

COLONIAL BARAK VALLEY: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECT

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Abstract

Barak Valley, the southernmost region of the state of Assam bears a rich socio-cultural heritage. The region is at present comprised of three districts viz. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The major portion of the region was under the suzerainty of the Kachari rule during the pre-colonial period. The society in Barak Valley was agriculturist in nature, which follows a well maintained hierarchy of workers at different grade and collection of land revenue was the main source of income. Owing to the internal conflicts in the Ahom rules, the Burmese invaded Assam, of which Cachar was a part. The Burmese invasion, though short lived but it was marked by the total ruin of the country and its people. The situation ultimately attracts the attention of the British to oust the Burmese from Assam and accordingly began the Anglo-Burmese war in 1824, which was ended with the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. According to the terms of this treaty, the Burmese renounced their rights on Assam as well as the neighboring kingdoms of Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur. Thus, the introduction of British rule brought some qualitative changes in the socio-economic life of the people of Assam in general and Barak Valley in particular. The old pattern of administration got changed, the revenue system was revived, educational establishment began its journey, new opportunities opened up on a large scale, facilities for trade and commerce increased, middle class emerged, the means of communication gradually improved, opportunities for jobs opened up etc. of course with the motive to consolidate their own position in India by the British. However, in order to understand the contemporary society and issues involved therein, it is imperative to look into the relevant past. Hence an attempt is made here to look back into the past, particularly into the nature of society in the colonial Barak Valley. It is expected that, this study would enable us to understand the forces that facilitated the rise of nationalism, particular kind of regionalism and multiple varieties of localism and how and when these forces contradicted one another and how and when they worked in unison as the situation so demanded and the influence of these processes on the progress of this region.

Keywords: Society, Culture, Colonialism, Transition, British, Nationalism, Regionalism etc.

1.1: INTRODUCTION

The present state of Assam is comprised of three physical divisions' viz. the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the Hill Range. The Brahmaputra Valley which forms Northern part is the largest in size comprising 71.7% of total geographical area of the state. On the other hand Barak Valley region which forms Southern Part is comparatively smaller in size. The two valleys derive their names from the respective main rivers - the Brahmaputra and the Barak flowing through East to West in the Valleys. The Hill region formed by the Karbi-Anglong and the North Cachar Hills district which separates two valleys from the middle.

The Barak Valley region is situated between Longitude 92⁰15" and 93⁰15" East and Latitude 24⁰8" and 25⁰8" North, covering an area of 6922 Sq. Km. The Valley constitutes 8.9% of the geographical area of the state but it contains 11.22% of the population as per 2011 census. The region shares its border with North Cachar Hills district and the state of Meghalaya in the North, the state of Manipur in the East; the state of

Mizoram in the South; and the state of Tripura and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the west. Administratively, the region at present is comprised of three districts, viz. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Cachar is the largest district and Hailakandi is the smallest with total geographical areas of 3786 Sq. Km. and 1327 Sq. Km. respectively and the area of Karimganj district is 1809 Sq. Km as per 2011 census.

The society in Barak Valley was agriculturist in nature under the Kachari rule. It follows a well maintained hierarchy of workers at different grade and collection of land revenue was the main source of income. Initially, the rent was extremely low, the earliest mentioned rates being a he-goat, a pair of fowls, a duck, and two coco-nuts from each holding, irrespective of its size. Subsequently, the rent was fixed at 12 *annas* for each *hal*. Kartik Chandra raised the rate for the *hal* to Rs- 3; and it is said that Gobind Chandra, the last of the Kachari Rajas, obtained from some lands as much as Rs-6 per *hal*. The lands which of course were originally under jungle were settled not with individuals, but with corporations called *raj*. Each *raj*, again, was sub-divided into minor corporations or *khels*, which formed the real units of the revenue system. Each individual in the *khel* was held jointly and severally responsible for the revenue assessed on the *khel*, similarly each *khel* was responsible for the payments of its *raj*.

The *khel* elected its own mouthpiece, known as *mukhtar*. Certain portion of the area allotted to each *khel* was appropriated rent free to persons of standing; and of the lands remaining, every man received as much as he could cultivate. The system of rent free grants was discontinued by Govinda Chandra, but the influence and recognized position of the grantees endured long afterwards. The head-men of the *raj* and *khel* were primarily responsible for the revenue, which was collected in the following fashion: A Cachari peon was sent to the house of the head-man with a demand for payment. The head-man then sounded a drum or fired a gun if the demand was urgent. When the people came together the revenue was forthwith collected. Defaulters, after being allowed a short respite, were arrested and brought before the Raja. If it appeared that they had no means, the sharers in the *taluk*, or separate estate, were invited to enter upon the defaulters' land, on condition of satisfying the arrears. If they declined, the holding was given to the *khel*. If the *khel* failed to pay, the land lapsed to the *raj*, which could not be refused. The *paikan khel* was the name of an estate, the rent of which was devoted to the expenses of the worshipping the goddess Ran Chandi; *Vishnughar khel* was appropriated to Lakshmi Narayan; and *Bhisingsa khel*, to the goddess Shama or Kali. Many of these last mentioned *khels* are now called *mauzas*. (Hunter, 1879, vol. ii, pp 414-16).

Thus, the socio-cultural scenario of Cachar was semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature. It was on this socio-political formation that the British administration was to operate.

1.2: BEGINNING OF COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

The internal contradictions which the Kachari rulers failed to resolve, paved the way for neighbouring rulers' intervention and throwing the entire society of Cachar Valley into a state of uncertainty and gloom. At this critical stage, the colonial ruler intervened and colonized Cachar. It was annexed to British dominion by a proclamation issued by the Board of East India Company on August 14, 1832. The colonization gradually broke the isolation of Cachar by making it a part of British India and thereby linking it with the colonial

capitalist world economy. The penetration of colonialism added new complexities with serious socio-political and economic ramification into the hybrid social formation composed of the Bengalees and the Tribals.

Cachars' incorporation into the colonial system led to the abandonment of the Kachari way of administration. Initially, the colonizers patronized the pre-colonial Kachari aristocracy in their administration. With the passage of time, this system did not fit into the new system based on bureaucratic principle of maintaining formal and written records. Hence, it was replaced by a new British Mughul system of administration. Thus, modern western education became a precondition for the entry into the colonial administration. In case of Cachar, this vacuum was filled by the districts of Bengal which was colonized much earlier. Without any investment in Western education in Assam, the colonizers profitably availed the service of the already surplus educated unemployed persons from Bengal Presidency.

Immediately after annexation, the local officials realized that unless the depopulated lands were resettled and uncultivated tracts were brought under cultivation, material progress would be adversely affected. Accordingly, a systematic policy was followed to increase population. Captain Fisher, the then Superintendent of Cachar, took the initiative in this regard and he made the official arrangement for the settlement. Accordingly, people from different corners accepted land in Cachar and they were mostly Bengalees from the district of Sylhet, Mymensing and Komilla. The earliest Bengalee population of Cachar belonged to agrarian community. It is to be mentioned here that, during the British rule, Bengalees of all castes had migrated to Cachar. But, because of its agrarian base, bulk of its population were agriculturist and belonged to the lower strata of Hindu social hierarchy, namely-*Nath, Patnis, Jogis* and *Namasudras*.

Like other regions in India, the British conquest led to a revolution in the existing land holding system in Cachar. The *Royatwari* system introduced by the British superseded the traditional right of the guild over the land and it also started qualitatively different land revenue system. The colonial system monetized the land revenue system and the users had to pay the revenue direct to the Government. As mentioned earlier, the inhabitants of Cachar were agriculturists. The peasants had either *Khas* land in their possession or land held in sub-tenancy. This agrarian population was known as *Mirasdar* in Cachar. It needs to be mentioned here that since the *Dimasa* Kingdom in Cachar was not within British domain in 1789, the permanent settlement was not introduced there. Thus, the land revenue system of the pre partitioned district of Cachar differed from that of Sylhet district. As a result, it was only in Karimganj region that the permanent system was in vogue in 1947, when this part of Sylhet became a part of Cachar district.

The British colonizers established a distinctly new type of structure in Indian subcontinent. It was highly centralized and ramified in the remotest corners of the country. They established hierarchically graded public services which brought about administrative unification of the country. Immediately after annexation, Cachar was placed under a superintendent to be administered as a non-regulated province under the control of the agent to the Governor General of North East Frontier. But, the geographical location and the socio-economic closeness of the two districts compelled the administrators to introduce the normal rules and regulations that were applicable in Sylhet. When Cachar passed under the commissioner of Dacca in 1836, many of the departments had common heads for Cachar and Sylhet. Needless to say, the British Government of India was an organized bureaucracy run by hierarchy of officials. The commissioner of Surma Valley

supervised the general affairs of the division, while the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar was in-charge of the district. For the purpose of general administration Cachar was divided into three sub-divisions viz- Silchar, Hailakandi and Haflong. In 1869, Hailakandi Division was created and placed under an Assistant Magistrate. In matters of judicial administration, the Deputy Commissioner acted as the District Civil Judge.

The urbanization was indeed a colonial contribution. The district and Sub-Divisional headquarters first grow into towns. Silchar became a municipality in 1860 and Hailakandi Sub-Division was managed by a Town Committee. The traders came mostly from Marwar, Rajputana (Today's Rajasthan). The local people took to petty shop keeping in a limited way. The communication which was hitherto so underdeveloped, gradually improved under British regime. At the initiative of Public Works Department (PWD), a number of roads were constructed. The most important being the Cachar Trunk Road, Silchar-Hailakandi Road, Silchar-Sylhet Road, and Jatinga Valley Road. The actual line of communication with outside world was, however, opened with the extension of the rail link. The Assam Bengal Railway covered Silchar in 1899. The Calcutta-Silchar and Calcutta-Karimganj steamer services were introduced by British Capitalist owned Joint Stock Company. There were ferry services in the river *ghats* in the valley. Improvement of communication established a close contact between the different parts of the country.

Administratively there existed two types of administration i.e. Karimganj being the part of Sylhet and greater Bengal *Suba*, was under the direct administration of the Mughals in the Medieval time and the early British administration following the defeat of Siraz ud daula, the Nawab of Bengal at the hands of the East India Company in the Battle of Plassy 1757 A.D. Contrary to this, the present districts of Cachar and Hailakandi were never under the Mughal administration and the British administration had a late head start in the region only after 1826, following the Treaty of Yandaboo signed as a mark to the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War. They were under the Tribal administration for centuries. Culturally, though for centuries Cachar and Sylhet maintained a close affinity, but practically what we see is that Sylhet being Bengali majority district flourished in Bengali culture, but in Cachar along with the Bengali culture more conservative tribal culture was also practiced.

Karimganj, being a part of Sylhet district, was inhabited by the Bengalees, both Hindus and Muslims also practised the same culture. But in Cachar, a tribal influenced region, a mixed culture was practised. The population of Cachar was a composition of the aboriginal tribal groups, the Bengali migrants both Hindus and Muslims, a sizeable population of Manipuries both Hindus and Muslims, the tea garden labourers migrated from Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other places, and the small group of Marwaris - the business group.

1.3: MAJOR SOCIAL GROUPS IN COLONIAL BARAK VALLEY

As a result of massive migration of various groups, distinct and new social groups gradually emerged in the Colonial Cachar in addition to the existing pre-colonial social groups. These new groups can be classified as shown in the table below. In order to understand the colonial society it would be necessary to comprehend the emerging class structure and dynamics in addition to social groups.

The Europeans though very small in number, was obviously the most powerful group. The Bengalees who came from lower provinces to assist the colonial rulers as their subordinates formed another group. In the absence of an indigenous business class, the Marwaris filled up the vacuum in big business. The Biharis came as labourer mostly in tea garden work. The migrant Muslim peasants occupied most of the waste and low lying land in Cachar. The plantation labour came from places in both North and South India and toiled to build massive tea estate in Cachar. In addition to these groups there was another small group, the Manipurians who were granted land by Captain Fisher, the then Superintendent of Cachar. These Manipuri grantees were settled in Cachar after they had been chased away by the Burmese from their own home land. They were mostly engaged in cultivation. Thus, in the early part of 20th century the present day Barak Valley stood as Karimganj Sub-Division of erstwhile Sylhet District, Hailakandi and Silchar Sub-Divisions of Cachar District under the greater Surma Valley division.

Table: The major Social Groups in Colonial Barak Valley

Sl. no.	Nationality/Community	Major occupations	Size and social standing in Colonial Cachar
1	The British	They were the Colonial administrator, dealing with Civil and Military affairs, Members of Christian Missions, Tea planters etc.	They were small but powerful, and influential community.
2	The American	They were mainly the Members of Christian Mission.	They were small and influential community.
3	The Marwaris	They were the Traders and businessmen.	They were small group, but rich and organized community.
4	The Caste Hindu-Bengalese	They were the holders of Lower grade jobs in the administration, monopolised the Tea garden, legal and academic professions.	They were Large in size and worked as collaborator and harbingers of new ideas.
5	The Lower Caste Hindu – Bengalese	They were holding the traditional profession, agriculture, weaving, fishing etc.	They were larger group, economically oppressed and hardly influential.
6	The Muslim – Bengalese	They were the Peasants, artisans and skilled labourers.	They were also formed the larger group, but under privileged and poor.
7	The Manipuris	They were mainly engaged in cultivation and handicrafts.	They were the small group, poor and not very influential.
8	The Biharis	They were mainly the labourers	They were Small, hard working and largely oppressed group.
9	The Black Tribes	Mainly the tea garden workers migrated from other states.	They were small, poor and largely oppressed group.

10	The Mongoloid Tribes	The aboriginal natives of the land, engaged mainly on Primitive agriculture.	They were Small in size, poor, nomadic and semi nomadic.
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The population composition of Barak Valley shown in the above table comprised of a varied socio cultural background. The Bengali Hindus, of whom the majority belonged to lower castes, mainly the peasants and artisans, restricted to their traditional caste based occupations and concentrated in the rural areas. Some belonging to the Intermediate Castes and small group of Hindu Upper Castes, involved in Government services as administrators, clerks, teachers, and other non-manual jobs in the administration mostly concentrated in to the urban areas.

The Bengali Muslims, mainly the peasants involved in agriculture and cleaning the jungle for expanding the area for cultivation, inhabited the villages predominantly. A small group of them worked as artisans and some were involved in the administrative jobs, inhabiting in the urban region.

The Manipuries, the majority of whom were Hindus were mainly agriculturists and some were involved in some handicrafts and inhabited the villages.

The tea garden workers, migrant from the neighbouring states of Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Bihar, sizeable in number, also formed another group of population in the region The aboriginal tribal groups like – the Cachari, Dimasa, Kuki, Khasi, Naga, Mizo, Sonowal and others, though small in population size, dependent mainly on agriculture inhabited the hills of the region.

The small group of Marwari's involved in business centering in the urban areas only. This demographic composition continues till today in the Valley.

1.4: CONCLUSION

From the above description it is evident that, the Barak Valley region consists of a multi cultural, multi religious, and multi lingual population since long. There evolved a gradual shift from tribal social formation to the most advanced urban social formation due to the emergence of Colonial rule. The mixing of languages with each other led to the development of inter linguistic culture, and dependency towards the dominant language. As a result, the majority of the population in Barak Valley appeared as the Bengali speaking, baring few a Hindi speakers.

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