

The Strategic Fall of the Kachari Kingdom in Cachar: A Historical Study

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Abstract

In 1833 the foundations of British administration in Lower and Central Assam were solved temporarily by the recognition of Purandar Singha as the tributary ruler of that region (March 1833). Meanwhile the plains of Cachar had been annexed and administrative arrangements had to be made for that ill-governed territory. After the Burmese War, Govinda Chandra was restored to his territory in conformity with the treaty of 1824 with the East India Company. The authorities in Calcutta, however, were not confident about the capacity of this imbecile prince to pay the annual tribute regularly. They would have been glad if he had willingly ceded Cachar to the Company and thus under their instruction the Commissioner of Sylhet and the Agent to the Governor-General made enquiries on this point. As a matter of fact, the tribute fell into arrears, and Govinda Chandra applied to the Supreme government for remission of tribute for the years 1825-26 and 1826-27. This request, supported by Scott, was granted as a boon but in return the King was required to construct a good road across his territory facilitating easy communication between Sylhet and Manipur. Under this background the present study is an attempt to explore the strategic fall of Kachari kingdom in Cachar during the British rule.

Introduction:

At the beginning of the 19th century Cachar was under the rule of the Kacharis who are one of the oldest inhabitants of Assam. At the time when Ahoms came to Assam, Kacharis were inhabited the western parts of Sibsagar and a considerable portion of Nowgong. However, the Kacharis were gradually driven away by the powerful Ahoms and thus they finally established their capital at Khaspur in the plains of Cachar. The Kacharies maintained a sort of pragmatism in their relations with the Ahoms and behaved alternatively as friends and foes. Though the Kacharis living under the swaddle of the political influence of the mighty Ahoms occasionally faced the challenges from the petty hill states surrounding it but it never had the misfortune to withstand the onslaught of the mighty Burmese empire. In-fact, in the last quarter of the 18th century particularly during the rule of Kachari king Krishna Chandra, the independent Cachar maintained her status rather precariously because the Manipuri prince Marjit Singh and through him the Burmese began to interfere in the affairs of the Kachari state (Hazarika 2006). During this crucial period, in 1813 Krishna Chandra died and his younger brother Gobinda Chandra Narayana became the ruler of the mighty Cachar but unfortunately, he lacked character and caliber which had been the crying need of that critical hour. He soon found himself involved in many difficulties. Kohi Dan, a table servant of the former Raja, was appointed to a post in Northern Hilly tract but he rebelled and endeavored to form an independent kingdom which led to his assassination by Gobinda Chandra at Dharampur. The rebellion was however, continued by Kohi Dan's son Tularam who, himself a servant of Raja and, thereby realizing his danger, fled to hills and successfully occupied the Northern portion.

Thus, Gobinda Chandra lost the northern portion of his dominion but worse was to follow. In 1818 the Manipuri Prince Marjit Singh with the help of his two other brothers, Gambhir and Chaurjit Singh invaded in the plains of Cachar and drove him out of his kingdom and usurped his paternal properties. In the following year Marjit Singh was, however, defeated by the Burmese and thus found his way to Cachar along with Gambhir Singh. Subsequently, Gambhir Singh quarreled with Chaurjit Singh and appropriated the whole of the southern Cachar except Hailakandi which remained in Marjit Singh's possession. On the other hand, Govinda Chandra who took refuge in the neighboring British district Sylhet seek help from the British but when the latter did not pay any attention, he then appealed to the Burmese who promised to reinstate him. Thus, it was the advance of the Burmese to Cachar that led to their first conflict with the British who could not tolerate to a powerful nation to extend its territory right up to the frontier of Sylhet. This was a critical moment of the History of Assam as the internal conflict of Assam was at rock bottom slime.

Objectives of the study:

The primary objective of the paper is to explore the strategic downfall of Kachari Kingdom in Cachar during the British rule.

Materials and Method:

The study is principally historical in nature. The data for the present paper has been collected from the secondary sources. The secondary data has been collected from different text books, journals and internet sources etc.

Result and Discussion:

The first Anglo-Burmese war took place in 1824-26 and at the end of the war, the Burmese emperor by the Treaty of Yandaboo, ceded Cachar along with Manipur. This kind of circumstances compelled the last Kachari king Govinda Chandra to make the Treaty of Badarpur on 6th March 1824 (Chatterjee 2000) with David Scott, the political agent of the Governor General. As per to this Treaty though Govinda Chandra, the deposed ruler restored to his kingdom but the British help cost his independence and he was reduced to the status of a protected prince of the British. Moreover, according to the Badarpur Agreement, Govinda Chandra was to pay Rs. 10,000/ annually to the East India company for the maintenance of army.

Economic and Political Catastrophe:

The tribute (Rs. 10000/- per annum) was however appeared too heavy for Govinda Chandra's territory, which had suffered from the operations of Gambhir Singh and his brothers before the war, the depredations of Tularam and the occupation by the Burmese during the war. Only a few parganas were under the Raja's occupation. Most of the villages were empty when Lieutenant Fisher fixed the amount on the basis of an ad hoc estimate. Although Govinda Chandra lacked firmness of character and also administrative ability but he took several measures to improve his finances. The number of ministers and judges was reduced. The services of revenue officials attached to the queens and members of the royal family were dispensed with. The immunities and rent-free grants allotted to officials and other dignitaries were withdrawn. To increase income, strict measures were adopted against defaulters, but the usual land-tax (five rupees per hal or kulbah, 4.82 acres) was not changed. Additional taxes were levied

on the cultivation of poppy, fruits and vegetables as also on the manufactures of salt. Extra payment had to be made for social privileges such as holding titles, riding in a *Dola*, wearing of gold ornaments, having music at marriages and festivals, etc. these measures did not affect the poorer section of the people. The Raja's attempts to solve his financial problem pressed hard on practically all sections of the people and created widespread discontent. His unsparing exactions of the people affected the interests of his neighbors for the heavy transit duties imposed by him on all articles of merchandise almost killed the trade between Manipur and Sylhet.

The people of Cachar mainly the Kacharis had grievance of a different kind. They were unable to serve as officers working for the new administrative system. Not only were they unfamiliar, as in Upper Assam, with the novel pattern, most of them were illiterate and incapable of preparing records in their own or any other language. Govinda Chandra could not depend upon them in reorganizing the revenue and judicial departments of his principality. He followed the example set by the British government in Assam and hence a number of officials were recruited from Bengal. The appearance of these outsiders was disliked naturally by the indigenous people. They found that they were losing influence in their own country and strangers were exercising authority over them. Here again, the Raja was a victim of circumstances, he could not fulfill the British expectation of good management of his affairs without the assistance of the Bengalis who were familiar with British methods.

Two other factors contributed to Govinda Chandra's unpopularity and weakened his position in the eyes of his subjects. One was social factor as Govinda Chandra had broken tradition by marrying a widow (Induprabha, Manipuri princess) of his own brother Raja Krishna Chandra. The other was political, and therefore more serious in its implications. According to the old custom of Cachar, the Raja and his ministers should be selected by a council known as the Forty *Sengphons* (male clans) and he should marry from his own community. Moreover, Govinda Chandra was nominee of the British government, and on the ground his claim to the throne was open to challenge. Nevertheless, the crises of Govinda Chandra's unhappy reign came when his dissatisfied subjects left the plains of Cachar. Many of them were migrated to Jayantia, the hill principality of Tippera and the British district of Tippera. Some of them however joined his old enemy Tularam, who continued to be an active factor in Cachar politics even after Govinda Chandra's installation as Raja under British protection. He retained possession of the hills in spite of every attempt made by the Raja to expel him from his position. Under Tularam's influence, the forty *Sengphons* jointly submitted a memorial to the British government in 1828, alleging that Govinda Chandra had forfeited their confidence by violating the ancient usage/convention of the country and also by ruling tyrannically. It has been found that the Kachari Rajas were not from same clan, some were from Haflongbar and Bodosa. This strengthened Tularam Senapati's hands and won for him the support of a large section of the people of Cachar. He declared that it was the right for the *Sengphons* to elect a new ruler in place of Govinda Chandra.

Before any decision could be reached Govinda Chandra was murdered by a gang of Manipuris (Meitei) who entered the palace at night (April 1830). Several members of his family were killed and the palace was set fire too. A notification was sent from Sylhet to Cachar to maintain peace and to make final arrangements, the principality was placed, in June 1830, under the administration of Lieutenant Fisher, who was then on survey duties in Sylhet. He was vested with powers of Magistrate and Collector. Scott instituted an inquiry which extended over more than a year, and it was proved that murder had been planned and executed with the knowledge and under the direction of Gambhir Singh. In order to solve the problem of succession in Cachar the British government published a proclamation inviting the

claimants, and accordingly sifting inquiries into the pretensions of the claimants were held by the local officers under orders from the Supreme government.

Induprabha, Govinda Chandra's queen, prayed to be confirmed in the hereditary possessions of the ruling family. Scott supported her claim in a qualified manner, suggesting that she would be recognized as a Zamindar for life time with certain conditions. As she was already aged, it might be expected that the estate would escheat to the British government within a few years. This would be an interim management. Scott's successor, Edmund Craycroft, thought on different lines. The administration of a female Zamindar would create an atmosphere of uncertainty and provide opportunities for her officers to practice extortion and peculation at the expense of the people. It was not desirable to delay the introduction of better system of administration in Cachar.

Another claimant was Tularam, but his pretension to descent from the royal family of Cachar was not supported on many grounds. Thus, the forty *Sengphons* (male Clans) claimed the right to elect a new Raja from among themselves. However, Fisher's enquiries brought out no instance of a free and fair election of a Raja by them in the past history of Cachar as the right to succession belonged to the sons of the Rajas according to seniority. If the right of election, he wrote, ever existed, it had become obsolete and the revival of it is unlikely to be attended with no benefit rather it would likely to be the source of interminable civil war. The most formidable claimant – on political ground – was Gambhir Singh. But he himself knew that his claim to the throne of Cachar was justified neither by history nor by dynastic considerations. So, he submitted an alternative proposal, he offered to farm out Cachar for a period of twenty years in return for an annual revenue of fifteen thousand rupees. Major Grant, Commissioner at Manipur, strongly supported Gambhir Singh's claim. In his opinion, the acquisition of Cachar by Gambhir Singh was desirable from the British point of view, because it would enable him- a prince capable of building up a stable and efficient government which would strengthen the security of the north-east frontier. Moreover, the union of two principalities would promote the assimilation of the two communities – Manipuris and Kacharis, who had been engaged in hostilities for many years.

Grant's proposal was not supported by any of the local officers. Craycroft opposed it on three principal grounds. Gambhir Singh was accused in the murder of Govinda Chandra hence he should not be allowed to benefit by his crime. His main purpose in claiming the possession of Cachar was to extort the largest possible amount of revenue from Cachar. The plains of Cachar were inhabited mainly by the people of Bengali race and Kacharis, they would be delivered over bound hand and foot to the tender mercies of a cruel chieftain if Gambhir Singh's proposal was accepted. Moreover, it was doubtful if he would be able to pay the proposed amount and in case of lease-punctually irregular payment would create difficulties and might throw him into the arms of the Burmese. Moreover, the British government already confirmed the involvement of Gambhir Singh in the murder of Govinda Chandra and hence rejected Grant's main proposal, but it decided to consult Lieutenant Pemberton and Captain Jenkins, who had recently visited the north-east frontier, on Grant's suggestion regarding the cession of the Jiri-Barak tract. In regard to the Jiri-Barak tract, Pemberton supported Grant's proposal. The local tribes, who were strong in their mountain fastnesses, had never rendered more than a nominal submission to the Raja of Cachar. It was not easy to keep these tribes under subjection. Pemberton stated that it was a task involving much trouble with little profits. Jenkins however, submitted an entirely different opinion and stated that authority over the Nagas who lived in the Jiri-Barak tract was essential for exploitation of the valuable resources of the area. Nevertheless, the final decision of the British government (on 9th July 1832) was ultimately in favor of annexation of Cachar to the Company's dominions. The principal ground was the

absence of a legitimate heir to the deceased Raja while another factor was the desire of the local people to be placed under the rule and protection of the British government in preference to being made over to Raja Gambhir Singh.

Conclusion:

Finally, by a proclamation dated 14th August 1832 the plains of Cachar were annexed to the Company's dominions. Cash allowances and rent-free grants of the total value of Rs. 3,875 were provided to Govinda Chandra's widows and near relatives. Tularam was allowed to retain the hill tracts which were in his possession, but no formal agreement was concluded with him. The claims of his cousins, Govinda Ram and Durga Charan, to the pargana of Dharampur, between the rivers Kapili and Januna, were rejected even though they had held it since the death of Govinda Chandra. They were later granted life pensions of Rs. 50 each as well as some rent-free lands. The tract was placed under the jurisdiction of the authorities of the Assam valley with a view to attaching south Cachar, in due course, to the district of Sylhet with which it was geographically and economically connected.

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