

Ramesh Chandra Kalita



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*Assam  
in the  
Eighteenth  
Century*

This book represents a pioneering analysis of a most critical period of the history of modern Assam during 1769-1826 A.D. It deals with the historical forces that were at work within the Ahom State system and the policy of expansion followed both by the British and the Burmese towards Assam from without. The struggle for mastery over the Brahmaputra Valley that ensued between the Burmese and the British ultimately ended with the occupation and annexation of Assam into the British Indian Empire in 1826.

The British policy of expansion towards the Brahmaputra Valley or Assam was dictated by their commercial motive or interest. Captain Thomas Welsh's Expedition into Assam during November, 1792-June, 1794, with the Royal sanction of the Ahom Government, and his exhaustive *Secret Report* on Assam to the East India Company's Government in India in February 1794, constitute the first major step towards the realisation of that motive or interest. Captain Welsh's expedition into Assam marks a new landmark in so far as it ushers in a new or rather the modern period in the history of Assam.

Besides supplying an accurate version of the *Report* and other relevant historical documents of immense historical value, the book contains a critical analysis of the *Report* as well as the attitude of the Ahom feudal nobility towards the English East India Company and their Government in India.

A study of the history of this period, as the book reveals, is, therefore, an imperative necessity to an understanding of the history of modern Assam in its true perspective.

Prof. Ramesh Chandra Kalita (b. 1948) took his graduation with Hons. in History from Cotton College, Guwahati (1970) and his M.A. in History from the Gauhati University, Guwahati (1972). He has been teaching History in Tezpur College, Tezpur, since 1973. A prolific essayist in Assamese, Prof. Kalita made an outstanding contribution to the study of the Student Movements in Assam in the British period. His book on this aspect, a pioneer work indeed, titled *Role of the Assamese Students in the Struggle for Freedom of India 1826-1947*, published in 1986, earned him wide academic appreciation.

Besides this he contributed several outstanding papers on various aspects of modern Assam history in National Seminars, Books and Journals and Academic gatherings during the last one and half decades. Also, he has completed his Ph.D. dissertation on the *Study of the Role of the Mass Movements in the Struggle for Freedom in Assam, 1857-1942*, under the Gauhati University, Guwahati.

A devoted scholar to the discipline and profession he has chosen, Prof. Kalita completed the present work, titled *Assam in the Eighteenth Century*, during 1985-87.

Dr. Hiren Gohain of Gauhati University writes : "Prof. Ramesh Kalita is a rising historian of Assam who has already made a mark with his contributions to the history of Assam. He brings to his studies a refreshingly original approach and an analytical cast of mind. Few of the contemporary historians of Assam display such qualities. Prof. Kalita has now written an introduction to most important document on the history of Assam before the advent of the British. Captain Welsh's exhaustive report to the East India Company on Assam when she had not yet become a province of British India has both immense diplomatic and historical value. It is referred to by every college teacher in his lectures on Assam history. Unfortunately no scholarly and annotated edition of the report is available. Prof. Kalita proposes to fill that gap and serve the needs of teachers and students with an annotated edition of the full report with a long critical introduction. It should also raise a lively debate on many vital issues. There is no doubt that Prof. Kalita's *Assam in the Eighteenth Century* will be an important academic publication".

4.9.89

**Hiren Gohain,**  
Dean, Faculty of Arts,  
Gauhati University.

# **Assam**

in the

# **Eighteenth Century**

By

**Ramesh Chandra Kalita**

B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Senior Lecturer in History,

Tezpur College, Tezpur.

Dist. Sonitpur (Assam)



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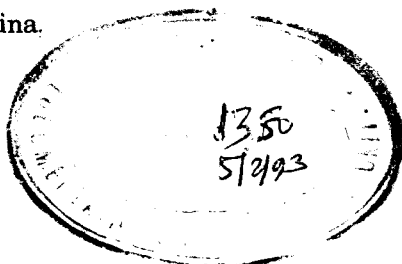
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## ***British Frontier Policy to the East of Bengal***

The military intervention of the English East India Company's Government in Bengal to settle the internal political affairs in Assam in 1792-94 forms a landmark in the modern historical annals of Assam. The policy of intervention streamlined by Lord Cornwallis, 'the first of the new dynasty of Parliamentary Governors-General'<sup>1</sup> of Fort William, was executed by Captain Thomas Welsh. Though the actual take-over of Assam by the English East India Company's Government in Bengal took place about thirty years hence or a little more thereafter, the question of its annexation, as the historical evidences have conclusively proved, was settled once and for all by the chain of events that occurred since the days of the Company's or of its servants' commercial intercourse with Assam. Only the time for its execution remained to be finalised, and the Company differed it to some other future date as their attention was then heavily taxed by some more important issues in other directions. As a matter of fact, they were yet to vanquish the Indian Native Powers, viz., the Marathas and the rulers of Mysore, both supported, very often than not, by their most formidable rival—the French.

The English East India Company's frontiers in the North, North-west and South of Bengal remained almost in a very precarious and unsettled condition. Besides the Marathas and the rulers of Mysore, the Gurkhas too in their hilly terrain remained very refractory to the British for some



time past.<sup>2</sup> Still the Court of Directors did not give up their hope of enlisting the friendship of the Nepal Durbar and they instructed the Government of India to explore the possibility of opening up of 'new channels for the British staples to the extensive regions of Thibet'.<sup>3</sup>

The eastern frontier also remained very cumbrous for the British. To the east of Bengal, the English East India Company's Government did not have a natural frontier either in terms of a river or a mountain. Therefore, there lay the possibility of expansion of British frontier with every article of trade till it reached the submontane and hilly ridges to the east and south-east of the Brahmaputra Valley. British frontier policy in India, throughout their rule, had always been a moving phenomenon, which proved detrimental to the free and independent existence of the Native Indian States.

The following factors primarily shaped the British policy towards Assam and led to her ultimate annexation in 1826. The first in question was the unsettled state of the frontier to the east of Bengal. The quest for a natural frontier to the east of Bengal had troubled the British statesmen and administrators ever since the days of the Plassey. The next in point was the policy of Burmese territorial expansion running through Manipur, Cachar, Jayantia and Assam. The third in point was the lucrative Assam trade, concomitant with the possibility of exploring the inland trade routes through Assam to Tibet to China. Of all the factors, this is perhaps the most important one. In the last, there was a circumstantial factor, i.e., the political instability in Assam together with the yearning and aspiration of a section of the Ahom feudal aristocracy to accept British protection and overlordship. All these factors combined together made the British policy of expansion effective and the annexation of Assam, the erstwhile Ahom Kingdom, was complete by 1838.

With this bare outline, we will now go into the details of each factor mentioned herein above as a preliminary corollary to the study of the history of Assam in the late eighteenth century with special reference to the expedition of Captain Thomas Welsh into Assam in 1792-94 as well as his Report on Assam in 1794.

The English East India Company's victory at Plassey (23 June 1757) marked the first step towards the establishment of territorial and political sovereignty of the British nation in Bengal (India), and their victory at Baxur (1764) led to a further step in this process of empire building throughout the Indian sub-continent. Almost every military expedition undertaken by the Company met with success and resulted in the expansion of its territory. The history of the territorial ambition of the English East India Company in India can be pushed back to the 17th century A.D.

In the wake of the declining state of the native political system and administration, the English East India Company, among others, became animated with the idea of fortifying their trading centres and settlements 'for their self-preservation'<sup>4</sup> and virtually they started to 'taking up a more independent position in the country'.<sup>5</sup> 'The increasing weakness of the Moghul empire' says Lyall, 'doubled the risks and uncertainty of their trade...'<sup>6</sup> and so the Court of Directors of the Company instructed the Company's officials at Madras in 1683 in the following terms; "...we would have you to strengthen and fortify our Fort and Town (Madras) by degrees, that it may be terrible against the assault of any Indian Prince and the Dutch power of India... But we must needs desire you so to continue your business (but with all gentleness) that the inhabitants may pay the full charge of all repairs and fortifications..."<sup>7</sup> On December 12, 1687, they again wrote to the Madras authority to establish "such a politie of civil and military power, and create and secure such a large revenue, as may be the foundation of a large, well grounded, sure English dominion in India for all time to come".<sup>8</sup>

In 1690, the Court of Directors very emphatically declared its policy with regard to the establishment of territorial possession(s) in India thus; "The increase of our revenue is the subject of our care as much as our trade; t'is that must maintain our force when twenty accidents may interrupt our trade; t'is that must make us a nation in India... and upon this account it is that the wise Dutch, in all their general advices that we have seen, write ten paragraphs concerning their government, their civil and

military policy, warfare, and the increase of their revenue, for one paragraph they write concerning trade".<sup>9</sup>

Thus it is seen that the acquisition or establishment of territorial possessions by the English East India Company in India was not the result of some historical accidents alone, but the outcome of a well-thought out policy of empire building. And the English East India Company's trading centres acted as forward outposts for a moving frontier for the British and for the eventual establishment of territorial possession and political sovereignty in India. By the end of the seventeenth century, the English East India 'Company were... capable of defending themselves and even of pushing forward their out-posts against any opposition that could be made by the Viceroys of a distracted Oriental empire'.<sup>10</sup>

The English East India Company or their Court of Directors did not make any difference between trade and empire building. To be precise, the establishment of British empire in India was, as a matter of fact, the result of the expansion of the East India Company's trading centres in Bengal, Madras and in Bombay. Throughout their long history as a political power in India, the English, with regard to Indian states and peoples, followed a policy of studied disrespect and cautious bellicosity. Whatever gentleness they showed or they were required to show in their dealings in commercial transactions with the native powers or peoples was clothed by the lust of territorial possessions.

Exactly three years after the battle of Plassey, the Company got Chittagong, among others, as an article of reward from Mir Kasim.<sup>11</sup> This was an important acquisition made by the company before it got the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765. The possession of Chittagong along with the sea port named after it on the Bay of Bengal as well as the Dewani, left the Company with a boundary line on its north-eastern frontier which touched-off the pristine western boundary line of the Ahom Kingdom, i.e., Assam. Thus the boundary line between the Ahom Kingdom and the British territorial possessions in Bengal became conterminous. But it was not scientifically defined and therefore to the British historians and statesmen, the

north-eastern frontier line of Bengal remained 'perilously indefinite'<sup>12</sup> till the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26).

Roberts categorically stated that "The eastern boundary line of Bengal, roughly speaking, might have been found by drawing a line from Chittagong northward to the hills; but it was very ill-defined and variable. Immediately to the east of this line lay the kingdom of Assam with various little independent or semi-independent states...since there was no natural barrier of mountain or river to the Province of Bengal upon the east, the same law of development which had governed British expansion in the past again became operative".<sup>13</sup> To the Government of India therefore the British territorial expansion beyond Bengal to the north-east lay in the logic of history.

The lack of a natural barrier, either in terms of a river or a mountain on the north-eastern borderline of Bengal, was taken as a justification for the occupation and annexation of Assam. In other words, the British territorial expansion beyond Bengal to the east was governed, therefore, by the quest for a natural frontier. On the ill-defined character of the north-east frontier of Bengal Mackenzie writes; "The north-east frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense it embraces the whole of the hilly ranges north, east, and south of the Assam Valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges".<sup>14</sup> Surrounded as it was by recalcitrant Asiatic powers beyond Bengal upto Irrawaddy, the British Colonial Government in India thought it prudent to secure for its possessions a natural frontier. Necessity on this score was very often dictated by the urge of monopolising the trade beyond the Bengal border to the east. Therefore, the quest for natural frontier became merged and analogous with the expansion of British trade and commerce. The Burmese policy of expansion towards Manipur, Cachar and Assam also had its bearing on the policy of British territorial expansion to the north-east of Bengal Presidency.

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In middle of the eighteenth century there were three main areas of advancement in which Brahmans and Brahman-centred values came increasingly to predominate: in the field of finance, statecraft and war, and ritual arena. In the peshwa daftar records, that is, the Maratha rulers' registers of state transactions and revenue obligations, the Peshwas documented acts of adjudication through which they as Brahman guardians of the realm proclaimed themselves arbiters of other people's jati and varna status. This chapter explores the views aired in the subcontinent's emerging public arena, looking briefly at the early nineteenth century, but concentrating primarily on from the 1870s to the early 1930s. Tea and the Tea-Table Public Drinking in the Ghosts: A Social History in Eighteenth-Century Early Modern World: Editor: Owen Davies England Voices from the Tavern, Despite the scientific and intellectual General Editor: Markman Ellis 1500–1800 advances of the past five hundred In the early eighteenth century tea General Editor: Thomas E Brennan years, populist belief in the and coffee were. early nineteenth century with material culture, and has contributed to a richer understanding of economic www.pickeringchatto.com/ghosts two key events: the discovery of tea plants in Assam, India in 1823, and history. The history of Assam is the history of a confluence of people from the east, west and the north; the confluence of the Tibeto-Burman (Sino-Tibetan), Indo-Aryan and Austroasiatic cultures. Although invaded over the centuries, it was never a vassal or a colony to an external power until the third Burmese invasion in 1821, and, subsequently, the British ingress into Assam in 1824 during the First Anglo-Burmese War.