CHAPTER VII

TRAGEDY IN ASSAM
In ancient period, up to the death of Gauri Nath Singh (Dec. 1794 A.D.) The condition of the country at that time was miserable. As Gait says, "Where the Moamarias held sway, whole villages were destroyed, and the inhabitants, robbed of all their possessions, were forced to flee the country, or to eke out a precarious existence by the eating wild fruits and roots and the flesh of unclean animals. In Lower Assam the Bengal mercenarie and gangs of marauding banditti who flocked into the province caused similar, though less widespread, havoc, while where Gaurinath himself and power, all persons belonging to the Moamaria community were subjected to all manner of persecutions and barbarities."

The prophecy of Captain Welsh was thus almost literally fulfilled. If we leave the country now". He wrote in his report to the supreme Government in February, 1794, the contest for influence, power and independence would revive amongst the first officers of State, dependent Rajas, and chiefs of districts and towns. The same confusion, devastation, and massacre would ensue. Assam would experience a state of desolation greater in proportion to the temporary restraints which British influence has now imposed on the inhumanity of the monarch, on the ambition and resentment of the chiefs, and on the vengeance of the people.

Obnoxious ministers and favourites would immediately be restored to their offices. Every individual who had been observed to cultivate British friendship would flee the country, in well-grounded apprehension of destruction by the ministers or their connections.

Commerce would again be suppressed by the confusion that would prevail in the country; and the monarch, whose person is too sacred for assassination, would probably be compelled to abandon his
kingdom. Captain Welsh recommended that the British Government should continue its mediating and controlling influence as the only means of preserving order and tranquility. The refusal of the Supreme Government to accept this recommendation was clearly responsible for the revival of anarchy in Assam.

After Gaurinath's death Purnananda, the Burha Gohain, treacherously murdered the Bar Barua, his most powerful rival, and placed on the throne a mere baby who was an illegitimate descendant of Rudra Singh’s, brother. The new king, known before his accession by the humble name of Kinaram, assumed the title of Kamaleswar Singh. He remained nominal king till his death in 1811, but Purnananda became the de facto ruler of the country. He was an able man. He suppressed many insurrections and to some extent restored the prosperity of the country. But he was a tyrant to his rivals and enemies.

On his accession Kamaleswar Singh wrote a friendly letter to the Governor General, who sent a conciliatory reply. This was followed by repeated requests for military assistance again the Bengal mercenaries who were still committing depredations in different parts of the country in defiance of Purnananda's attempts to restore peace. Sir John Shore refused to send another expedition to Assam, but he supplied the Assamese envoys with arms. The following contemporary account about the mercenaries is interesting: These bandits are represented to be a set of vagabonds and dacoits who, having or choosing no means of existence but plunder, rally under the standard of any one who has influence enough to collect them, and forming themselves into parties in the neighbourhood of Assam.
towards the close of rains, take advantage of the fall of the water to enter the country where they oblige the Raja or his officers to entertain them as Sepoys upon their own terms, by threatening to overrun the country if refused, and, when entertained, act wholly without subordination and commit every species of outrage upon the defenceless inhabitants. The enormities committed by these people are represented as shocking to humanity Rapine and murder are practised without control. The country is deserted. Whenever they appear cultivation is impeded and commerce almost wholly at a stand. Surely it was a duty of the British Government to take adequate measures for preventing these people from crossing the frontier of Bengal. A detachment of Sepoys was stationed at Jogighopa and orders were issued to the Commissioner at Cooch Behar and the Magistrates of Rangpur and Dinajpur to watch and regulate the movements of the mercenaries. These measures proved partly effective.

In 1806 Queen Kamaleshwari, wife of Gaurinath Singh, sent an application to the Governor General against Purnananda. She stated that Kamaleshwar Singh had no title to the throne, that he was nothing but a puppet in the Burha Gohain's hands, and that peace and prosperity might be restored to Assam if the British Government assisted Brajanath Singh, a descendant of Rajeswar Singh" in securing the throne.

The queen was at that time living at Chilmari and enjoying a pension granted by the Company. Brajanath Singh had fled from Assam and joined her there. The Governor General does not seem to have taken any notice of her request. Lord Wellesley had already left India, and the policy of non-intervention had been revived.
The Bar Phukan, whose gallantry in suppressing some insurrections had been rewarded with the title of Pratapa ballava, realised that it was not possible to restore peace and prosperity in Assam without British assistance. So he suggested that Assam should follow the example of Cooch Behar and become a tributary State under the protection of the Company. Purnananda rejected this proposal. It is almost certain that the proposal would have been rejected by the then Governor General, Lord Minto, had it been officially submitted to the Supreme Government.

Kamaleswar Singh died at the age of sixteen and was succeeded by his brother, Chandra Kanta Singh. At the time of his accession he was a boy of 14 years. Purnananda continued to govern the Kingdom as before. In June, 1814, some conspirators tried to murder him, probably with the connivance of the king. The plot failed. One of the sympathisers of this plot was Baban Chandra, who had recently succeeded Pratapa ballava as Bar Phukan. He was not only a rival of the Burha Gohain; his administration at Gauhati was very oppressive. So Purnananda tried to arrest him, but a timely warning enabled him to seek shelter in Bengal. He visited Calcutta and tried to secure British assistance against Purnananda. His request was not complied with by the then Governor General, Lord Hastings, whose attention was at that time concentrated upon the war with Nepal. The desperate Bar Phukan came into contact, in Calcutta, with a Burmese agent, who probably advised him to address his prayer to King Bodaw paya. He went to Amarapura, and after waiting there for 16 months, succeeded in persuading the Burmese King to send an expedition to Assam.
Govinda Chandra was soon confronted with a new danger as a resu-
of the establishment of Burmese control over Manipur. Pemberton say-
that Manipur was doomed...to the devastating visitation of Burmese
armies which have nine or ten times swept the country from one
extremity to the other, with the apparent determination of extri-
pating a race whom they found it impossible permanently to subdue.
Whenever the rulers of Manipur were seriously threatened by the
Burmese, they fled to Cachar. It is said that Jai Singh had been
thrice expelled from his kingdom and forced to take refuge in
Cachar.

His son, Madhu Chandra, married the daughter of Krishna Chandra
of Cachar and tried to recover his throne with his father in law's
assistance; but he was defeated and killed by the troops of his
brother, Marjit, fled to Cachar and became involved in a bitter
dispute with Govinda Chandra regarding a hockey pony of equite
exceptional excellence. Marjit went to Burma, in duced Bo-daw-
pa-ya to take up his cause, and expelled to Govinda for Chandra
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and expelled Chaurjit from Manipur in 1812. Chaurjit and his
brother Gambhir Singh came to Cachar and applied to Govinda Chandra
for assistance with a view to invading Manipur. Govinda Chandra
refused to lend his support to Chaurjit as he was related to both
the brothers in the same degree. Chaurjit then went to Calcutta,
but having failed to secure British assistance there, came to
Jaintia, made an alliance with Ram Singh and began to create
troubles on the frontier of Cachar. Govinda Chandra approached the
British authorities for 25 sepoys to help him (November 1815).
Meanwhile Marjit Singh, having consolidated his authority in Manipur with Burmese support, invaded Cachar in December 1817 with a view to feed fat his ancient grudge, on unfortunate Govinda Chandra. Once more Govinda Chandra invoked the intervention of the British Government, but no notice was taken of his application. Chaurjit and Gambhir Singh, however, came to the assistance of the Cachar Raja. Marjit was defeated and forced to retreat to Manipur. Govinda Chandra's principality was saved for the time being, but he soon found that his friends were his worst enemies. Chaurjit Gambhir Singh and Tularam took advantage of Govinda Chandra's troubles and plundered Cachar. Towards the middle of the year 1818 the Cachar Raja was ousted from his kingdom and compelled to take shelter at Sylhet.

At this stage the intervention of the Burmese created a new situation. Marjit was expelled from Manipur by the Burmese. He came to Cachar and effected a reconciliation with Chaurjit and Gambhir Singh. Cachar remained a prey to their depredations. At the same time they made repeated attempts to expel the Burmese from Manipur. Hira Chandra, son of Rabin Chandra continued at the head of a small body of horse to annoy the Burmese garrison left in Manipur. In 1822 Pitambar Singh, another nephew of Chaurjit, was sent to Hira Chandra's assistance. Pitambar and Hira Chandra defeated a Burmese force, but they had to retreat to Cachar owing to the difficulty of securing provisions in the Manipur territory ravaged by the Burmese.
There was one more difficulty who was to be recognised as vassal ruler of Cachar, Chaurjit Singh had lost all footing in Cachar, Marjit Singh held precarious possession of a small tract. Gambhir Singh had obtained a decided ascendency, but he intrigued with the Burmese and showed a marked disinclination to enter into any new and specific engagements. So Lord Amherst turned to Govinda Chandra. He had already appealed for assistance to the Burmese and a Burmese army was advancing from Assam to reinstate him. But he was not unwilling to make terms with the British, so Govinda Chandra was recognised as the protected ruler of Cachar. He agreed to acknowledge allegiance to the Company, to pay a tribute of Rs. 10000 per annum and to admit British interference in the internal administration of his territory. An alternative plan less objectionable from the Burmese point of view, was suggested by Scott, who had been appointed (on Nov. 14, 1823) Agent to the Governor General on the North East Frontier in addition to his post as Civil Commissioner of Rangpur. In order to give no ostensible cause of offence to the Burmese he proposed that Govinda Chandra should remain independent of both British and Burmese Governments. This proposal was not accepted by the Governor General. It would have been altogether impossible for Govinda Chandra to preserve his independence against the constant threat of Burmese intervention, so Lord Amherst acted wisely in bringing this defenceless, but strategically important, State under the direct control of the British Government.

The extension of British suzerainty over Cachar was followed by the inclusion of the petty hill State of Jaintia in our general system of defensive arrangements for the frontier.
In 1823 Pitambar Singh again invaded Manipur, deposed a man named Shubol who had been placed on the throne by the Burmese, and assumed Royal dignity himself. Gambhir Singh then entered Manipur with a small force and dispossessed Pitambar, who fled to Burma and found a permanent asylum there. Unable to draw supplies from devastated Manipur, Gambhir Singh returned to Cachar. Unfortunately, a quarrel broke out between the three brothers. Jarjit Singh occupied Hailakandi, and Gambhir Singh possessed himself of the rest of south Cachar. Chaurjit took shelter in Sylhet. In May, 1823, Chaurjit requested the British Government to recognise him as the tributary ruler of Cachar. Gambhir Singh also professed himself willing and anxious to be considered, as a protected Prince, but he showed a marked disinclination to enter into any new and specific engagements. In 1823 he made a futile attempt to establish himself in Manipur.

The inducements were strong indeed, but there were difficulties. Did the Burmese consider Cachar as one of their protected States, and would they take offence if British protection was extended to that principality? Lord Amherst found no evidence to show that Cachar had ever been subject or tributary to Ava and felt satisfied that Cachar might be taken under British protection without any fear of infringing the rights or claims of the Burmese.

He went further and remarked, if the measure be expedient on other grounds, we ought not to deprive ourselves of its advantages from an apprehension of giving umbrage where it cannot with any colour of justice be taken.
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The Burmese claimed that as successors of the Ahom Kings they were entitled to regard the ruler of Jaintia as a vassal prince. Ram Singh was asked to make his submission. Scott had already opened negotiations with him. On February 2, 1824, Scott sent a letter to the commander of the Burmese army in Cachar, prohibiting his entry into Jaintia territory, on the grounds that Ram Singh's ancestor had received his principality as a gift after conquest from the Company and that Ram Singh himself had applied for British protection. Still the Burmese commander treated Ram Singh as a vassal of Burma and required his presence in the Burmese camp. A Burmese force appeared near the Jaintia frontier, but it withdrew as soon as a British detachment was sent to reinforce Ram Singh's troops. Although Ram Singh was reluctant to compromise his independence by any engagement as long as this could be avoided, the approach of a Burmese army left him without any alternative. A treaty was concluded in March, 1824, Jaintia followed the example of Cachar. Ram Singh agreed to place his territory under the protection of the Company and to admit British interference in his internal administration, but no tribute was demanded from him. He was promised a part of the territory conquered from the Burmese if he cooperated in the Military operations against them.