CHAPTER II

TRADITIONAL LAND SYSTEM AND EARLY REVENUE MEASURES

Thomas Fisher had to entangle himself with a number of problems in the administrative management of Cachar. He found in Cachar legacies of the previous decades' misrule, chaos and confusion. About the prevailing system of administration in the Kachari state on the eve of British annexation, J.B. Bhattacharjee states:

The Kachari state originated in the hill districts of the north-eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. Even before the state came into being, a disintegration of the clan system had occurred. The genealogical group gradually made way for a socio-professional type of group, which initiated growing social inequality. As the population grew the number of these groups also grew. Incessant warfare consolidated the position of the notables. The influence of military leaders was considerable. Technical as well as socio-political concepts were borrowed from surrounding states; these had a substantial impact upon the formation of the Kachari state.¹

Existing Political Institutions in Cachar

On the eve of the introduction of British rule in Cachar, there existed two types of institutions—One following

the traditional system of the Dimasa Government with its own hierarchy of officials such as the Barhbandari (Prime Minister), the Patras (Ministers), the Senapati (Commander in-chief) and the Rajpandit (Chief priest) and the other as the socio-economic units of the plainmen. The jurisdiction of the aforesaid officials was confined to the hill-people such as the Dimasas, Kukis and the Nagas.

Khela

The indigenous people had a constitution of their own based on a peculiar system of agricultural unit known as Khel. Unlike the Khela of Upper Assam, the Khela in Cachar were organised for common objectives composed of 'not only the Bengalees of any caste and creed but also the Kukis, the Nagas and the Europeans'. The Raja did not interfere in the affairs of the Khel and the Mukhtar was the channel of communication between the Raja and the raiyats carrying into execution all orders in the Khel, taking charge of abandoned talooks and collecting the government revenue. The Mukhtar in return enjoyed rent-free lands and honorary titles. He could even confine and punish defaulters.

The Khel system in Cachar developed under peculiar circumstances. In the early British records these Khels have been variously described as agricultural guild, corporation and commonwealth, formed primarily for agriculture. A Khel was also set up for mining (Salt-wells), fishing and elephant-catching. The principle of such association was purely commercial. It depended on the basis of voluntary co-operation of a number of persons for the purpose of carrying a special undertaking, acknowledging no other nexus except community of interest.

The most important aspect of these Khels was their democratic ideas and secular attitude. W.W. Hunter observes that as a result of the "development of this system the Bengalees obtained a constitution which in quiet times was sufficient to preserve them from all interference on the part of royal officers." About the principle and nature of the Khels Hunter adds:

Just as in Hindu communities the village forms the basis of the agricultural commonwealth, which is bound together, theoretically or practically, by ties of kindred or castes, so the Khel formed the unit of the agricultural community of Cachar, but its members were not connected by any ties of kindred, castes, nationality or creed.

5. Bhattacharjee, J.B.; Cachar Under British Rule in North East India, 1977, New Delhi, p. 75.
7. Ibid., p. 395.
Raj Mukhtar

In course of time the number of Khela increased, groups of adjacent Khela joined together and formed into larger units the Raj or Pargana. The Mukhtars of the constituent Khela elected a Raj Mukhtar with titles such as Choudhury, Majumdar, Laskar, Barabhuiva, Major Bhuiva, Chota Bhuiva etc., all according to the status and importance of the unit. These titles were Bengali titles and originally these were associated with land but gradually they became transferable at fixed prices. The titles again became hereditary and the units before long disintegrated into separate classes. The Khel members paid their portion of revenue to the Khel Mukhtar who paid the total dues of his Khel to the Raj Mukhtar who ultimately paid the total collections to the Royal Treasury.  

There were some Debattara Khela, the income of which were appropriated to meet the expenditures of important temples. Such as income of Paikan towards Ranachandi, Vishnagarh towards Lakehminarayan, Phisinga towards Shyama Kali etc. The lands settled from time to time with the religious and charitable institutions grew into vast areas. These institutions in most

8. Bhattarcharjee, J.B., n 5, p. 76.
9. The office of the Mukhtar was originally elective but with its becoming hereditary in the family, election became a mockery (for details see Bhattarcharjee, J.B.; Cachar Under British Rule in North East India, p. 76).
cases rented out land to tenants. There were also Lakhiral estates for the maintenance of the members of the royal family and the ministers, for example, Khelma for the Raja, Mahadevi for the queen, Deka Jurai for the heir apparent, Barajurai and Chitajurai for the princess, Shangjurai and Patrawala for the younger brother's khel. Before British occupation of Cachar, there were 238 Lakhiral estates with an area of 1727 acres, of which about 1000 acres were estimated to be under cultivation. The value of these estates were returned at about Rs. 5,745.

In this connection mention may be made of Brahmattara, Pirmuttara and Bakeha estates as well. As Debottara estates were granted to defray the expenses of the worship of a divinity, Brahmattara was granted for the support of the Brahmanas. There were 65 Brahmattara estates, the total area of which was 551 acres. Pirmuttara was given for the maintenance of the religious places of the Mussalman saints, there was one estate amounting to 14 acres. Lastly Bakeha was granted by the Raja as a reward for personal service; the number of Bakeha estates was 166 containing 1153 acres.


* The rulers of Cachar patronised Brahmanas for the propagation of learning and literature. There were tolas and pathales in the noted temples where learned Brahmins were appointed by the Rajas as hereditary Sevayats. For their maintenance Brahmattara lands were granted.

Scanty population in Cachar

Fisher could well understand that the primary requisite of Cachar was to increase the number of inhabitants so as to augment the revenue resources of the district. Although in the beginning he had anticipated a favourable revenue position in Cachar, he soon found to his utter disappointment that the collections were far below from his expectations. The cause of this fall in the estimated revenue was apparent to Fisher was due to the scantiness of population and unexplored cultivable lands. It may be mentioned that Cachar was depopulated during the Manipuri devastations and Burmese wars. Many went to Sylhet and other safety places during the convulsions that swept the valley. After his assumption of office Fisher had estimated the population of South Cachar at 50,000 and 1,800,000 bighas of waste land to which there was no claimant. Captain Pemberton during his survey duty in Cachar reported that about 12,000 people had immigrated from Sylhet during the first one and half years of Fisher's administration of Cachar. With the approval of the Government he invited cultivators from the neighbouring districts of Bengal. A large number of Manipuri villages were established by Fisher in the eastern part of Cachar. Several Naga and Kuki clans were also settled in Cachar during his time.

15. Ibid., pp. 210-11.
As a result of Government’s initiative the population of Cachar swelled to about 85,522 in 1850-51.

Fisher’s Revenue Measures

Fisher learnt that Cachar during the reign of Raja Krishna Chandra yielded a yearly revenue of about one lakh of rupees but after his death it fell off. The second Burmese invasion in 1824 brought complete ruin to the country and all land east of Bikrampur and Panchgaon was thrown out of cultivation and the villages were denuded of population. Fisher had great hopes about the revenue prospects of Cachar but found in the year of occupation that the receipt could hardly meet the expenses of the establishment. He estimated the cultivable lands in the province at 1,20,160 Kulbahs, roughly 4,80,640 acres at the average of Rs. 2-8-0 per Kulbah, yielding a revenue of Rs. 3,00,400 a year. But the total revenue collected for the

* In 1857 the population of the valley was estimated at 1,37,000. The census reflected an increase in the number of Manipuri and Naga settlers in Cachar plains. Since the middle of the 19th century due to the expansion of tea industry, immigration of labourers from North India had commenced at an increasing rate. All these found place in the first regular census of India taken in 1872, which returned the population of Cachar at 2,05,027 and the 1881 census at 2,93,738. In 1901 the population of Cachar plains was 4,14,781. This shows that by the end of the last century the population in Cachar or Barak valley grew with remarkable rapidity (for details see Bhattacharjee, J.B.; Cachar under British Rule in North East India, pp.211-13).

year 1831 was Rs. 30,595 against Rs. 32,679-3-0 in the previous year. Since the indigenous people were too poor to develop the resources of the district, Fisher realised that without increase of population there could not be any improvement of the country or revenue of Cachar. To attain his object he wanted to go for a fresh settlement and a general survey of the land. He submitted a detailed official report about the unsatisfactory revenue position to the Government but the same could not be traced. From a letter of Mr. Mac William, officiating Deputy Commissioner of Cachar addressed to the Commissioner of Dacca, it was learnt that the book containing the report was burnt in a fire in January 1839.

Meanwhile Captain Fisher continued the revenue system which was in vogue with only little changes which were considered absolutely necessary. He confirmed the old officials in their respective positions with their former powers and privileges. He also abolished the riverמחatz excepting a few on the Surma, at which duties were levied on exportable commodities at moderate rates; the agricultural products being entirely exempted. The monopolies on betel-nut, timber, salt, cotton, grain etc., were abolished, retaining the hillמחatz which was the only means of raising revenue from the dwellers of the adjoining hills.

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18. C.R., 14 July 1875, Letter from Mac William, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Cachar to the Commissioner of Revenue, Dacca.
With the approval of the Government, Fisher introduced in the last part of 1832 the same rent as was prevalent in Sylhet. The terms were that from all cleared lands revenue should be paid at the rate of Rs. 5-2 per Kulbah or hal of cultivable lands, but the bari (sites for houses) and chara (garden lands) were exempted. To encourage immigration of settlers from Sylhet, Dacca, Tripura, Rymensing etc., circular letters were sent through their respective district officers stating that—

the country of Cachar has been permanently annexed to the British dominion, that the tax there will be fixed at the rates analogous to such as have been adopted in recent assessment, that they may get good jungle lands rent-free for 1000 days, at the end of which a settlement will be concluded for the portion brought under cultivation to which the holder will acquire proprietary right as a Talookdar or Zamindar and that where an outlay was made for draining and filling marshes, clearing forests, the period during which the land will be allowed to remain rent-free would be extended to five years etc.

Collection

Captain Fisher was in favour of retention of the native system of collection through the Mukhtare. It may be

20. Ibid.
recalled that under the Kachari rule, the headman of the Raj and the Khel who were designated as the Raj Mukhtar and the Khel Mukhtar respectively were responsible for the collection of the revenue. A Kachari peon or Chautiya osvada used to beat a drum by which the subjects were directed to pay the Government dues. After collection of the revenue from the Khel Mukhtars, the Raj Mukhtars submitted the same to the Royal treasury.

The earliest rates of revenue were extremely low, the rates being a he-goat, a pair of fowls, a duck or two coconuts from each holding irrespective of its size. The collectors used to get a remuneration of two to three annas on account of each mahal but later some modifications were made when the Mukhtars were given 6 per cent on the total collection made. During the time of Gobinda Chandra, the total revenue collection in both cash and kind amounted to Rs. 20,000. Besides this, there were other important sources of revenue such as Bankar, Jalkar and taxes on salt-wells.

The most noteworthy feature of Captain Fisher's revenue measure was the prohibition of ill-treatment and confinement of the revenue defaulters by the Mukhtars. For confiscation of defaulters' property, the approval of the Superinten-

22. Bhattacharjee, J.B., n 5, p. 76.
dent was to be obtained.26 For efficiency in revenue collection and for the protection of interest of the tax-payers, Captain Fisher framed new guide lines which were incorporated in the Cachar Rules of 23 April 1833. By these rules, the people were enabled to pay their dues three times in a year, viz. Ist. Assarh, Ist. Aswin and Ist. Magh and the grace period with interest was fixed at Ist. Sraban, Ist. Kartick and Ist. Faloun.27 The Mukhtars of Khans were to produce Jumawashilbakee with the extent of collections and arrears in each Talook together with the name of defaulters. They were to receive the charges of collection from the Talookdars of the respective Khans where they had no power of addition or alteration of charges under any circumstances. Again Mukhtars were to tender their securities at the collector's office. In case of misappropriation of any money, he was subjected to punishment by the Fauzdarrae Court.28

Abolition of Mukhtar System

The Mukhtar system, which was in vogue in Cachar had suffered from inherent defects.29 It was seen that the Mukhtars

   * See Appendix-I.
27. B.R.P., No. 185, 19 May, 1858, Letter from Secretary, Board of Revenue, to the Secretary, Government of Bengal.
28. Ibid.
29. C.R. No. 29, 10 May, 1837.
were overburdened with various duties and the remuneration paid to them was insufficient to meet the cost of their journey three to four times within a year. Moreover, the estates in Cachar were very small and numerous where the system of collection through the medium of certain land holders was extremely difficult. It was also very often found that the Mukhtars embezzled a considerable portion of the rents received from the Mirasdar*. Although the Mukhtars were empowered to confirm the defaulters, they had no permanent establishment. Mr. Mainwarring who had succeeded Fisher having found the system defective as well as expensive recommended to the government for the establishment of a Tahsildar system in place of the Mukhtar system. Captain Fisher also suggested the establishment of Mofussil Tahsil which was sanctioned by the Government. This new establishment consisted of 4 Mohurirs at Rs. 8 each per mensem, 1 poddar and 1 English writer respectively at Rs. 8 and Rs. 15 per mensem respectively amounting to a total monthly expenditure of Rs. 55.

30. C.R., No. 78, 1837 & 15, 1837.
* Mirasdar means a petty zamindar.
32. C.R., 18 July, 1837, Letter from C.E. Trevelyon, Additional Secretary, Sudder Board of Revenue to R.O. Mangles, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Fort William.
Introduction of Tahsildari System

The Mukhtar system which was found defective was replaced by Tahsildari system in 1836. With the introduction of the Tahsildari system, Cachar was divided into three Tahsil viz. Silchar, Katigora and Hailakandi. But the new system from the very beginning failed to achieve either the desired objective of the Government or the satisfaction of the people. As an immediate effect of the Tahsildari system, the revenue fell down considerably and the arrears were heavy due to absence of mutual understanding between Tahsildars with the Mirasdars and accordingly the Commissioner of Dacca Mr. E.W. Gordon proposed restoration of the Mukhtar system once again. Mr. Burns' (Superintendent of Cachar) letter to Mr. Gordon contains a reference regarding the smooth functioning of the system. As an immediate effect of this system within eight months it was found that the revenue collection had been Rs. 22636-6-0 and the expense had been Rs. 1537-8-0 that is, the sum collected was much greater than that realised by the former system without disturbing the relation with the Mirasdars auctioning cattle or husbandry which seems to be a common practice in the old scheme. Burns suggested the continuation of the Mukhtar system for another two years. At the same time he suggested a more

34. Ibid.
simple mode of meeting the cost of collection by creating an establishment of 1 writer at Rs. 15, 1 Mohurrir at Rs. 8, 1 Mohurrir at Rs. 7.  

In the meanwhile, due to the invitations extended to outsiders many came to settle in Cachar, but they mostly belonged to the poorer section. Fisher found that the indigenous people of Cachar were not so much resourceful as those in the district of Sylhet. The burden of taxes, therefore, fell mostly on the shoulders of the poorer section of the people of Cachar. To add to these there occurred bad harvests for several years in succession due to unusual heavy rainfall. Consequently there were huge arrears in revenue. Towards the close of 1836, E.W. Gordon, Commissioner of Dacca reported to the Government of Bengal that those who had immigrated into Cachar from Sylhet with a view to speculate on lands were compelled to return on account of high rate of taxation and that many of the collectors had tendered their resignation or were prepared to do so. Under these circumstances on the recommendation of the Commissioner, the Government decided to make a new settlement on easier terms with the Mirasdars.

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36. Ibid.
37. Barpujari, H.K., n 2, p. 103.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.

* The inflow of population from the neighbouring regions imbued among the Mirasdars the spirit of competition to increase the number of sub-tenants and ryots. They used to sublet lands to the small zamindars who in their turn enjoyed a life of splendour and luxury. With the consolidation of colonial rule, Cachar became a land of Mirasdars and the cult of feudalism had made an indent into the society of the valley. The British favoured this feudal aristocracy.
Burns' Settlement

Major J.G. Burns who had succeeded Mr. P. Mainwaring as Superintendent of Cachar on 13 April 1836 effected a new settlement for five years in 1838. According to this, the highest rate imposed on the cultivable land was fixed at Rs. 3-0-0 per hal but the chara lands were brought under assessment at Rs. 2-8-0 per hal. The vakha, and lakhira1 holdings remained rent-free as before and the jungle lands were settled rent-free for 1000 days and then assessed at Rs. 2-8-0 per hal. The total area settled by Burns was 11,132 hals, of which 7,563 were paying and the rest rent-free. The total revenue estimated was at Rs. 24,974-11-9 annually.40

Like Fisher, Burns also took initiative to attract new settlers to Cachar. He noticed during his settlement that large areas of uncleared lands were with the Talookdars who had no power or the means to undertake clearings. In order to lease such uncleared lands he took measures to invite applications by issuing an Ishteshar specifying the localities and the benefits.41 Burns' settlement was favourable to the Miraj-dars & at this settlement the right of the settlement holds to

* See Appendix No. II

40. Assam Secretariat Records (Bengal papers), File No. 636 of 1872.

transfer their holdings was recognised. Notwithstanding, as
the settlement was based on Fisher's Survey which was defective
need was felt for a fresh survey in order to make a new settle-
ment in the near future. Accordingly, Lieutenant Thuillier,
Superintendent of Survey was deputed to Cachar to make a fresh
survey of the valley. 42

42. Bhattacharjee, J.B., n 5, p. 78.