV, Assam, Part I (Report.)
is stated that the Company's debt mounted up to nearly ten million pounds sterling due to war expenditure. The Company had, therefore, dire necessity of increasing the resources of the province and devised various means which could replenish Company's depleted exchequer. In their immediate need for money the Company thought it inexpedient to continue the previous system of paying revenue of the state in terms of personal labour and, therefore, since the year 1832 they had introduced the system of paying revenue only in cash.

The abolition of the old Pyke system had created an erroneous impression in the minds of the inhabitants that all of them were converted to Choomooa Pykes and as such they were exempted from compulsory labour for some months in the year. Evidently, the mighty labour force of the Ahom Government which the British inherited and also retained in the early years of their rule gradually collapsed. Thus, the revenue policy of the government was primarily responsible for creating a problem of labour in the early days of the Company. In the meantime, occupations like those of carrying burden, digging, hoeing etc. were gradually regarded by the Assamese as the means of livelihood only to the lower stratum in society. They considered it beneath their

38. A.S.Vol. No. 49(a) of 1859, No. 100 (undated).
dignity to engage themselves as labour. Actuated by such motives they gave up, whenever an opportunity presented itself, not only such avocations but some of them, even changed their surnames which were considered as derogatory to their social status. Under such circumstances it was hardly possible to induce any one in the province to work as labour. On the other hand, with the object of making Assam an asset to the British Government, incentives were given to the entrepreneurs to invest capital and enterprise in the newly acquired province; and industries developed gradually which also badly needed a large labour force. The scarcity of labour, thus, became a major problem. How the problem was confronted and with what consequences—these are discussed in the subsequent pages.

39. Phukan, H.D., Assam Buranji (1829), 3rd Edn, J.M.Bhattacharjee, P. 88-89. Such as the 'Dom' community changed their surname to 'Hoyandial'.