

Excerpts from Dr Bijoy Bhusan Hazarika's Thesis later printed as a book, pages 121 to 128 of the book given below

Political Life in Assam During the Nineteenth Century

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Burmese Reign of Terror : While ordering troops to march to Assam for the first time at the request of Badan Chandra Barphukan, the Burmese king Bodawpaya gave some advice to his men. This constituted the basis of their dealings with the Assamese people. The king advised his troops as follows—"Strike a terror among the enemies inasmuch as to make even the tortoises hurrowing under the sand-heaps, fishes swimming in the water and animals roaming in the forests also fleeing away at your approach."⁹⁹ The Burmese king further advised them—"March on to Weissali and come back with beautiful maidens like Princess Nancheng, whom the Barphukan has given to us. The ambers, to be worn in ears, are required to be dug out from the bowels of the earth. In the same way, you are required to bring the maidens of matchless beauty from Weissali with some labour."¹⁰⁰ The king's message was echoed in his generals' words addressed to the king at the time of their departure for Assam after the completion of their preparations for the purpose. They said : "As the army of Ramchandra crossed the sea, conquered Lanka and then rescued Sita, so shall we conquer Weissali and collect the princesses of Nancheng's beauty for your majesty. We shall eat to our hearts content all the sweet fruits that Weissali abounds in, and shall bring with us all the beautiful damsels meant for the royal coach."¹⁰¹ The whole period beginning with the first invasion of the Burmese through the

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Treaty of Yandaboo bears ample evidence of the implementation of the mission to collect wealth and women.

After the first successful invasion, the troops of the Chiefs of Mung-Yang committed severe atrocities on the people of Assam following the orders of their respective Chiefs. They ordered their soldiers as follows—"Whomsoever you come across, do not allow him to escape. Catch him at once and hang him up on the nearest tree. Or, bind him tightly with a rope and throw him into a ditch. Take the women and children with you. Burn all the granaries..."¹⁰² After committing such atrocities and plundering on a wide scale, the Burmese soldiers returned to their land. Whenever Burmese soldiers sighted a woman with a breast-fed baby, they did not hesitate to throw away the baby merely to have the pleasure of snatching the mother. Some Burmese soldiers took fancy in forcibly taking away children of ten to twelve years of age to engage them in paddy cultivation when they returned home. Young men were carried away to work as beasts of burden. The plunderers took delight in killing husbands to take away their wives. Babies were also taken away. Many parents died fighting single-handed against the Burmese soldiers to rescue their babies. Sometimes parents followed the trail of the Ava soldiers for several days, only to die of exhaustion as well as starvation.¹⁰³ The author of *Weissali Hukong*, Cha-Ang, a Burmese, acknowledged that commission of all manners of atrocities happened to be daily occurrences. An invading Burmese soldier himself, the author's account of Burmese atrocities speaks for itself. It is possible to think that the atrocities were more terrible. The narration of Burmese atrocities in the *Weissali-Mun-Dun-Chun-Khum* was indeed very brief. But this and the accounts given by Cha-Ang, the author of *Weissali Hukong*, are telling instances of Burmese atrocities. As stated in the *Weissali Mun-Dun-Chun-Khum* the land of Weissali had been depopulated and innumerable houses got empties of their inmates who had been either killed or taking shelters elsewhere.....The soldiers of Ava tortured the women and children as much as they could. They made fun of children's lives whenever they came across the latter. They set fire to all the dwelling houses. And they made hundreds of children die of starvation,"¹⁰⁴

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After the final expulsion of Chandra Kanta, the Burmese devastated the country and created a reign of terror by their widespread acts of plunder, torture and killing of the inhabitants. The country relapsed into anarchy. Their repeated invasions and their orgy of blood reduced the country into a skeleton.¹⁰⁵ On Chandra Kanta's expulsion finally to Bengal, the last attempt to drive the Burmese out of Assam at the instance of one Hao Sagar Bora of North Lakhimpur with his Baskatia soldiers proved to be in vain. He was easily suppressed by the Burmese. After this the Burmese began to make the best use of their stay in Assam by all kinds of gratification. Virgins were deflowered before their parents and wives were molested before their husbands ; infants served as throwsticks to drop down mangoes from trees. All this makes lucid reading. There are even accounts as to how children were thrown from above on pointed swords below.¹⁰⁶ All properties and belongings had to be surrendered unconditionally and spontaneously on pain of mutilation or death ; rights and records of property were thrown into wells and rivers to efface any titles thereto.¹⁰⁷ Their atrocities had no limit. The Burmese burnt down the villages for days and nights. They even forgot that they were human beings when they sighted a woman and behaved like beasts. "The Burmese in a body of three to four, began to commit outrages on a single woman all at a time. Even a woman was outraged by ten men at a time. The old women, grown up women, and girls were not spared. Their outrages were so severe that a woman or a girl was not left till her female organ profusely bled."¹⁰⁸ Their oppression became increasingly severe as day passed by. No one could be sure of his wealth or reputation or even of life. Not only the Burmese robbed everything worth-taking, they wantonly burnt down the villages and even temples, violated the chastity of women of all ages and put a large number of innocent persons to death.¹⁰⁹ Another form of atrocities was to bind several persons together, sometimes even two hundreds at a time, and then lock them up in a hut which was afterwards set on fire to kill the captives. The Burmese used a particularly barbarous method of tying up people ; the palms of prisoners were pierced and cane strings were inserted

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for binding a number of people and preventing them from attempts at escape. This binding process became known to the Assamese as '*Manbandha*', i.e., Burmese Knot.¹¹¹ '*Manbandha*,' and '*Manar Din*' were equally horrible. While the young women were retained as wives, the aged or the unattractive ones cast aside after violating their chastity.

A number of local collaborators purchased peace by offering young and fair-complexioned girls to the invaders and thus became prominent and wealthy. Such people came to be known as *Duaniya*. Many such *Duaniyas* excelled their foreign protectors in inflicting atrocities on their own people by way of satisfying their ancient grudge. Usually one Burmese accompanied by 4/5 *Duaniyas* carried on their monstrous acts in the residences of peaceful citizens. The hill tribes followed suit, and the sufferings of the helpless inhabitants were unspeakable.¹¹¹ There were instance when many children lost their lives due to their own mothers' endeavour to keep them silent while hiding in jungles : hungry children cried for food and lest their noise should attract soldiers, children's mouths were forcibly shut by their mothers with the result that many such helpless children died of suffocation.¹¹² The cruelty of the Burmese knew no bounds. A vivid picture is to be found in the writings of Major J. Butler. He collected his facts from many surviving witnesses to Burmese atrocities. "All who were suspected of being inimical to the reign of terror, were seized and bound by Burmese executioners, who cut off the lobes of the poor victims' ears and choice portions of the body, such as the points of the shoulders, and actually ate the raw flesh before the living sufferers. They then inhumanly inflicted, with a sword, deep but not mortal gashes on the body, that the mutilated might die slowly, and finally closed the tragedy by disembowelling the wretched victims."¹¹³

The Burmese were similarly cruel in revenue administration. Cruelty in the matter of punishment tended to root out thefts and pilferage in the country but people were robbed of their property by the Burmese agents and their unscrupulous employees for collecting revenue.¹¹⁴ Such revenue collectors were employed to collect revenue the rates of which were also increased. The collectors used to pocket a portion of revenue

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and this obliged them to collect much more than the official dues.

Mingimaha Bandula remained in Assam for some months to consolidate the general administration was placed in the hands of Mingimaha Tilwa while Jogeswar Singha, the Raja, was a figurehead. Tilwa did not disturb the existing machinery of the Government. He appointed official from amongst the Assamese. But the Burmese taxation practices were arbitrary. Taxes were imposed on all classes of people and arbitrary was the manner of realisation of taxes. Personal service in lieu of revenue payment was a recognised custom in Assam during the Ahom days. Now, this custom was abolished. The usual rate of commutation of personal service by money payment which was Rs. 3 per *paik* was now doubled.

The *paiks* attached to temples had also to pay capitation tax at the rate of Rs. 6. Pandits and Maulavis, who had been exempted from any kind of taxation during the Ahom administration, were now compelled to pay Rs. 2 each. Even the Ahom priests, Deodhais and Bailungs, and the Hindu Gossains and members of the royal family were compelled to pay some amounts fixed arbitrarily by the Burmese. In addition to that, the Burmese collected whatever gold they could lay their hands on. The total number of *paiks*, as estimated by the Burmese, liable to pay poll tax of Rs. 6 stood at 89,850 of which 12,749 were runaway, and 12,546 were engaged in the services of the revenue collectors. The total amounts thus realised as *Paik* revenue came up to Rs 4,47,940. Out of this huge sum, Bandula received only little more than a lakh of rupees. The rest of the money was fraudulently apportioned by the accountants among themselves. It was suspected that the Assamese accountants bribed the Burmese supervisors who were content to accept 25 per cent of the collection or whatever amount was given by the Assamese accountants.¹¹ The people of Assam were not accustomed to pay revenue in cash, and coins were not much in circulation. As such, people usually turned out to be defaulters. The result was that parties of Burmese used to accompany the revenue collectors and they tortured the ryots till they parted with their valuables. Sometimes the ryots saved themselves from the torture of the

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Burmese by offering their girls for the pleasures of the Burmese. The collectors themselves were not spared. It was in the matter of revenue collection that the cruelties of the Burmese spread to the remotest villages of Assam.

The Burmese outrages were first seen on their return in April 1817. They plundered the border villages and carried off women and slaves to their country. In 1819-1821 the Burmese robbed, mutilated and killed all persons who were found sympathetic to Purandar Singha and Ruchinath Burahgohain. They repeated their outrages with greater severity after Chandra Kanta's flight from Upper Assam. But the most terrible atrocities were committed in their final retreat in 1825 from Assam after having been defeated by the British. The Burmese drove off before them all the young people could get hold of. It was estimated by David Scott that nearly 30,000 Assamese captives were carried off into Ava by the Burmese.¹¹⁶ The real nature of Burmese atrocities finds a clear expression in the account of Maniram Dewan: "Thefts were comparatively rare under the rule of the Burmese as they punished every thief by decapitation. In attacking the house of a rich man they would tie him with ropes and then set fire to his body. It was dangerous for a beautiful woman to meet Burmese even in the public roads. Brahmins were made to carry loads of beef, pork and wine. The Gossains were robbed of all their possessions. Fathers of damsels whom the Burmese took to wives rose speedily to affluence and power."¹¹⁷ A similar account is found in *Asamar Padya Buranji*: The Burmese dishonoured all women they came across in the roads and thoroughfares. The ugly and unattractive ones were left to the mercy of fate while their more beautiful sister enjoyed the continued patronage of the Shan invaders. Daughters were molested in presence of their parents and wives before their husbands.¹¹⁸ Gunaviram Barua, a well-known Assamese historian, expressed the opinion that biography of any and every family of that time, if written, would be a good account to prove that no family was spared the scars of Burmese wrath. Their depredations were so widespread that they made the country depopulated. Many people left the country just to save themselves; many went down, many entered either

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Manipur, Jayantia or moved towards Tripura. Many refugees entered the British territories where they felt secure. The successors of such fugitives are now-a-days seen in many parts of Bengal,¹¹⁹ especially in Chittagong areas, now under Bangla Desh. At that time many fugitives from Nowgong district specially from Dabaka Kathiatali, Barapujia areas entered Cachar and Sylhet districts. The migration of refugees from Dabaka and the Kapili valley resulted mainly from Burmese depredations. In Cachar there are as many as seventeen Assamese villages. The inhabitants are mainly Chutia by caste. They are descendants of those fugitives who were compelled to take shelter in Cachar and Sylhet. Tarapur, Taldhar, Gararbhitari, Bargul, Elakagul, Ilam, Kaiajani, Khalarpar, Konapara, Narayanpur, Jhapirband, Adorkona, Laburband, Larsingpar are some of the Assamese villages of Cachar district. In Sylhet district, now Bangla Desh, there were several Assamese villages such as Assampara in the Japlong Mouza, Sheillakhel, Kalairag, Lakarpar, Bagai, Na-goan, Barpoonji, Ishamati, Gumura, Sathal, Rangamati, Barham, Turung, Thalpara, Pantanajar, Umtak, Ratanpur, Jibanpur, Kataibag, Bijay Baruah, Rangpani, Barthal, Kadamtala. But after the 'Partition of India' the Assamese inhabitants of Sylhet district left for Assam. They have been provided settlement mainly in Bamungaon area of Lanka Circle of Nowgong district. It is learnt from the aged inhabitants of Tarapur that the parties going ahead thought the parties behind them to be the Burmese persuers following them and to escape from being captured the party marched further and further and in such a way they had to trek to such distant area. But the fact remained that the parties following them whom they took to be Burmese were also groups of Assamese fugitives. The descendants of such fugitives have become known as '*Manabhaganiya*' i.e., Fugitives from the Burmese.

In conclusion it may be said that the Burmese oppressions and barbarities were committed following a deliberate policy of striking terror into the minds of the people so that they might not dare rise against the invaders.¹²⁰ It was Bodawpaya's policy to launch a reign of terror and his successor Bogyidaw

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continued the same policy if only with added emphasis. It is evident that the Burmese invaders deliberately followed the policy of depredations. This greatly effected the life of Assamese people—socially and economically. It gave rise a new class of people viz., *Duaniya*. It destroyed the society by depopulating the country. It also destroyed the economic resources of the country whatever were there after the Moamaria Uprisings. The Burmese policy of depredation was also responsible for driving Assamese people to seek help from the English. Such help was secured which consequently brought British yoke over the people of Assam greatly effecting the life of the Assamese people.