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- ★ FORMATION, GROWTH AND BREAKDOWN OF IMMIGRANT VOTE BANKS OF CONGRESS IN ASSAM
- ★ FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: POPULAR PROTESTS IN LATIN AMERICA DURING 2011-2015
- ★ COLONIAL INDIRECT RULE AND THE MAOIST INSURGENCY IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA
- ★ REINTERPRETING BODO LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM IN ASSAM
- ★ A BRIEF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE IDEA OF INDIGENEITY
- ★ THE PLEASURES OF BEING A 'KANIYA': THE POLITICS OF 'LAZINESS' IN COLONIAL ASSAM (C. 1854-1930)
- ★ OPEN VERSUS CLOSED BORDER: INDIA-BANGLADESH BORDER IN THE 21ST CENTURY
- ★ NORTH EAST REGION IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY: ISSUES AND CONCERN OF CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS
- ★ GLOBALIZATION, TEA INDUSTRY AND TRADE UNIONISM: AN OVERVIEW WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM CHAH KARMACHARI SANGHA (ACKS)
- ★ CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER AND CHINESE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM
- ★ POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUP: A FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING
- ★ GENDER AND IDENTITY IN LITERATURE FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST
- ★ THE MAKING OF JORHAT: UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERNS OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT (2500 BC TO 1947AD)
- ★ DAM(N)ED THE KOPILI: REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
- ★ ROLE OF STATE IN ENABLING HEALTHCARE COORDINATION IN INDIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC
- ★ MAKING OF TRADITIONAL RICE BEER AMONG TRIBAL COMMUNALITIES OF NORTHEAST INDIA WITH REFERENCE TO 'HOR-ALANG' OF THE KARBI COMMUNITY
- ★ PROSPECTS OF GANDHIAN WORLD ORDER IN A VIOLENCE- STRICKEN WORLD
- ★ TROUBLED PERIPHERY - CRISIS OF INDIA'S NORTH EAST BY SUBIR BHAUMIK, NEW DELHI: SAGE PUBLICATIONS INDIA PVT. LTD., PAPERBACK EDITION, 2015; PP 305'

THE PLEASURES OF BEING A 'KANIYA': THE POLITICS OF 'LAZINESS' IN COLONIAL ASSAM (C. 1854-1930)

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Abstract

The term laziness plays an important part in the history and culture of Assam. From being constructed as a lazy people by the colonial states constructions to its native understanding makes it an interesting point of interrogation, as it still remains an important marker of Assamese identity.

Keyword: *Laziness, Colonialism, Revenue, Nationalism, Immigration, Entrepreneurship*

Introduction

Laziness is an integral part of human character or habit from the very onset of civilization. From the times immemorial, several categories of the population are termed as lazy in different times and contexts. In majority of the cases it was the nobility and the intellectuals and the artists or the creative people who fell into the category. But, at the same time a large section of the common people were also included in the category that did not openly oblige to the norms of the society. The growth of the nation state in Europe gave a new identity to its citizens as active and passive. Every citizen was required to actively participate in the activities of the nation state, particularly in serving the army. The Industrial Revolution further confined the definition in favour of the bourgeoisie classes where citizens were

expected to be disciplined and obedient to the new class. It was the new class who due to their accumulation of wealth and knowledge to enjoy luxury and comfort as well as lazy. Karl Marx had repeatedly emphasised the sufferings of the commoners who had to struggle under the dominance of the capitalist classes and expected the sufferings of the masses be redressed.

The triumph of capitalism in Europe is also linked with colonialism. By the 19th century majority of the European powers controlled the destinies of a large section of the people through their colonies. Through the colonial rule the dominance of the capitalist classes were provided with a new platform to accelerate their interests. The colonial state never established any industries in the country nor was they interested in imparting technical knowledge to the native to maintain their dominance. The colonial state's policy was clear cut, to promote the interests of the British private interests and investments. In pursuing these agendas the colonial state tried to peruse several steps which were against the interests of the natives. The best example, in this regard in context of colonial Assam was the policy of opium.

The colonial state in order to justify its policies also tried to make categorization of the native as backwards, 'effeminate' and lazy who were destined to be poor. Interestingly, this categorization was also related to the revenue yielding capacity of the natives. In other words, the natives failed to pay their revenue as they were lazy. Since land revenue constituted the largest share of revenue for the state its regular collections in spite of the odds became the primary focus for it.

The introduction of the tea cultivation in the province created a new concept of laziness. As Jayeeta Sharma has pointed out the European planters when unable to procure natives for the tea gardens began to categorise the natives as lazy and unprogressive. (Sharma Jayeeta, 2009). But this attitude of the colonial state did not remain confined to the tea industry but to the land revenue as well as the general characteristic of the Assamese people. This colonial attitude was constantly challenged by the Assamese nationalists from the days of Anandaram Dhekial Phookan.

The present paper seeks to examine the colonial notion of laziness in the proper context. First, whether, laziness was the inherent character of the Assamese people? Second, how the colonial state official understood the concepts of laziness and pleasure apart from their own imperial interests? Thirdly, whether the colonial state itself was responsible in making the natives lazy through the introductions of opium, which was not popular among the natives prior to the advent of the colonial rule? Fourth, how the educated natives tried to respond to these issues? Fifth, how far the colonial state was successful in defending its policies against the India National Movement for Independence in which opium and other narcotics as well as drinking became a specific area of attack, particularly under M. K. Gandhi during the National Movement for Independence. Sixth, how these issues affected the various tribal communities of the province? Seventh, how far the climatic and geographical factors also played in the colonial construction of laziness?

The scope of the paper will be confined to the Brahmaputra valley as the question of the Assamese identity and nationalism are interlinked within the parameters of the area. The new immigrants remained as a kind of competition under the colonial regime who were benefitting more than the natives.

The politics of Power, Knowledge& Identity

In the growth the difference between the West and the East the concepts of Orientalism and Race played significant roles. As Edward Said argues, the concept of Orientalism or the view that the West is superior and different to the East had long traditions dating back to the Greeks.(Said Edward, Orientalism, 1978) It carried a power structure in which the Europeans tried to situate their views on the east as lazy, weak and indulged only in luxuries. One of the best examples of this view is the concept of the 'Oriental Despotism' who was cruel and treated their women harshly. This tone can clearly be seen in J.S. Mills and T. B. Macaulay. The various Christian missionary works further strengthened these claims. In fact, there were also the Indologists and the Theosophists who held alternative views on it.

In advocating the dominance of the West the concept of race became a handy tool for the colonial powers. Aided by the strengths of the Industrial and the Scientific Revolutions the idea of difference between the East and the West became stronger when the question of domination emerged. The newly established branch of knowledge, Anthropology gave a ‘scientific’ basis for establishment of the difference. The colonial regime made several efforts to make the difference within the Indian society by conducting several anthropological surveys among the entire people which was published and the various Census Reports further differentiated the people. The colonial rulers fully utilised the concept of caste as existed in the country through the various anthropological reports and the Census Reports made the existing divide which was also racial clearer, through the legal recognition of the various Brahmanical texts like the Manu Samhita in the Personal Laws of the Hindus. The colonial state tried to link itself with the Aryan concept so that it could depict itself as not foreigners or the ‘other’ but sharing a link with the dominant natives in order to establish its legitimacy to rule the country. But, this identification created some problems for the colonial state as it left a large section of the people like the Dalit’s and the Muslims outside the dominant structure of the society. The colonial state understood this after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Although, it was harsh on the Indian Muslims for the events of 1857 after the Mutiny the colonial state soon understood the utilities of the separateness of the communal divide. Later this was extended to the Indian Dalit’s or the Depressed Classes. These shifting positions did not help the colonial state in many cases as it had to counter the challenges of the Indian National Congress. This made the colonial state as the champion for the cause of the minorities. But, this position of the state alienated itself from the dominant view held by the Indian National Congress to be the sole representative of the Indian people.

The Colonial State and the Question of Laziness of the Natives

Prior to the Treaty of Yandabo (1826) the British were not directly interested into the province. The prospects of directly annexing the province was not easy on the part of the East India Company, as the province was undergoing several turmoil’s due to the decline of the Ahom State and various rebellions like the Moamarias.

Moreover, the three Burmese Invasions along with the Barkandez (a class of marauders from Bengal) attacks, which created a confusing situation. Several people were killed by these events and the Burmese also took with them several people as captives. One of the characteristic of the pre-colonial Assam was low density of population. The Ahom state managed this issue through the introduction of the paik system (where a large majority of the citizens had to serve through their labour. As a result, monetised economy did not develop in the province. At the same time it must also be noticed that this system remained confined in the upper parts of the valley, in the Lower Assam the people were well accustomed to the monetized economy due to their interaction with the Bengali Paragana system. There were no paik's as they were not under the Ahom rule and they were familiar with the practice of paying revenues in cash.

As a result, the British had no clear cut agendas about Assam. Regarding Lower Assam they were confident in directly annexing it as its population had familiarities with Bengal as well as the number of population was also higher than the Upper parts. But, the colonial administrations understanding of Lower Assam soon proved to be a failure as there were several differences between Bengal and Assam regarding the land revenue settlements. As the province was a disturbed by the Burmese invasions as well as various internal disturbances like the Mayamora Rebellion it resulted in large scale depopulation, a large numbers of people particularly in Upper Assam were carried away by the Burmese it required a period of peace so that it could recover to normalcy. So, initially land revenues were not enhanced for several years. But, after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the situation began to change. Several efforts were made to enhance the land revenues but with little success. Rather it led to a series of peasant uprisings in the different parts of the province.

One of the major obstacles for the province was its landlocked and isolated geographic situation. Although, it had several potentialities in terms of its untapped resources its geography or remoteness from the purview of the European capital posed a major challenge for its commercial utilization. Secondly, the economy of the province particularly in Upper Assam was not properly monetized. The Colonial

state wanted a monetised economy and this was not a comfortable situation for both the state as well as its citizens. The Assamese people failed to pay adequate revenues to the state. The state tried to cope up the situation by imposing several other forms of revenue apart from the land. After 1857 the situation became more acute for the colonial state as it had also to undertake some measures for the benefit of the newly conquered area. But how can this be done without a regular supply of revenue whereby the state machinery be maintained? The lack of sufficient population was another area of concern for the colonial state. This frustration was clearly expressed by Henry Hopkins, the Commissioner to the Agent of Bengal in 1861 in these words,

*“At present we take very little from the Assamese, and we do very little for him. We do not intercept the bounty of nature on one hand, on the other we do not lead him to look for more than nature provides, place him in communication with the outer world, and put him in the way of acquiring new material wants; the result is that he remains an indolent, sensual and non-progressive being.”*²

In order to attract European capitalist interests the colonial government from the days of Francis Jenkins, Agent to the Commissioner of Bengal tried to devise several plans. One of his primary agenda was to make the land attractive to the British capitalist by making special provisions. Later this system was known as the Waste Land Settlements. Through this the western capitalist class was given long leases of land at a very paltry amount. The natives were indirectly discouraged to involve in this enterprise. This is important to note that when the majority of the Assamese people were trying to come into terms to adjust to the newly introduced monetised economy the colonial state only confined itself with the outsiders. The colonial state tried to make several experiments in changing the boundaries for its own interests. Thus Sylhet was added to the province in 1867 in order to get more revenues, without considering the linguistic and cultural differences. Throughout the 19th century the colonial state was concerned to increase the land and other forms of revenue and had no easy answers.

The situation began to change to some extent with the discovery of tea and natural resources like coal and petroleum. Since the natives were unwilling to work

in the harsh conditions as they became free from the Paik system the colonial state encouraged large scale immigration from the other parts of the subcontinent.

The Paik System and Laziness

One of the characteristic features of the Ahom administration was the Paik System. Due to limited population the Ahom state resorted to a system in which in Upper Assam (in which it was mainly concentrated) introduced a system in which the majority of the citizens in lieu of paying revenue to the state had to provide physical labour. Apart from discouraging the growth of a monetised economy it became more repressive and unpopular among the paiks. It led to several uprisings like the Moamoriya and emerged as a major cause for the decline of the Ahom Kingdom.

These issues again came during the brief restoration of the Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam during 1834-38. The Ahom nobility wanted reintroduction of the system as they were not accustomed with the cash economy. The situation was not easy for Purandar Simha as he had also to look for avenues to pay his tribute to the colonial state. He had to bring some Bengali officials known as the Amlahs from Bengal to collect revenues in cash. This made the situation more difficult for the ruler as the majority of the natives were finding it difficult to see the growing importance as well the oppressions of the outsiders. Purandar was not a lazy person but he could not make any radical change in the limited space designed by the colonial state.

When the British finally annexed the Ahom kingdom in 1838 and later the adjoining areas there were no question of reintroduction of the system. The colonial administration wanted revenues in cash and the beneficiaries of the system had to accept it. The Paik system emerged as a major obstacle for the introduction of the monetised economy. Only by 1850, a section of the nobility led by Maniram Dewan wanted the restoration of the system, but without any positive results. It resulted the Mutiny in 1857, which was quickly suppressed by the colonial state. The condition of the majority of the nobility deteriorated rapidly and they lost their earlier status.(Saikia, Rajen, 2001, p.16-45).Their dependence on the paik system made them lazier and economically impractical. The accounts of Harakanta

Sadar Amin clearly portray the situation very aptly. Although he was related with the old noble class he soon understood that unless his class understood the utility of adjusting with the new regime their future would be bleak. Sadr Amin Harkanta, Guwahati 1989). Interestingly, the Paiks were happy with the situation as they under the new regime were not forced to do the unpaid jobs. But, soon their euphoria subsided as the colonial state imposed new revenue system in which they had to pay their revenues in cash. The punishments of non payments were heavier. For example, the beggar system that prevailed in parts of the province, in which people was forced to work for construction of roads.

Slavery and Laziness

Like the other parts of the country slavery was also a dominant feature in the pre-colonial Assam. The Assamese nobility and a large section of the society were dependent on it. The colonial state knew about its existence but till 1860 made no specific rules to stop the practice. But soon the colonial state began to understand that if slavery existed in the province which also included the various temples it was not going to collect regular revenues from the people. In fact, a large amount of lands were put aside for the religious institutions like the temples and the satras by the colonial state till its existence to retain the support from the native beneficiaries. In this effort the Colonial State was successful to a certain extent as the majority of the beneficiaries remained loyal. But, this was not the case with the nobility who were the major beneficiaries of the system. Maniram clearly pointed it in his report to AJM Mills. (Dewan, Maniram, 1954:619) It must be added that in context of Assam the slaves in most cases were treated as part of the extended family, but not as captives or inferior objects. But, at the same time due to the existence of the system the native nobles became lazy and failed to take full opportunities of the colonial transition. Yet, apart from the economic grounds the existence of the slavery was to an extent in context of the temples to the devadasi system.

Opium and Laziness

One of the major problems which severely affected a large section of the population was the increasing consumption of opium. The use opium as narcotics was a recent

development in colonial Assam. The Assamese people were accustomed to the Bhang which also produced some pleasing affects to the addicts and it did not create any serious issue in the pre-colonial rulers who were not dependent on cash. A large section of the people consumed only during the Shivratri. In other words, Bhang had the Divine sanction for the majority. But, after the arrival of Captain Welsh in 1892, things began to change. Soon, it became quite widespread taking full advantage of the political instability of the province. Moreover, it can be easily cultivated in the province. The colonial administration took full advantage to the situation. The Assamese elites became very concerned with this and urged the Government to do something to prevent it. Anandaram Dhekial Phookan, in his Report to A.J.M Mills in 1854 (who came to monitor the progress of the province from its annexation in 1826) argued in these words, “Moreover by the facilities afforded now-a-days, such low people as Doomnees, Meereoneos (wives of Dooms, Mohomedans and Meerees) have become inveterate opium- eaters, and by their allurements have spread the practice universally. Association of opium eaters is the cause of the increase of such characters.... If unable to procure opium, and good food, they are obliged to sell or give in servitude their wives and families. And when women becomes opium- eaters they will sell their domestic utensils without the knowledge of their husbands, and even barter their chastity or forsake the path of virtue to get the drug.” He was disappointed with the situation and remarked that the Assamese had better qualities. They were unlike the present was “once a hardy, industrious and enterprising race” had converted into “an effeminate, weak, indolent and a degraded people...Women themselves are often not accepted, and in many parts of the country opium is freely administered to the infants and children.” (Phookan, D. Anandiram, (Mills, *ibid*, p.110)

His contemporary, Maniram Dewan was also very concerned at this trend. In fact opium was one of the major problems in colonial Assam which affected the province till the 1930’s. The case was different in the other parts of the country where its consumption was rapidly declining. This emerged as a major issue for the Assamese nationalists to involve directly with the Indian National Congress till 1920 as the later regarded it as a provincial matter. The Assamese nationalists were very critical about the impacts of opium on the Assamese people among the large

majority, irrespective of class and caste. Opium was one of important topic of debates among the Assamese nationalists and they creatively utilised it. The various public bodies like the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha and the Assam Association were also very active in this regard. These activities among others forced the Colonial State to appoint inquiry commissions on opium.

The present paper tries to raise the question, why opium became more popular in the 19th and the early 20th century when the people had the alternative options of pleasures like the Bhang and various local drinks? What was so special to opium in the context of colonial Assam? How far the British colonial state was responsible for the growing popularization of it in the province? Interestingly, Hemchandra Baruah, who wrote the first book on opium, 'KaniyarKirtan' (The Revels of an Opium Eater), 1861 was a regular drunkard. The role of the colonial state in this regard was very pathetic. It was primarily guided by the concerns of the economy rather than the well being of the natives. Interestingly, opium became a major problem in contemporary Britain and it emerged as the centre of the global anti -opium movement. But the colonial administration in Assam monopolised opium so that the deficits in the land revenues could be overcome. In other words, it did not regard opium as harmful to the people but tried to defend it. This becomes clear during the visits of the Royal Commission of Opium of 1884 into the province. A section of the representatives before the Commission, both natives and the Colonial officials, tried to argue that opium was not only a narcotic but a medicine for dysentery and other diseases which affected a large section of the people in colonial Assam. It clearly portrayed the failures of colonial state to introduce western medicines into the province and it tried to place the burden on laziness of the people. It did not have any visions for public health or public welfare and was confined to the English investments like in the tea industry but here also it practically did nothing but let the planters and the Christian Missionaries to take the responsibilities. Instead it allowed the promotion of opium particularly among the Assamese masses. The situation was no different in the tea plantations. So, the British colonial state in Assam was an active agent in the growth of the opium addiction among the masses. For the collection of revenue it could go to any extent.

The Growth of the Tea and Other Industries and Laziness

The growth of the tea and other industries like petroleum the colonial concept of laziness was different. Here, opium did not emerge as a major issue. In the tea gardens in particular, the colonial state promoted drinking, instead of opium and developed mechanisms for it. But why not opium, as it was done in the other areas? This was due primarily to the fact that if the tea garden workers knew about its cultivation the entire industry was to doom.

Immigration and Laziness

The rapid immigration into the province from the second half of the 19th century into the province from different parts of the country gave a new momentum to the concept of laziness of the natives. The new immigrants were very hard working and soon they began to take control of the economy from labour to market. The natives began to lose their presence in the colonial economy and this was observed by a section of the Assamese elites. In order to evoke the spirits of the natives they tried to provide certain examples to the natives to the commercialization of agriculture as well as enterprise. This can be clearly be seen from the days of the ‘Jonaki’ (1889) to the ‘Banhi’ and as well as the later newsmagazines’ like the ‘Chetana’ and the ‘Awahan’. They tried to critically engage with the colonial understanding of the natives as lazy against the new immigrants.

The Assamese Middle Class and Laziness

The concept of laziness underwent several changes in the wake of the westernization or modernization as well as the growth of communication and the market economy. During the colonial period there were several contradictory pictures relating the issue. From the days of Bholanath Barooah and Lakshminath Bezbaruah as well as Malbhog Baruah (a pioneer in the tea industry) there were several men who instead of becoming colonial clerks tried to choose independent avenues for themselves. These men tried to change the stereotypes of the Assamese mindsets about the notion of entrepreneurship. In fact, from the days of the “Jonaki” various efforts were made to instil the spirits of entrepreneurship among the natives by showing the examples of the benefits of shifting to the new commercial crops like arrowroot.

Although, the respondents were fewer but a section of educated men became inspired in the 20th century. One of the best examples is Purnakanta Burhagohain from Dibrugarh, who not only tried to cultivate turmeric but also to sell his products outside the province. For that he visited several parts of the South East Asia, particularly Burma. He was followed by some others as mentioned in the "Chetana".

Nationalism and Laziness

The question of laziness became an important issue in the growth of the Assamese identity. By the second half of the 19th century provincial national identities began to emerge which tried to provide new linguistic and cultural identities to the particular region. This became more problematic in colonial Assam where the Assamese identity had to face competitions from the Bengali identities as both relied on linguistic identities. The publication of the Census Reports made both the identities to become more alarmed at the numbers of the respective speakers. In Colonial Assam this was a contentious issue as the colonial government introduced Bengali as the official language from 1836 to 1873.

To the Assamese nationalists laziness became an important site of contestation. They were basically divided by two groups, one advocating the colonial understanding and the others by the limited provincial focus. The former entirely accepts laziness as the inherent quality of the natives and can only be reformed through the colonial enterprise. The other view belied that through inner-regeneration it can be done.

Conclusion

The issue of laziness in colonial Assam is important in the discourse of Assamese nationalism and identity particularly related with the men. From the days of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan the Assamese educated middle class continuously began to argue that it is due to laziness that the natives are not progressing. But at the same time they did not pay attention to the climatic conditions of the valley as well as the abundance of the natural resources that were also responsible for it. Regarding opium in the nationalist discourses the natives were mainly blamed for its addiction while the role of the colonial state was not questioned.

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