



Annexation and Colonial Economic Policies in Assam

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Abstract

The entry of the colonial rulers in India had culminated into far reaching effects in the long run. It was not just in the political sphere but at the same in the social as well as economic sphere that great transformation was observed. As far as the process of colonization in the north eastern part of the country is concerned, that was indeed started in the later phase after the completion of the colonial expansion in the other parts of the country. That delay was made in the colonial expansion in the north east taking into consideration the aggressive nature of the indigenous tribal inhabitants of the north-eastern states and on top of that the misconception among the colonial administrators that the north eastern states can not provide any commercial benefits in the long run. But with the gradual passage of time this misconception melted away and colonial rulers made an entry into the so called isolated part of the country which is more commonly known as the north eastern part of India. The beginning was of course made after the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 after which the rate of interference in the internal matters of the north eastern states increased to a great extent. Talking about the process of colonization in the state of Assam, it has to mention in a specific way that commercial prospects had greatly attracted the colonial administrators and had even determined their later economic policies towards the state. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the way in which Assam was annexed to the colonial empire and in what way gradually its economic pattern transformed rapidly due to the economic policies of the colonial authorities.

Objectives: This work has been successfully able to attain the below mentioned objectives in a great way.

- Analyzing in what way or under what circumstances the annexation of Assam was materialized by the colonial rulers.
- Elaborating on how far the commercial prospects of the state created strong ground for the policy of annexation.
- The pattern of the new economic policies initiated by the colonial administrators towards the state of Assam in agricultural and non-agricultural sector.
- Finally highlighting on the impact of those colonial economic policies bringing tremendous changes in the economic scenario of the state.

Methodology: Secondary sources have been mainly taken into consideration for making a deep study on the said topic. Mainly books written on colonial economic policy in the north east along with some articles and writings of the distinguished scholars have been considered.

Discussion & Findings: The annexation of Assam and the gradual introduction of new economic policies that was applied towards the agricultural as well as non- agricultural sector in the state in the long run greatly affected the material progress and economic status of the state. But in the very initial stages the colonial administrators thought of taking sole control of the political power of the state so that in due course of time they could become the real masters of the state and handle all matters either political or economic ones independently. The crucial decision to annex the state of Assam was taken after taking into consideration the decaying and degenerating condition of the Ahom dynasty and the frequent entry and interference of the Burmese invaders into the internal matters of the state. It was indeed a sort of an alarm for the British who could view a great danger in the form of presence of Burmese on the soil of Assam. After the signing of the treaty of yandaboo the strong foundation for the enhancement of the colonial grip over the north eastern states and more particularly the state of Assam was increased. In the mean time the commercial prospects of the state was discovered for the very first time by the colonial authorities right from 1740's onwards. The presence of petroleum products, traditional handicraft industries in the form of indigenous silk industries, the availability of gold dust on the river beds of Brahmaputra river and above all the perfect climatic condition required for the growth of the tea plantation were the vital attraction for the colonial administrators. Meanwhile when in 1792 Capt Welsh made his very first entry into the state of Assam for helping out the Ahom King Gaurinath Singha against moamaria rebellion, he was instructed by his higher authorities to even take a look at the future commercial benefits. But due to the unanimity of decision on the pattern of administration to be introduced in the state of Assam any concrete decision could not be taken at that point of time. Although it had not reduced the commercial interest of the colonial administrators and even in the later stages they were on the lookout for the right opportunity to fulfill their commercial needs and the beginning was made when upper Assam came directly brought under the control of the British in 1838 after deposing the then king of Assam Purandhar Singh. After gaining the political power in Assam, the new policies related to the changes in the waste land management as well as in the plantation and non-plantation sector was applied in a very prompt way. Talking about the availability of the waste land in the state, it has to be stated specifically that due to the long period of devastation brought by the frequent Burmese raids on Assam as well as the long extended period of civil wars and invasions, vast tracts of lands were left in the form of waste lands throughout the province of Assam. But any sort of agricultural production did not take place on such lands. Neither revenues could have been collected nor any change could have been introduced in the material prospects of the state. It was in the year 1827 that for the very first time David Scott initiated a plan of granting waste land to the people for starting cultivation on these plots.

But the agricultural cultivation was to take a concrete shape by bringing one fourth of the total plot of land under cultivation in the first period of three years. And then again gradually in the sixth and ninth year another one-fourth portion of the land was to be converted into cultivable land.

That was just the beginning of the waste land management plan which was again modified in 1836 by Capt. Jenkins with introduction of the new revenue policies on these waste land areas with the gradual conversion into cultivable land. In the initial stages the step of granting land to the people without mentioning anything about the revenue or the imposition of rents greatly attracted them towards this policy but then once when the land was converted into cultivable plots, the usual nature of British exploitation was focused.

This was one sided picture of the new economic policy initiated by the colonial authorities. At the very same time they diverted their attention towards the plantation sector by laying more emphasis on the tea plantation in the state which had greatly attracted them towards the state. The discovery of Robert Bruce that tea saplings are growing wild in the forests of Assam immensely determined the later phase of the colonial economic policies towards the state. By that time the end of the monopoly of East India Company in the tea trade with China had already compelled them to look for an alternative way so as to keep the supply of the tea intact in England. And once the quality of the sapling of Assam was found to be quite impressive that could have replaced the Chinese tea in the market, automatically the process of exploitation of this resource in the state got a new form. Basically Robert Bruce had played a very dominant role in commercializing the tea plantation but as far as the discovery of tea plant in Assam was concerned, it was his brother C.A. Bruce who is credited with the discovery of the tea plant in 1823. The later phase was marked with the new schemes of the colonial authorities to commercialize the production of tea in Assam. In spite of facing the challenges of scarcity of labour, somehow the colonial exploiters tried their level best to maintain the commercialized production of the commodity for their personal benefits. Since the commercial prospects of the state were quite high, it was not restricted to only a particular sector. The state showed good signs for developing the sericulture industry as the climatic factor as well as the skills of the indigenous people could have favoured the production of silk in a more advanced way and in a commercial pattern. And for that David Scott had played a pivotal role with the introduction of the plantation in 1831 in the Darrang district of Assam. The future decisions related to the growth of the silk industry were concretely taken after the Board of Trade made some vital decision in December 1832. Apart from these steps the colonial authorities had moved ahead with their future plans that were made applicable to fully exploit the forest resources of the state. Indeed the state of Assam was described as a 'forested country' in the administrative reports of 1921-22. The rich products of the forest like that of the timber and other products in the form of fruit trees, berry bushes etc. could really prove commercially useful in the long run. But to properly exploit the forest resources proper forest policy was to be initiated that could increase the colonial intervention in the utilization of forest resources. The British Forest policy towards Assam was just a way to move ahead with the task of revenue

collection as well as to put a check on the reckless and improper utilisation of forest products in the state. The imperial forest department was established in 1864 and the Indian forest Act was passed in 1865 that further intensified government monopoly on the forest resources. Not only had that but the later phase marked the beginning of the categorization of the forest into reserved areas and non-reserved areas. This step not only brought the forest areas of Assam under the control of the colonial authorities but at the same time helped in conservation of the forest resources. So it is very clear that the entry of the colonial authorities in the state of Assam was not merely because of the intension of taking up the role of mere administrators but at the same time the major focus was on the total exploitation of the resources of the state. Perhaps if the state would not have provided commercial prospects the colonial authorities would not have shown their promptness in annexing the state of Assam. And in a combined way the waste land management scheme, the policies towards the plantation sites of the state as well as the plans initiated for the maximum exploitation of the forest resources, all such steps highlighted one thing in a very clear way that colonial oppressors had not only entered to take up the charge of the administration but at the same time economic benefit was their major motive. The period starting from 1826 and more particularly 1838 in context of Assam's annexation, it will not be out of place to mention that economic status of the state underwent a great change and transformed very promptly owing to the colonial economic policies.

Conclusion: Finally while drawing the conclusion it can be stated in a very precise way that the commercial interest and the tendency to get maximum benefit from the total exploitation of the resources of Assam guided or determined the economic policies of the British administrators. But before they could move forward with those scheme and policies, they attained the political power in the state in 1838. Until and unless political power was in their hands, they could not have expected to materialize their future dream. The outcome of such economic policies reflected both positive and negative results. Thinking of the negative results it will not be out of place to mention that at certain point of time these economic policies were forcibly imposed on the people of Assam. The forceful collection of rent from those who had acquired waste land grants and the way the tea garden labourers were exploited presented the negative impact of the economic domination of Assam. Meanwhile positivity gets reflected through the level of material progress that was attained by the state during the colonial period. The overall scenario presents both the plus point as well as the flaws of the system.

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