

PURANDAR SINGHA AND CONTEMPORARY ASSAM

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Abstract:

The period of Purandar Singha and his contemporary Assam is an important epoch in the history of Assam. Because this period marked not only the end of a powerful Ahom monarchy that had ruled in the valley of the Brahmaputra for over a six hundred years but ushered in a new regime of foreign domination having radical changes the effects of which can be felt even today. In spite of several works on medieval and British period of Assam, some personalities and some issues have failed to receive adequate justice in the hands of historians. Though there are already several historical works on Ahom or pre-British Assam, number of similar works even articles in learned journals on Purandar Singha and his contemporary period is partially covered by many, there is lack of research work on this period. This paper focuses on causes and circumstances that led to the final exit of last of Ahom king from the stage of history. It also discusses the position of Raja Purandar Singha how he has responded to the challenges of that time.

Key words: Ahom Monarchy, Purandar Singha, Foreign Domination, New Era

Introduction:

The six hundred years unbroken rule in Assam of the mighty Ahoms came to an end with the invasions of the Burmese in the decade between 1815 and 1825 and final British conquest of the territory in 1826. Great and powerful kings wise statement, asute ministers, clever diplomats brave and loyal generals had distinguished the rule of the Ahoms in their bright and affluent days but the last fifty years of their sovereignty in Assam had shown all the signs of a decadent polity and crumbling political edifice. During the Burmese invasion the reign of puppets on the throne of Ahom kingdom gave a new direction in history of Assam. Burmese conquerors upheld Chandrakanta Singha for a time and then set up Jogeswar Singha in his place. But on their departure after the first invasion Purandar Singha a scion of the Ahom Royal family though not of the direct line, a descendant of king Rajeswar Singha was enthroned king of the Ahoms in 1819. He had ruled for a year before the Burmese returned to Assam and became thereafter a fugitive in British territory, he then tried to gather army and men to recover his last possession. When he finally returned to Assam after the Burmese had been driven out of Assam by the British, Purandar Singha was a sheltered prince who looked up to the British deliverers to restore him to his throne. Under a treaty with British in 1834 Purandar Singha became a Maharaja over a tract of his ancient kingdom in Upper Assam excluding the Muttak territory. But no prop could save the dynasty he represented on its ancient but tottering throne and after five years of not very popular rule he was in utter despair, his kingdom being taken over by his overlords leaning nothing for him but a royal name. Purandar Singha faced a tragic fortune showing the tragic end of a glorious dynasty that had reigning for centuries wielded its dominion with valour and fame. A critical discussion will be made on causes and circumstances that led to the final exit of the last of Ahom kings from the stage of history and role that played by Purandar Singha to maintain himself on the throne and to save the dynasty from the hands of British imperialism

Methodology:

The work is primarily based on books and scholarly articles in journals. The information presented here is secondary information collected from the above mentioned sources. The present study is carried out on descriptive mode of analysis.

Objective:

1. To understand the condition of Upper Assam at the time arrival of British
2. To know about the position of Raja (Purandar Singha). How he had met the challenges of that time.
3. To know about the circumstances that led to the final exit of last of Ahom king from the stage of history.

Condition of upper Assam at the time of arrival of British:

During civil wars of last reign of Ahom monarchy and occupation of the country by the Burmese had affected Assamese society very badly. It had become densely populated; people left the villages to save their lives. A considerable immigration having of late been constantly going on, the number of inhabitants must have been a good deal less than when the country was transferred to Purandar Singha. During his reign various rebellions took place because of following circumstances:

1. Not giving remission of revenue on account of those who had deserted or were deceased.
2. By want of military protection against incursion of hill tribes.
3. Inefficiency of civil and criminal courts

Arrival of British in Upper Assam:

Jenkins (commissioner of Assam in 1828) blamed Raja- believed that Raja did not directly increase rates of taxes but they had more to pay. Ryots and others who were getting their livelihood by trades, brass workers, fishermen, gold washers, weavers etc were taxed at the same rates as formerly. The transit duties were same. Though Raja wished to abolish them but urged that this could not be done without a corresponding deduction from his tribute. Grievances of ryots for want of proper military protection against aggression and robberies of the hill tribes. Another in the absent of pyke services now they were called upon to offer services for which they unwilling to offer.

The chief cause of complaint appeared however to arise from the mal-administration of Raja's court. The review of the revenues of Upper Assam from its first settlement under company in 1828 showed diminution of revenues of Raja but Jenkins believed that finances were better than they would seem to be from the exposition of the comparative revenue figures. To Jenkins there was not only required a revision of the settlements but an entire new organisation of the revenue agreements similar to Lower Assam. On the other hand Jenkins report assured that the area that under Raja would yield revenue that would be adequate to meet the demands of his government. Because Upper Assam possessed a vast potentialities iron, salt, coal, tea. The resumption would throw open the entire territory to the unfettered competition and industry of Europeans and Indian entrepreneurship alike. Purandar Singha requested a remission of a part of his tribute under the plea that it was first fixed at too high and almost impossible to collect. But Jenkins believed that the Raja's management was not good for which he couldn't collect the said amount. Failure was largely due to the personal character of Raja. So Jenkins recommended that government should resume such a portion of the country.

Purandar Singha's efforts to save the dynasty:

Purandar Singha aimed not merely the reform of the existing administrative abuses but also the moral and material progress of his subjects. During the period of British occupation revenue of Upper Assam was far from being satisfactory. The immediate decline under Purandar Singha was may be due to transfer of Naduar, a subdivision in Darang to Lower Assam and partly removal of civil and military establishment.

Jenkins admitted that Raja was placed under most difficult circumstances the emigration was also encouraged by lower rate of taxation in Muttock and by the entire abolition in Lower and Central Assam of the services of the pykes the transit duties and the poll tax. He recognised

that he was given authority over a people of which the masses were indifferent to the frequent changes in government while the majority of the Upper orders who were opposed to him personally were endeavouring to get rid of a government they were averse to.

Difficulties of Raja multiplied by irritation caused by the collection on account of the fugitives and also of the inequity in demanding transit duties when these were wiped out in the adjacent districts.

Purandar Singha in his effort to meet the demands of the British government with his rapid decline in revenue gradually his officials were left unpaid, favourites and partisans remained neglected religious rites and ceremonies were almost abandoned. Inevitably the frontier guards had to be withdrawn and his subjects were exposed to incursion of the neighbouring highlanders, supervision over the amlah became less and less effective and justice could not be had without adequately paying for it, the number of enemy steadily mounted up and they persistently worked for the ruin of the monarch. The more the decline in revenue the greater the demands on his collectors and heavier the pressure on the ryots for whom there was hardly any alternative but to flee.

The Raja was of opinion that the adoption of the system introduced by the company in Lower Assam was not practicable. Abolition of paik system would deprive him of the means of supporting his dignity and living after manner of his predecessors. According to the article of the treaty that was signed with British government, Purandar Singha failed to pay his tribute; he had fallen heavily into areas showed his inability to go on paying government. Jenkins believed that he was entitled to an indulgent consideration on several accounts.

British government did not allow to be continued in favour of the Rajah nor did they allow a proportionate tribute to be forced upon Muttok territory to get rid of tax. This was the reason for which changes he tried to make had no effect. Nor was the alleged misrule of the Rajah entirely without excuse. The Government placed him in unlimited authority over a large population of which the great majority of upper classes opposed to him individually and lower classes of which were disinclined to any changes.

The supreme Government had not consulted the population and knew little of the competency to govern of the person to whom was allowed an indefinite power contrary to custom of the country. Although failure of Raja in his engagement had given to government the right to interfere to secure their own interest the Raja had in Jenkin's opinion strong claim on their indulgence and so Jenkins recommended that while resuming a portion of the country in lieu of the tribute he be treated with much leniency.

Actual situation of that period of time:

Jenkins also looked forward to accessions from the hills and to a considerable improvement of salt form under better management. They would secure great amelioration of a large extent of country; this would lead to a proportionate extension of trade which would benefit whole province. Raja's management of affairs had led to the atrocities of Duffalas, Miris and Abors, Nagas these had consequences inflicted several cruelties upon unfortunate ryots. The Resumption of proposed territory would bring all these hill tribes under management of company's government which would result in restoring a state of tranquillity in the frontiers.

The occupation of proposed area would also enable British to connect Lower Assam with Sadiya by a good practicable road and to open roads for their troops towards frontier passes to Ava, Singpho country. The security of frontiers control and management of the border tribes' and development of resources of an extensive tract of country led to eventual consolidations uppermost part of Assam were in the mind of Jenkins at time. All Upper Assam was then in a measure lost to the traffic of the country from the injudicious taxations and barbarous management of native princes. The resumption of the proposed area to British would have the effect of throwing open the whole country to the unfettered industry and

competition of European and Native Merchants. The iron, salt, the coal and tea of these south eastern districts would alone suffice to enrich a country under the active energy of Europeans. The supreme government gave more than due considerations to the proposals of their agents in North East Frontier and very little to the difficulties and disadvantages of Purandar Singha and the very unfavourable circumstances he was placed in. On the other hand owing to the outbreak of cholera and a famine following it there were huge areas. Raja failed to meet his obligations and could never recover solvency.

Court of Directors finally decided that territory of Purandar Singha should be resumed and Purandar Singha should be pensioned off Sep. 1888, Purandar Singha was obliged to get down from his gaddi.

Conclusion:

The period of Purandar Singha and his contemporary Assam is a formative epoch in the history of Assam as well as north east India. Because this period not only led to the end of 600 years of glorious Ahom monarchy but ushered a new regime of British rule in Assam. Main objective behind the employment of an official aristocracy was that they were discontented with the change in government and who would have otherwise be a burden on the government and if unemployed might create disturbances. British blamed Purandar Singha for inconvenience in payment of taxes and about mal-administration of province. On the other hand on the part of Purandar Singha he denied the blames that were put upon him by British. He claimed that revenue that was demanded by British was too high to pay. He gave some reasons which were discussed above. By analyzing the whole situation we can say that though Purandar Singha cannot administer properly the whole region he should not have to be overthrown from his throne. By doing this British had fulfilled their many colonial interests. At last we can say that the colonial interest of British was the main reason for this epoch making transformation of power.

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