North-East India in the Nineteenth Century

LALIT KUMAR BARUA
Fellow
Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Shimla

Introduction

The concept of India's north-east as a single regional entity is of recent origin. Historically, it has been recognised more as a unity in terms of its geology or geography. As an administrative formation in the pre-independence era, it largely meant the states of Assam, Manipur and Tripura; most hill tracts then were part of Assam. Today, this region, east of Bangladesh includes seven states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It covers an area 98000 sq. miles, and population around 26 million.

The Himalayan and the sub-Himalayan ranges and the river Brahmaputra flowing down from Tibet across an eight hundred miles stretch in the Brahmaputra valley have endowed the region with its distinctive ecology, landscape and terrain, flora and fauna. The region accounts for eight per cent of the total land surface of India; its population consists of the hill tribes, the plain tribes and the non-tribal population of the plains of Assam. The region has great ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversities.

The languages spoken by the tribes in the hills and the plains belong mostly to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan or the Tibeto-Chinese family. But the languages and the dialects have gone through a process of mutation due to the impact of the Aryan expansion in the region. Aryan expansion has been historically through Assam's Brahmaputra valley. Assamese, the dominant language in the valley is an Indo-Aryan language.

The plains of the region comprise the Brahmaputra and the Surma valleys of Assam and the Imphal valley of Manipur. The two valleys of

Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. VIII, No. 1, Summer 2001, pp. 106-122.

Assam are separated by the Shillong plateau; the ranges of hills running in a north-south direction bifurcate the northern part of Manipur. The hill ranges meet again in the southern part, enclosing the Manipur valley. The hills of Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura form the natural barrier between India and Burma. Arunachal Pradesh extends from the foothills of the Himalayas and the Brahmaputra valley to the McMahon line which is the border between India and China.

Assam (31000 sq. miles) has a population of 20 million: the Brahmaputra valley stretches from East to West; the Surma valley forms the southern adjunct; the two hill districts stand in between. Meghalaya (9000 sq. miles) consists entirely of the hills, has a population of 1 million; Nagaland (6000 sq. miles) and Mizoram (8000 sq. miles) have a population of 0.5 and 0.3 million respectively.

Manipur (9000 sq. miles) has a population of 1 million. Arunachal Pradesh, by far the largest (32000 sq. miles) has a population of 0.5 million while Tripura, the smallest (4000 sq. miles) has 1.5 million.

About two thirds for the population of Manipur live on the valley; the rest inhabit the surrounding hills. The Meiteis as well as the twenty-two tribes who inhabit the hills belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group but the culture of the Meiteis had undergone a profound change through their adoption of Hinduism in the form of Vaisnavism of Bengal. The region's complex demography is reflected in the population growth patterns of Assam and Tripura. In 1826, Assam had a population of a million but by 1981, it has increased to over 20 million, which is not a natural growth but is due mainly to the influx of immigrants from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). In Tripura the ethnic composition has changed due to post-partition influx from East Pakistan.

In the hill areas of the north-east except Arunachal Pradesh, the Christian missions of various denominations working for a hundred years have brought about a noticeable cultural change: the American Baptists worked in Naga hills, the Welsh presbyterians in Khasi and Jaintia hills, the Baptist mission in Garo hills and the Baptists and the Anglicans in Lushai hills; they have created bastions of the Christian religious faith and a new tribal ethos and culture deeply influenced by Christianity. In several parts of the region the Church leaders introduced the Roman script, took up the writing of grammars and dictionary and translated Christian texts into the tribal languages. However, in Arunachal Pradesh there were a good number of Buddhist tribes and others who followed an indigenous faith.

After the transfer of power, changes within the new democratic framework were introduced in the tribal areas. The adoption of the

Indian constitution in January 1950 changed the very complexion of politics and administration in the region. The political reorganisation of the region was completed by the enactment of the North Eastern Areas Act, 1971 and finally, by the grant of statehood to Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. The special provisions in the constitution for scheduled tribes and the provisions for the Sixth Schedule which delegated legislative functions for the tribes to legislate on the ownership and use of land, the preservation of the tribal customs and administration of tribal laws created a new political structure in place of the colonial system with its concept of excluded and partially excluded areas and other restrictive provisions made applicable through special law or regulation. Tribal insurgencies like those in Mizoram or Nagaland had been a disturbing factor, no doubt but one cannot but agree here with the verdict of a seasoned administrator who said, 'it is not possible for any society to undergo the kind of revolutionary change that the tribal society in the north-east has undergone, in many places in a single generation and in others at most in two, without setting up the most severe stresses and strains within the body politic'[1].

II

Expansion of the empire became a major thrust of British policy by the end of the eighteenth century. The imperialist attitude was bluntly projected by Lord Wellesley, whose sense of racial superiority was matched by his ambition to expand the empire. This expansionist policy was also influenced by the evangelist preference for free trade and the view that Britain's superior civilization and commercial leadership made the imperial undertaking a mission.[2]

In reality the evangelist postulate for reinforcing the empire was manifest in the continuous effort to expand and consolidate the process of empire-building. As far as north-east India was concerned, its importance was also considered in terms of the security of the empire. The empire needed to keep watch on the sensitive region bordering Tibet and China. For instance when Upper Burma was annexed in 1886, it had two objectives: to protect commercial interest and to acquire a gateway to Yunnan and south-west China.

North-east had long been regarded as a distinct geopolitical unit although it became a unified territory for the first time in the nineteenth century. In fact the geographical location of the region has been such that it was called the meeting place of the two great civilizations of India and China.[3]

The region is surrounded by Tibet and Bhutan on the northern side, China on the north-eastern side; on the south there is Burma. It is also enclosed by natural boundaries, with the Himalayas on the north, Lushai hills on the south, the plains of Manipur in between the Naga Hills and Chin hills of Burma. Historically, the Brahmaputra valley was the heart land. The importance of the valley in ancient times can be understood from the following observation:

> The Assam-Burma route started from Pataliputra (Patna) which was the ancient capital of India, passed by Champa (Bhagalapur), Kajangala (Rajmahal), and Pundavardhana (north Bengal) and proceeded to Kamrupa (Gauhati) in Assam. From Assam to Burma the routes to Burma were three in early times as now: one by the valley of the Brahmaputra up to the Patkoi range and through its passes up to upper Burma; the second through Manipur to the Chindwin valley; the third through Arakan up to the Irrawaddy valley.[4]

It is also surmised that the Buddhist monks had carried Buddhism to south China by the Assam-Burma route in the early centuries of the Christian era.

Migrations of different groups of people into the hills and plains of the region took place in different periods of history and the process continued till the eighteenth century. Assam, situated on the eastern extremity for the sub-continent, surrounded by inaccessible mountain ranges marked the eastern limit to the eastward Aryan migration. The tribes in the hills have been identified as belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid group who spoke languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family with the solitary exception of the Khasi language, which is Austric in origin.

The Khasis had migrated most probably from south-east Asia, the Garos from the southern side of Tibet, the Kukis from southern China while the Nagas, it has been speculated came along with the second wave of emigration from the traditional cradle of the Indo-Chinese in north-western China, which explains their strong affinities with the natives of Burma and Philippines but one can be certain of only one thing—in the process of transition none retained the racial purity. But the ethnic traits were retained in their languages, the social systems and the different levels of culture they carried with them.

In the nineteenth century, the missionaries and the colonial administrators wrote on Assam's history. Jenkins wrote in the *Journal of Asiatic Society* on an important copperplate grant; William Robinson wrote his *Descriptive Account of Assam* in 1840; Jenkins also compiled a

selection of papers on the hill tracts between Assam and Burma. The interest in historical research culminated in Edward Gait's account of the inscriptions, coins, historical and semi-historical manuscripts and other source materials published in 1897.

Most of the colonial writing falls in the category of descriptive ethnography, not a sociological history. In the hill areas they made no effort to rework the local histories backward in order to understand the migration pattern or the ways of life in the pre-colonial period. Studies of the oral history for instance of the Khasis have revealed that 'Khasi migration to the present homeland had been of the nature of the members of each Kur (clan) migrating together from east to west'.[5]

It is also found that there were several stages of evolution of the political organization of the Khasis before it led to the formation of the Khasi state.

Assam: Medieval to Modern

Assamese language originating from Eastern Magadhi prakrit, a branch of the Indo-Aryan, developed around the twelfth century AD.

The first Aryan migration took place in the early centuries of the Christian era.[6] The Aryan speaking groups of Eastern India who settled on the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley carried a superior agricultural civilization. These groups speaking the Aryan language were all plough cultivators. Some of them belonging to these groups were peasant artisans who had at one time or the other came under the influence of Buddhism. Their social organization was influenced by Buddhism. These early Aryan speaking groups were the forerunners or the founders of the basic pattern of the social organization in the old Assamese society. About the linguistic antecedents of these groups, it has been said:

> The dialect of pracya was the one current in what is now Oudh and Eastern U.P. and probably also Bihar. This dialect was current among the Vratyas who were wandering Aryan-speaking tribes who did not owe allegiance to the Vedic fire-cult and the Brahmanic social and religious organization; and the pracyas or Easterners were also described as Asura or demoniac, i.e. barbarian and hostile for whom the Vedic Aryan had no great love.[7]

The Vedic literature also speak of the Vratyas who had their settlement in Eastern India especially in 'Videha, Magadha and Pragjyotisha'.[8]

The first wage of Aryanization in Bengal was brought by the Vratyas or the non-Vedic Aryans, who also according to some scholars gave birth to Buddhism and Jainism. There was a difference between the Vedic

Brahmanical Aryans of the Upper Gangetic valley and the Aryan-speaking Vratyas who wandered into the Brahmaputra valley and settled there. Scholars also link them with the Bhauma or Naraka or the Varman dynasty who ruled Assam (Pragjyotisha) till the middle of the seventh century.[9]

It is clear that the first settlers of the Brahmaputra valley cleared the dense forests with their iron implements in order to cultivate with the plough and the 'first cattle breeders and food producers had no need to push anyone back' as D.D. Kosambi has clarified:

> The dispalcement of tribal people implies they were formerly settled where the main settlement now happen to be. This is highly improbable, for the most productive lands today either need heavy irrigation or were dense jungles fit only for certain amount of hunting in the driest seasons.[10]

It is seen that the Bodo-Kacharis in the Brahmaputra valley and other tribals practised shifting cultivation and were more used to broadcast of seeds than to transplanting; this was so even in the medieval period. Significantly, 'the terms of most of the items of agricultural implements connected with settled cultivation in the languages of the such tribal groups of the plains as the Missings, the Karbis, the Rabhan are loan words from the Assamese; this shows their earlier connection with shifting cultivation'.[11]

It has also been indicated how the process of Aryanization had gone beyond the Brahmaputra valley. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee holds that 'The Aryan language spread in the wake of the spread of the agricultural communities, in this way a wedge of Aryan language spread through the plain lands of Sylet between the Bodos of the east and those of Tripura'.[12]

It seems that the early Aryan speakers of the Brahmaputra valley through their interaction with other groups speaking a Tibeto-Burman or Sino-Tibetan language laid the foundation of Assamese language in the medieval period. The other significant feature that emerged was that the social institutions that undermined caste and gave a certain distinctiveness to the Assamese social identity during the impact of neo-Vaisnavism were to a great extent derived from the early Buddhist traditions of Eastern India. The process of initiation to Vaisnava 'Guru' for instance called 'Sharan' differed from the orthodox Hindu system of 'Diksha', similarly the traditional democratic institution of 'Namghar' was essentially in the pattern of a 'Buddha Vihar'.[13] Significantly, neo-Vaisnavism in Assam sanctioned the initiation of Brahmins by the 'Sudras' into the religious order. This process is most probably not seen

in Bengal Vaisnavism or in any other movement of Brahmanical Vaisnavism. It is seen that it worked in favour of a different type of caste formation in Assam.[14]

It is evident that Aryanization in Eastern India in the ancient period was more closely connected with an agricultural civilization. It was not only of the unorthodox type—it was through the Vratya Aryans who weilded the plough in the Brahmaputra and the Surma valleys, the process also assimilated the elements of an Austric and Mongoloid cultures of ancient Assam. In the Brahmaputra valley groups or tribes who had not taken to this process, which the Aryan speaking groups had started by taking recourse to plough cultivation much earlier were still settled in the submontante regions.[15] The following observation brings this out clearly.

> So in the early years of British administration in Assam most of the various Bodo-Kachari communities of the valley were either using hoes or were passing through a transition from hoe to plough. They were carrying on shifting cultivation in some form or other. The only exceptions to this were the well settled Kachari villages of upper Assam who had adopted the plough and sali rice culture side by side with Ahu quite early. So it will not be incorrect to say that the use of plough, if any, by the Bodo-Kachari people in the thirteenth century was insignificant. Even when the plough was adopted, it did not mean an end to the shifting cultivation.[16]

The disintegration of the old kingdoms and the beginning of a new kingdom that was to last nearly six hundred years make the thirteenth century a kind of watershed in the political and cultural history of Assam. Baikanta Kakati put it succinctly:

> Since the beginning of the thirteenth century the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. After the fall of the last Hindu king of the Pala dynasty, a class of local potentates called the Bhuyans were keeping watch over the broken fragments of the ancient Hindu kingdom like so many wardens of the marshes without any overlord. But even their vigils were challenged by the entry of the Ahoms, the rise of the Kacharis in the east and of Kochs in the west.[17]

The Ahoms, a branch of the Shan tribe of the Tai-Mongoloid race entered Assam from the upper Burma region in 1228 and established their rule which lasted till 1826. Before the Ahoms could consolidate their rule, they had to defeat the Chutiyas, another Shan tribe who entered Assam earlier and established their rule in the east after overthrowing the Pala dynasty. They also defeated the Kochs, a group of Indo-Mongoloid tribes, became Hinduized and ruled over a wide

territory to the south and the west, and the Kacharis who at one time occupied a considerable portion of the lower Brahmaputra valley and the plains of Cachar. It is an important point of Assam's history that all these groups, the Chutiyas, the Kacharis and last of all the Ahoms not only became Hindus but through a process of assimilation became, in course of time, merged in the larger Assamese identity. The Koch king Nara Narayan (1540-64) earned considerable popularity by spreading Vaisnavism in the sixteenth century. It is significant that a process of Sanskritization and detribalization was going on throughout this period.[18]

By the seventeenth century, the Ahom rule established its authority almost over the whole province. The Ahom king adopted Hinduism as his religion and Assamese as his language. As the Ahom rulers abandoned their own language and script, the 'Buranjis', their unique historical record came to be written in Assamese. The Buranjis broke away from the earlier style, which became very natural, adopting the language of the people. This tradition of the Ahom court helped the language of eastern Assam to become the literary language of the whole province in due course.

The distinctive character of Ahom monarchy cannot be studied without going into that intrinsic connection that exists between rights over land and the system of government. Under the Ahom system the bulk of the adult male population with the exception of the nobility and the serfs was required to render personalized service in return of the lands given for cultivation and out of every four 'paiks' (common cultivator) one was required to serve the state militia on a rotational basis. The Ahom state has been variously described as tribal-feudal or military-feudal because of this connection between the cultivating class and the state militia. There was a strict hierarchy with the lowest rung of the peasantry required to provide free manual labour or service in the militia. In the society, one's position was largely determined by birth and the highest officials had to be recruited exclusively from the seven families (Sat-ghar), constituting the Ahom nobility. That was why 'the Ahom nobility from the very beginning held the social gap that existed within the Assamese Hindu society as legitimate. They even made common cause with the Brahmins against the non-conformism of neo-Vaisnavism, since it tended to promote an egalitarian social outlook'.[19]

The Ahom rulers later came to patronise the Brahmanical Sastras or neo-Vaisnavite nonasteries; they gave them liberal land endowments with no obligation to pay revenue. They succeeded in driving a wedge between the two sects of the neo-Vaisnavites but the bulk of the peasantry

remained with the democratic order of the non-Brahmanical neo-Vaisnavite institutions.

This dichotomy was later manifest in the lingering civil war (1770-1806) in which the rulers faced militant opposition and revolt from a section of the neo-Vaisnavite peasantry.

Under the Ahom rule all land theoretically belonged to the king; the state also controlled the distribution of the wetlands, the extraction and distribution of surplus for the maintenance of the state and the nobility. 'The Ahom kings', it has been observed 'by issuing copperplate charters created permanent rights over considerable tracts of land in favour of the privileged few.'[20] The privileged few held revenue free lands; the peasantry held land directly from the state without any prescriptive rights.

'By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the feudal fabric of the Ahom rule and the divided nobility were on the throes of disintegration. The Burmese invasions further hastened the process. The fall of the Ahom monarchy and the disintegration of the social structure had other consequences; the nobility lost its privileged position; the agrarian structure closely linked to the hierarchical system broke down totally. The ruling class ridden with infighting could hardly revive the system at a time when successive Burmese invasions and internal dissensions had devastated large parts of the country. The unstable condition of the last days of the Ahom rule reduced a large number of peasants to the category of serfs and slaves, many of them accepted the condition of dependent tenancy and bonded labour.[21]

However, in the earlier period, the Ahom rulers increased agricultural production to a large extent specially in upper Assam by extension of cultivation to large tracts of wasteland. From the seventeenth century they started giving land grants to temples and Brahmanical monasteries, thus expanding the base of the estate-holding class which facilitated extension of cultivation.

III

The British annexed Assam following their victory in the Anglo-Burmese war, and the treaty for Yandabu in 1826.

Assam came under the administrative jurisdiction of the Bengal government with its seat in Calcutta. The province was placed directly under the charge of David Scott, the Agent of the Governor General for the north-east frontier of Bengal. David Scott (1826-31) was succeeded by Robertson (1831-34) and Jenkins (1834-66) and these

three, specially David Scott and Jenkins, introduced a structurally different administrative system in the province. Although operating strictly within the framework of the colonial policy and the colonial objectives, they sought to bring about changes which would noticeably change or modify the social structure of the earlier regime.

The colonial justification in early nineteenth century was to a large extent shaped by the ideas of Mill and Bentham:[22] it was mainly on the utilitarian lines that David Scott combined what has been called a paternalistic approach with the economic and the commercial interests of the British. Initially, David Scott settled the whole of upper Assam with the representative of the Ahom monarchy on a fixed tribute in 1833 (but on the failure of Purandar Singha, the territory was resumed in 1838). The rest of the province was divided into four districts: Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara, of which the last one was permanently settled under the Bengal system.

Throughout the early part of the nineteenth century the colonial government tried to introduce new terms of settlement, raised revenue; the large number of cultivators were reduced to the position of bonded labour. In 1830, David Scott released 12,000 cultivators who bonded themselves; further, as a matter of policy, slavery and serfdom were abolished by enacting a law in 1843. Several proposals for grant of waste land on concessional rates or on a graduated system of assessment fell through as the bulk of the peasants had no means to either invest on land or pay tax under the monetised economy. David Scott who had long experience of working in the province thought of improving farm earnings through 'opium, Muga, mulberry silk which were being cultivated by individual households all over Assam' and which 'could be further developed without involving a European managed plantation system' but this was never given a fair trial by the government. A restructuring of the entire agrarian system seemed to be the only option. A comparison of the agrarian situation of Assam with that of Maharastra or Punjab would certainly throw more light on this problem.

It was seen that it was through the relatively less exploitative land system (compared to Assam or Bengal under permanent settlement) that social power was distributed in the Maharastra village. The villagers were grouped into hereditary landholders and peasants, the difference between them being more social than economic.[23] Around 1815, Metcalfe in Delhi territory was looking for a system different from that of Bengal. Metcalfe ruled that land could not be sold or alienated except by the consent of all the proprietors. This ruled out the custom of Bengal, of selling land for arrears of revenue with all its disastrous consequences.

The Bengal experience had also shown that there was no relation between the landed aristocracy and direct capitalist farming. On other hand, the zamindars preferred usurious exploitation to risky investments and multiplied the rent manifold by the 'use of arbitrarily short standards of measurement which multiplied the cultivated area' and sheer physical coercion—which amounted to an attack on the new security won by the occupancy ryots'.[24]

The first settlement in Assam was conducted in 1839-40 on the basis of occupancy ryots; the ryot had to pay rent in addition to plough and hoe tax, there was no uniformity or even certainty with regard to the nature and extent of the land rights. There were differing views on whether there was need to have a group of intermediaries on the lines of Bengal or to create a legal basis for sub-letting. In 1853, A.J. Moffatt Mills, a judge, was deputed to enquire into condition in Assam. Two distinguished Assamese gentlemen of the time, Maniram Dewan (1806-58) who later achieved great renown as a martyr, being executed for his part in the revolt of 1857, and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) Dewan's younger contemporary, western educated and far more progressive in intent submitted two separate memorials which still provide both an authentic documentation and a penetrating insight into political and social realities of the province. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, educated in Presidency College, Calcutta, widely read and in touch with the progressive Bengali elite of the day offered a lucid exposition of the realities of the province of the early decades of the nineteenth century, mildly indicting the colonial government, thereby testifying to the rise of a new political consciousness among the educated elite. Maheswar Neog summarises thus: 'The heads of the government have never taken occasion to enquire into the state of the country; and although twenty-eight years have elapsed since the annexation of Assam to the British empire little perceptible change has been effected in the condition of the people and the good government of the province'.[25] He argued against the introduction of the Bengal land tenure in Assam for under permanent settlement 'the art of agriculture stands nearly in the same rude state as it was several centuries back. He also drew attention to the high rate of revenue collection pointing out that in the ancient system it never exceeded roughly one-sixth of the produce. He pleaded for the modernization of agriculture, revival of silk and cotton in the province. He also demanded for bringing down revenue from the prevailing rate of 50% or 60% of the produce. Later, the Assam Ryot Association and the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha represented for long-term settlement without the enhancement of revenue.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 legally conferred the common landholder's rights; this provided a complete legal basis to the region's ryotwari system that had been taking shape in the course of the preceeding six decades of the British rule. It gave even the small landholder a security of tenure. It was not generally true of Assam as it was of some parts of India that the actual ryots on whom land rights were settled were large landholders for 'small landholders were numerous and they accounted for almost all the temporary settled estates'.[26]

It was obvious that the burden of enhanced taxation fell all the more heavily on the small farmer; this led to much discontent and in several districts, there were agrarian riots in the last part of the nineteenth century.

IV

In the first half the nineteenth century the colonial government offered very liberal terms of land settlement to enable foreign investment in tea cultivation. The Assam Tea Company, later turned into a Sterling Company was formed in 1839; ninety-five Europeans served the company as members of the staff in these two decades; it stimulated systematic coal exploration in upper Assam. The first man to promote tea in Assam was also on its staff initially, he was none other than Maniram Dewan, whose two tea gardens were confiscated for his alleged conspiracy to overthrow the British government in 1857, a charge, on account of which Dewan was executed after an unfair trial.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw several developments connected with the tea industry. In 1900, the acreage under tea was 3,37,327 acres and the total area under tea gardens stood at 10,59,624 acres. The industry opened up lines of communication; first river steamer services, then railways: the Dibru-Sadiya Railway, Jorhat Provincial Railway and the Assam-Bengal Railway. While investments in tea amounted to 110.9 million rupees. Railway investment amounted to 62.4 million rupees. Tea formed 68% of the exports from Assam. The later part of the nineteenth century saw vast improvement in the process of tea manufacturing, and improved scientific plantation of tea in Assam. But there was also an imbalance; an extremely backward agriculture sector living side by side with a capital intensive modern sector.

Extensive tea plantations in upper Assam, specially in the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur—where also the two major companies the Assam Tea Company and the Jorehaut Tea Company were located—

brought about some urbanized economic activity, changed the landscape in bringing about an aura of change and social mobility. It was natural therefore that most of the Assamese entrepreneurs who ventured into the opening of small tea gardens without any hope of support form foreign capital belonged to these two districts (now six) of upper Assam. It is not surprising that some of them in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth centuries were in the vanguard of the educated middle class movements in the Assamese society. Among these entrepreneurs was Jagannath Barooah (1851-1907) who after graduating from the Presidency College, Calcutta in 1872 refused to take up high government job, established several tea gardens, was closely associated with the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha and was for several decades an important spokesman of the progressive and educated elite of the province. Among the Assmese entrepreneurs of tea—there were at least a fifty by the turn of the century—were Ghanashyam Barua (1867-1923), a law graduate of Calcutta University, Devicharan Barua (1864-1926) also a law graduate, Kali Prasad Chaliha (1862-1914) who started four gardens, Bisturam Barua who owned three tea gardens before 1900, Munshi Rahamat Ali, who owned two tea gardens, Haribilas Agarwala and his son Chandra Kumar Agarwala, an important figure of the Assamese literary renaissance in the nineteenth century.

It is significant that there were a good number of educated Muslims among the first Assamese who ventured to establish tea gardens; in the newly forming middle class in the Brahmaputra valley there was no great divide as in Bengal.

In 1874 Assam was separated from Bengal and became a Chief Commissioner's province. Assamese language, banished from the schools and law courts for nearly four decades was reinstated in 1872. This was an important point in Assam's cultural history. It energised a creative flowering in literature in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The troubled legacy of the native language and the neglect of the government resulted in slow expansion of education: the number of primary schools for girls at the end of the century stood at 202 with just 3,159 students on rolls. The position was unfavourable as compared with other parts of the country:

> Sharp regional disparities posed another problem causing perennial tension as English education increasingly became a sole path to good jobs. The Public Service Commission of 1886-87 found 18,390 'educated natives' in Madras, 16,639 in Bengal, 7,196 in Bombay but only 3,200 in

the United Provinces, 1944 in Punjab, 608 in the Central Provinces and 274 in Assam.[27]

Among the educated Assamese who earned extraordinary distinction in the nineteenth century was Anmundaram Barooah (1850-89) who joined Presidency College, Calcutta in 1865, a contemporary of R.C. Dutt and S.M. Banerjee. Later he qualified for the ICS and was posted as District Magistrate, Noakhali in Bengal, after his probation as Assistant Commissioner in Assam. He earned great renown as a Sanskrit scholar and lexicographer.

Till his time, there was no institution of higher education in Assam. In 1892, M.C. College, Sylet was started and in the Brahmaputra valley, Cotton College was established by the turn of the century.

V

Within a decade of occupation of Assam the British had to confront and overcome two rebellions in Assam (1828-29) and another, longer one in the Khasi territory (1829-33). A more serious challenge was in 1857, led by Maniram Dewan (1805-58) who had earlier in 1853 submitted a strong critique of British rule and pleaded for restoration of the old monarchy and the feudal privileges. Dewan's execution by the British made him a national martyr adding a new dimension to the emerging spirit of nationalism in the early years of the freedom struggle in Assam.

The political consciousness represented in the person of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) was different in kind. He was not at all for a return to feudal privileges of the older regime. He was for progress in the western sense of the word; which meant material progress on new lines with an enlightened middle class and a strong local peasantry. Like Rammohan he believed that 'British rule, though unquestionably a foreign yoke had a regenerative aspect and required a mediation'.[28] It has been rightly observed:

> Dhekial Phukan, on the other hand, was in every respect a product of the modern age of enlightenment. He got his inspiration from contemporary Bengal renaissance and from what he read about England's material progress and Peter the Great's reforms in medieval Russia. He dreamt of days when reform and material progress would surely dawn upon Assam.[29]

Last two decades of the nineteenth century saw a new pace of colonial progress. A consolidation for the Assamese middle class had taken place.

It was significant that Jagannath Barooah in his civic welcome address to Lord Curzon on when the latter came to Assam at the turn of the century raised a number of economic demands and also pressed the right of representation for the Assamese in the imperial legislature. Earlier in 1897, the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha under his leadership argued in a representation in favour of a 'much larger middle class, who in every country in the world lead the van of progress'.

This pleading had deeper implications for what the middle class was faced with was not a political but an economic crisis. They were actually looking forward to a broad based elite, not the predatory elite of Bengal-type land intermediaries. The settlement of land had been made directly between the state and the cultivator and the occupancy rights had been made secure but the idea of a 'yeoman' class of farmer perhaps did not materialise because of the exorbitant taxation in relation to agricultural income. Assamese middle class was at that point aligning themselves with the peasantry in their discontents that came to the surface in the nineties.

Significant cultural trends became pronounced towards the last two decades of the nineteenth century. There was a flowering of creativity in different genres of literature representing a literary renaissance in Assamese literature. It was closely allied with the broad stream of the pan-Indian cultural development of the time. Bengal renaissance was already having a decisive impact on the educated Assamese sensibility. Assamese readers were becoming very familiar with the writings of Michael Madhusudhan Dutta (1824-73), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). A new literary journal called *Jonaki* (published in 1889) through its manifold contributions specially in the field of lyrical poetry ushered in a new age in Assamese literature. Laksminath Bezbarua (1868-1938), the foremost Assamese writer for nearly half a century till the thirties produced short stories, dramas, poetry and a novel and also wrote extensively on Assam's past history, religion, language and culture. A sense of tradition and a stress on a distinct cultural and historical identity were part of this deeper search for meaning in the resurgence of literature.

The sense of a cultural identity was not a product of the colonial forces, it was also not confined to the elite. There were continuities in it from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which give it a different kind of historical weightage. On the other hand, a discontinuity between the 'new colonial state' and the predecessor regime has to be recognized.[30] The economic forces of the colonial period had no similarity with those

of the pre-colonial period in Assam. This makes the situation in the north-eastern region in the nineteenth century very much different.

NOTES

1. B.K. Nehru, *Thoughts on our Present Discontents*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 136-48.
2. Michael Edwards, *British India 1772-1947*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1947.
3. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, University of Gauhati, Gauhati, 1970, p. 32.
4. Probodh Chandra Bagchi, *India and China, A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations*, Hind Kitabs, Bombay, p. 17.
5. R.S. Lyngdoh, *Government and Politics in Meghalaya*, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 136-40.
6. This is well established from various sources including the Nidhanpur copperplate (sixth century AD) and also the Umachal rock inscription (fifth century AD) mentioned in D.C. Sircar *Studies the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India*, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1971, pp. 81-2.
7. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Indo-Aryan and Hindi*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhaya Calcutta, 1960, pp. 60-5.
8. B.N. Puri *Studies in Early History and Administration of Assam*, (Third Banikanta Kakati Memorial Lectures), Gauhati University, Guhati, 1966, p. 6.
9. It is believed that this dynasty was founded by Pusyavarman. See D.C. Dircar, *Religious Life in Ancient and Medieval India*, p. 80.
10. D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956, p. 113.
11. Birendra Nath Dutta, 'The Study of Folklore Material of North-East India', *The Assam Academy Review*, 1983-84 (in one combined volume), p. 229.
12. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Kirata Jana-Kriti*, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951, p. 126.
13. 'The village name house (Namghar) is an autonomous unit not subject to the authority of the Gurus', see Audrey Cantlie, *The Assames: Religion, Caste and Sect in an Indian Village*, School Oriental and African Studies, London, 1985, p. 157.
14. H.K. Barpujari, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. V. Chapter 9, Assam Publication Board, Gauhati, 1993, pp. 151-64.
15. Dev Raj Chanana, 'The Spread of Agriculture in the Gangatic Valley' in Tapan Raychandhuri, ed. *Contributions to Indian Economic History*, II, Calcutta, 1963.
16. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences and K.P. Bagchi, Calcutta, 1991, p. 69.
17. Banikanta Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Rehabari, Gauhati, 1948, p. 80.
18. Amalendu Guha, op. cit., pp. 91-4
19. Ibid., p. 106.
20. Ibid., p. 47
21. The registered 'paik' as distinguished from dependent tenant was entitled to two puras or 2.66 acres of wetland which he could cultivate revenue free in lieu of his obligatory service to state.
22. See Wellesley's statement of the Directors of East India Company on 9 July 1800 quoted in H.W. French and Arvind Sharma, *Religious Ferment in Modern India*, 1981, p. 10: 'We feel that it would not only be unpolitic, but highly immoral to

suppose that providence has admitted of the establishment of British power over the finest provinces of India, with any other view than that of its being conducive to the happiness of the people, as well as to our national advantage.'

23. Ravindra Kumar, 'Rural Life in Western India', in T.R. Metcalf, ed., *Modern India: An Interpretive Anthology* Macmillan, New Delhi, 1971, pp. 66-102.
24. Percival Spear, 'Twilight of the Mughuls' in T.R. Metcalf, ed., ibid., pp. 146-62.
25. Maheswar Neog, *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan,* Assam Sahitya Sabha, Gauhati, 1977, p. 60.
26. Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam.*
27. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India,* Macmillan, New Delhi, 1983, p. 66.
28. Alok Bhalla and Sudhir Chandra, eds., *Indian Responses to Colonialim in the 19th Century,* New Delhi, 1993, p. 105.
29. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj,* ICHR, New Delhi, p. 21.
30. The political 'discontinuity' between the 'new colonial state and the predecessor regimes is emphasised in Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial History,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994 (pp. 26-7), but he also indicates that 'the economic institutions of capitalism of India today, such as commodity production, trading and banking capital, methods of accounting, a stock of educated expertise and of mercantile groups that would ultimately become industrial entrepreneurs, emerged in the pre-colonial period' (ibid., p. 29).