

**AN
ECONOMIC HISTORY
OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
1826 to 1947**



Jalad Baran Ganguly

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PREFACE

Economic changes and growth in North East India from 1826 to 1947 under colonial rule reflect the processes of structural changes in political, social, cultural and economic organizations of production impacting on the region's economic growth and distribution of goods and services among different classes of people.

This work is an endeavour to capture the forces of these changes and evaluating their consequences on the wellbeing of the people in the colonial period. Economic pursuits of people and their advancement are conditioned by the prevailing social, cultural and political, institutional architecture and past history. These aspects have been highlighted in appropriate places in respect of the different sub-regions constituting the region.

In 1997 I took up the work of writing the economic history of North East India inspired by the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati. It was felt that in the field of historical studies relating to the causes of economic change and growth in this region in the colonial period there existed some gap which need be addressed. It was Professor Atul Sarma, of the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi and member of the Governing Body of the Institute who first broached this project to me. Thereafter, Professor Atul Goswami, the then Director of the Institute, urged me to undertake this research assignment which I did in the same year. How I wish Goswami had lived to see this work! I state with profound sadness that he passed away on June 4, 2004.

In the initial stage for a few months Mousumi Saikia, a research scholar of the Institute, helped me in collecting some data for the work. Thereafter I went ahead with the hard task of collecting the required source materials for writing

this history almost singlehandedly. First, Professor Atul Goswami, now no longer living, and later Professor Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, who became the Director of the Institute in March 2000 after Goswami's retirement, the Deputy Librarian, several distinguished faculty members and a good few staff-members of the Institute extended all help and cooperation to me in carrying out my work. I am grateful to all of them. I record my unbounded gratitude to Late Professor H. K. Barpujari, my teacher and doyen of historical studies of this region. From him and his writings I got inspiration.

For consulting various reference books, taking notes and borrowing relevant books I have depended on the National Library, Kolkata, the libraries of the Anthropological Survey of India and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Kolkata, the libraries of the Centre for Historical and Antiquarian Studies, the Assam Secretariat's Records Department, the Census Department and the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development in Guwahati. The staff members of all these libraries extended help and cooperation to me for which I remain grateful to them.

I have been helped, encouraged and advised by many well-wishers and scholars, among whom especially are Amalendu Guha, B. K. Roy Burman, D. P. Barooah, Renu Devi, Atul Goswami, and A.N.S Ahmed.

I gave three seminars at the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Gauwahati and a fourth at the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong where I had interactions with several scholars and benefited by their observations and comments on my work. Pulak Majumdar, my former student, graciously helped me in many ways in completing this work and getting it edited and typed.

Deepak Datta, conventional typist, Ratan Das, Computer typist, and Anupam Chatterjee, who did proof reading of computer – typed first Chapter and Sayantani Biswas, who did proof reading of the rest of the Chapters and the Appendix, deserve my sincere gratitude for completing their assigned tasks enthusiastically.

In the final stage Professor P. K. Mitra, retired Professor of English of Kalyani University, West Bengal, very kindly edited the manuscripts. And he did it meticulously even

though it entailed his withdrawal from other urgent academic pursuits to find time for editing the manuscripts. I am deeply grateful to him for his graciously agreeing to undertake and completing this task. Despite his thorough editing work, if any error or pitfall remains, I am wholly responsible for any such blemish and not Professor Mitra.

From 1997 to 2003, for a period of six years, one person who silently but steadfastly stood by me when I was carrying out this work often neglecting my duties in the domestic sphere is my wife Chitra. Despite her glaucoma of both eyes afflicting her, she attended to domestic chores to keep the household running and maintaining a congenial environment in the house to enable me to complete this work. No words are adequate which can express my love and sense of gratitude to her.

P.S. I also acknowledge the help I received from my friends B. Batta Ray and Arabinda Basu in writing this book.

Thanks are also due to Kalpana Digital of Kolkata for correcting the original C.D. It may be noted that certain additions and alterations to this work were made after August 2004. When I first made this book ready.

Omeo Kumar Das Institute
of Social Change and Development,
Guwahati

Jalad Baran Ganguly

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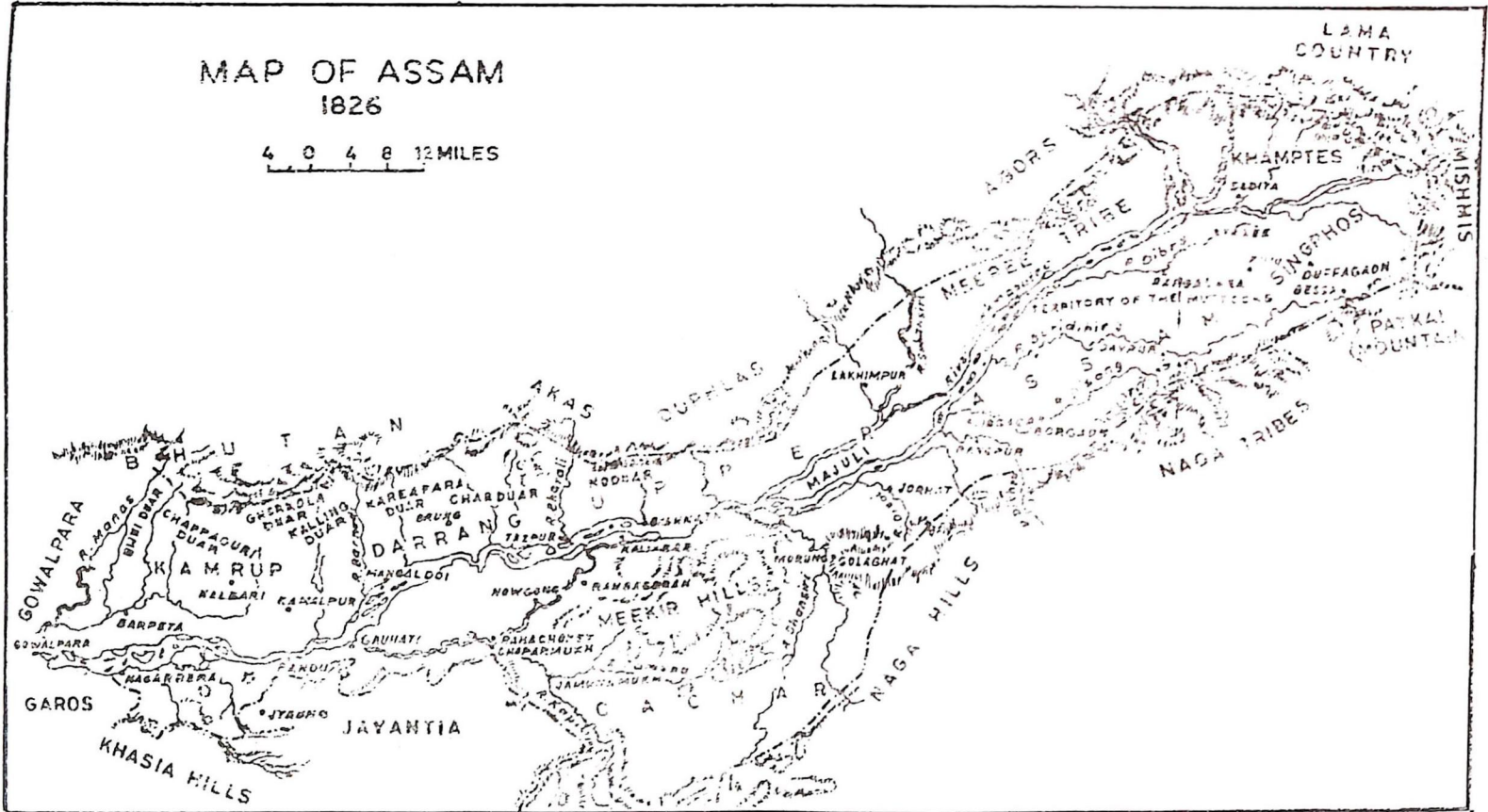
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MAP OF ASSAM 1826

4 0 4 8 12 MILES



11111

Source: H.K. Barpujari (Ed), The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.IV, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati (1992), P. facing page 1.

PART - ONE
THE REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

1

THE APPROACH TOWARD WRITING AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF NORTH EAST INDIA

1. North East India as an Economic Entity

The North Eastern Region as we know it to-day consists of seven political units designated as states in the Constitution of India. These are: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. During the colonial period, political division of this geographical region was different. In 1826, in terms of the Treaty of Yandabo (24 February, 1826), Assam was annexed by the British after defeating the Burmese invaders, who occupied the entire area of the Brahmaputra valley after vanquishing the Ahom rulers. The Burmese had also overran the kingdoms of Cachar, Jaintia and even Manipur. And in accordance with the terms of the same treaty the Burmese agreed to give up their domination over Cachar and Jaintia and to let Gambhira Singh to resume ruling Manipur as its king.

After taking over Assam the British proceeded to annex one after another the states of Cachar, Jaintia and the tribal states of Khasi Hills. They pursued their forward policy of establishing step by step their domination over the adjoining tribal areas, such as, Sadiya and Muttock, the Naga Hills, Garo Hills, and Lushai Hills. In the process they encountered fierce and stiff opposition of the tribal people. Ultimately of course the British raj overcame the stubborn resistance of the hill people and subdued them.

Extension of British control over the north-eastern hills

(presently Arunachal Pradesh) inhabited by the Abors (Adis), Mishmis, Khamptis, Daflas, (Nishis), Apatanis, Konyaks, Wanchos, Monpas, was made possible much later, by mounting a number of armed expeditions. The constitution of the North East Frontier Agency covering the 'Abor or Central Section, Mishmi and Khampti or Eastern Section' and Western Section extending from the Subansiri to the border of Bhutan took shape in 1912 when the proposal sent by the Government of India was accorded approval by the Secretary of State of the United Kingdom.

Tripura came under the British sway much later. In 1858 the Company's rule ended and the country came under the rule of the British Crown, the Paramount Power of India, and the successor to the Mughals. Under the Company the Princely States were treated as 'foreign states' but the Government treated them as 'feudatories' or vassal states.

The British Government took upon itself the responsibility of maintaining 'good government' in the states by making them adopt the British model of administration. To carry out this objective, Political Agents were appointed for the princely states.

In the case of Tripura, the British intervened on the ground that the Indian villages in the districts of Sylhet, Cachar, Chittagong and Tipperah bordering Hill Tripura were raided by the Lushai-Kuki tribesmen. Finally, in 1871 the Political Agent was appointed for Tripura when Birchandra Manikya was the ruling king of that state.

Evolution of the constitutional and administrative arrangements for the different units during the British rule will be outlined in Chapter II in so far as they are relevant to the comprehending economic changes in the respective territories.

Our knowledge about the political history of this part of the country has of late been enriched by the authentic works of some noted historians. But by contrast, there exists a void in the field of writing economic history of the region as a whole. Some political historians, of course, have in some measure dwelt on economic institutions, facts, activities, and the causes that lay behind specific political movements and events¹. But a close study of the economic system and

changes having a bearing on the well-being of different social groups is an imperative need.

The common geographical features of the north-eastern states account for striking similarities in the *modus operandi* of natural resource use for productive purposes. The region is bounded by high mountain ranges on the north (Arunachal Pradesh), east (Nagaland and parts of Manipur) and south (parts of Manipur and Mizoram). Within the area capped by high mountain ranges there are mountainous zones, such as, Meghalaya and Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam. In Tripura five hill ranges run parallel to each other from north to south. Moreover, there are innumerable hills and hillocks scattered all over these states. No wonder, more than 70% of the total area of the region is hilly and nearly 50% is under forests. Major part of the forests comprises tropical rain forests.

Assam, Manipur and Tripura have considerable areas of valley lands. They are the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys in Assam, Imphal valley in Manipur and the Gomati, Khowai, Howrah, Manu and Muhuri valleys in Tripura. Some flat valley lands between hills and hillocks are there as well in all these states.

In adaptation to physiographical features different systems of agricultural practices have been developed – while the hill forests have been the sites of shifting cultivation, the valley lands have been in use for practising settled wet rice cultivation. In some parts of Naga Hills an effective system of settled cultivation has been indigenously developed by terracing hill slopes and irrigating the terraced fields by building diversion channels from the nearby hill streams and directing the flow of stream water along the terraces. On the Apatani plateau of the north-eastern hills (Arunachal Pradesh) the Apatanis have devised a unique system of building terraces and irrigation networks for practising cultivation of settled wet rice.

Shifting cultivation is less efficient than settled cultivation in terms of productivity per unit of land as well as labour-year. In most cases, people dependent on shifting cultivation have been unable to attain self-sufficiency in food production. Therefore, they have to procure food from the plains where

wet - rice cultivation system yields sufficient quantum of rice, the staple food- grain of the people both in the plains and in valleys. In the past, periodically the hillmen raided the villages in the foothills and looted food stock and other necessaries and even took away men and women as captives to use them as their slaves. The Ahom rulers introduced a system of paying in cash and / or kind some 'compensation' called 'posa' to certain border tribes in exchange for a pledge that no such plundering raids would be committed by them anymore. Even the British Government continued to pay 'posa' to some tribes after entering into fresh agreements with them. The hill farmers produce some non - food crops and collect forest products for which there is a great demand from the plainsmen. This pattern of production explains how a relation of economic interdependence for the hill-dwellers and the plain-dwellers has developed.

This economic factor has traditionally bound together, the different population groups of the north - eastern states for their well-being. Besides, various other features of commonality obtain among these states, such as, territorial contiguity, similar ecological infrastructure, power and mineral resource base, crop - soil - rainfall matrix, etc. Excepting for Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, the river systems of the remaining four states are connected with the mighty Brahmaputra which runs from the east to the west of Assam. The southern districts of Assam (Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi) are drained by the Barak river system with which are related some of the rivers of Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura.

In term of resource endowments, economic interdependence of hills and plains and historical commonality the seven political units comprise a broad economic unit (or zone). Economic scenario of each of the seven states manifests certain distinct structural features and differences in sectoral distribution of state domestic products and the trends in economic changes. Despite the uniqueness of certain economic features of each of the seven states, a general pattern in the economic changes that took place in the past in this region as a whole is discernible. This general trend needs to be focused to establish north

eastern economic history as a framework that transcends a somewhat random collection of separate economic histories of north - eastern states. Such generalizations are quite in order as explained by Hicks:

“Every historical event has some aspect in which it is unique; but nearly always there are other aspects in which it is a member of a group, often of quite a large group. If it is one of the latter aspects in which we are interested, it will be the group, not the individual, on which we shall fix our attention, it will be the average, or norm, of the group which is what we shall be trying to explain. We shall be able to allow that the individual may diverge from the norm without being deterred from the recognition of a statistical uniformity. This is what we do, almost all the time, in economics”².

2. What is Economic History : An Analytical Framework

Economic history of a country or a part thereof may be broadly reckoned as an account of the economic conditions of its people in the past and changes thereof over the chosen period of time denoted by the trend of growth, stagnation or decline in the gross domestic product. For simple non-monetized barter exchange economies or for economies having a mix of barter and monetized exchanges systems statistical estimation of GDP would be difficult to make, if at all. In such conditions some surrogates for roughly assessing the direction and order (higher or lower) of change in the total output of goods and services might be used. Explanations of the occurrence of particular courses of changes need to be articulated in terms of economic laws/theories. For this purpose the structure of the economic system that exemplifies organization of economic activities, such as, production, distribution, exchange, accumulation, need to be outlined. The economic system operates within the given social, cultural and political parameters. In fact, political and economic aspects of life are symbiotically related with each other. Economic changes cannot be comprehended ignoring political and socio-cultural changes affecting the living conditions of the people. This is borne out by Hicks who observes: “A major function of economic history, as I see it, is to be a forum where economists and political scientists, lawyers, sociologists, and historians – historians

of events and of ideas and technologies - can meet and talk to one another"³.

The process of production is the outcome of application of human labour for converting the mobilized resources to useful items of immediate consumption (consumption goods) or to that which can be used for production of item now or later in increased quantities (capital goods). Technology applied for producing goods and services is an important determinant of the productive efficiency of human labour. Technology is not a gift of nature, it is developed and adopted by human beings and the ability to do so is dependent on the level of development of human resource itself. Education, training, experience, culture, ideology et al. largely shape the potential of human resource. The growth of population itself, as asserted by Ester Boserup⁴, promotes technological change. In analysing the problems of development and growth of agricultural production in primitive communities, in particular, Boserup has cogently outlined the positive impacts of growth of population, which is taken as an autonomous change, on such growth. Population growth has actually been an important element of change in the structure of the north eastern economy.

Institutional factors and ideology also play an important role in determining the pace and direction of economic change and distribution of its gains among the different socio-economic groups in the society⁵. This happens through changes in relative prices of goods and services and the factors of production. Such a course of change takes place mainly through the market mechanism. In other words such a mechanism of economic change presupposes the milieu of the market economy.

As we see large parts of north east India during the period under study did not yet develop into a market economy. Extension of colonial rule over this area and the colonial policy of bringing changes by imposing the required political, administrative, legal and juridical structure entailed basic institutional changes. A market economy started taking shape. Yet the major part of people's activities for survival could be reckoned, what Fernand Braudel has termed, as the structures of every day life⁶. Market economy covers

“mechanisms of production and exchange linked to rural activities, to small shops and workshops, to banks, exchanges, fairs and (of course) markets. It was on these ‘transparent’ visible realities, and on the easily observed processes that took place within them that the language of economic science was originally founded. But there is another, shadowy zone, often hard to see for lack of adequate historical documents, lying underneath the market economy: this is that elementary basic activity which went on everywhere and the volume of which is truly fantastic. This rich zone, like a layer covering the earth, I have called for want of a better expression *material life* or *material civilization*”⁷. This covers eating habits, luxury and the foods of the masses, drinks, stimulants and drugs, houses throughout the world, interiors, costume and fashion, the spread of technology: sources of energy, metallurgy, transport, money, towns and cities, etc. From an account of the material life of the people one can have an idea about “the limits of the possible” level of social and economic development of the people in the period. These facts need to be noted, for they represent the varied dimensions of social and economic development. Most importantly, Braudel has also emphasized the impact of material progress on population growth. To quote him: “World population doubled during the four centuries covered by this book (15th to 18th centuries); nowadays it doubles every thirty or forty years. This is obviously the result of material progress. But the number of people is itself as much a cause as consequence of this progress”⁸.

Braudel has concluded from his studies that the capitalist process has been facilitated by ‘a vigorous and expanding market economy’, favourable social environment for the ‘continuous process of wealth accumulation’ and finally the liberating action of world trade⁹.

3. Historical Perspective of the North Eastern Economy

The economy of North East India during the colonial period was far from being an expanding market economy. ‘Material life’ as exemplified in the structures of everyday life and the ‘economic life’ as it evolved along with institutional changes in North East India need be analysed while writing

its economic history. The study will be, in Braudel's words, 'on the borderlines of the social, the political and the economic'¹⁰.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, that is, in the precolonial period, North Eastern Region, excluding Assam, Manipur and Tripura plains, was predominantly inhabited by tribal communities bearing different names. They mostly migrated into this area from different parts of South Asia. Contrary to the claims of the colonial administrators and writers the people of the region, including tribals, were not a fossilized lot in the cultural, political, and economic spheres of life, waiting for the colonial rulers to bring dynamism into their socio-cultural and economic life. Transition from shifting to settled cultivation had been taking place in some parts of the region already. Higher technology of production than that entailing the primitive form of shifting cultivation was being adopted by a few tribes as manifested in the construction of irrigation works, running of water mills, manuring of fields, terracing of hill slopes for farming practices, diversification and specialization in the field of productive activities and so on. New crops, such as, maize, pineapple, chilli, tobacco were raised. And animal power was harnessed for agriculture practice.

The indigenous population in Khasi and Jaintiya Hills and the Nagas had acquired the art of smelting iron ore into iron. This enabled them to use iron hoes and even iron-tipped ploughs.

The opening of trade routes between the hills and the plains of Assam and between Assam and Bhutan, between Tibet, Burma, and even China, brought forth opportunities for producing more and also new goods for exchanging with the goods needed by the tribes. People of the region – tribals and non-tribals alike – were also getting familiarized with the system of exchange economy.

The economic system related to shifting cultivation was not a wholly non-surplus generating subsistence economy. The shifting cultivators raised surplus crops like oilseeds, cotton, vegetables for exchange. Trade was a source of income for them. It is a myth that this system of forest-farming is destructive of natural resources just as it is a myth that the

shifting cultivators had no concept of ownership of land by individual households. These myths have gone against the interest of slash and burn agriculturists and enabled certain vested interests to grab their lands for private gain. The colonial rulers too took advantages of these myths in depriving these cultivators of free access to lands and forests. More fundamentally, as pointed out by Michael R. Dove, these myths "have generally facilitated the intention of external administration and exploitation into the territories of the swidden agriculturists and hence can perhaps best be explained as a reflection of the political economy of the greater societies in which they dwell"¹¹.

The upshot of these factual details of the tribal people's economic pursuits is that studies in *economic* history of the North Eastern Region by explaining the past performances of the people of this region, when a large segment of population is categorized as tribal is quite in order. In fact there exist several scholarly works on the economies of primitive people. Raymond Firth in his famous book, *Primitive Polynesian Economy* has referred to 'the problem of the existence of market conditions in the economist's sense'. He has noted that market conditions are regulated by prices and that there is no price system in the Tikopia community, a fact that forms the subject of his study. The price system brings about the adjustment between wants and scarce resources having alternative uses. For Tikopia "it is relevant to inquire what processes of exchange exist, what notions of value there are, what part they play in the economic system, and whether there are any objects the functions of which approximate to that of money. If there are not, how is production organized and how are the wants of consumers met, since the rationale of an economic system is to satisfy wants by the production of consumer goods?"¹².

Such inquiries have been made by H. N. C. Stevenson of the Burma Frontier Services, in respect of the Central Chin Tribes located in Burma on the India-Burma border adjoining the Mizo Hills (the then Lushai Hills).¹³ Following the suggestion of Firth (*op.cit.*), Stevenson has methodically analysed, supported by factual evidence, the dominant technique of production, the system of exchange, the price

system, the control of the means of production, the system of regulation of consumer's choices and the ties between participants in the economic process. Besides, he has also very appropriately dealt with the facts about accumulation of capital to improve production. His finding is that the process of capital formation does not yet exist among the Chin tribes. For there does not exist any scope for application of capital goods in production in the given nature of physical background. But "there is scope for profitable investment in improved methods, of carriage, threshing and storage of grain, and it is to these aspects of agriculture that we should first turn in our efforts to teach the Chin the benefits of improved technique".¹³

4. Capital Accumulation Process

We shall look into historical records to find out the realities about the process of accumulation of capital (without quantification in money terms) among the people of the North East during the colonial regime. For capital accumulation is a vital propellant of economic growth and hence an important criterion of assessing performance of an economy. In the extremely primitive society capital formation is generally unknown. But as this society evolves into a peasant economy, production of surplus income and saving of income with the objective of increasing the volume of consumption in future periods through increased production becomes a possibility. But Firth cautions that the level of peasant economies cannot "be raised effectively by some dramatic increase in capital formation by peasants in their traditional and customary activities. The scale of individual operations is too small and income levels are too low for that"¹⁴. Firth has, however, opined that one of the important ways of setting in motion the process of capital formation may be through mobilization of peasants' savings by taxation and utilizing that for undertaking public works and increasing 'social capital' of various kinds.¹⁵

Boserup, on the contrary, maintains that in communities excepting for the most primitive ones, 'a high rate of population growth necessitates a high rate of investment'¹⁶. She points out that a large share of such investments can be "carried out by the cultivators themselves" by putting in

extra labour which may come from reducing the periods of leisure enjoyed by them. When current agricultural work is at a minimum, working capital for 'additional investment is normally available'. According to her it does not depend on the cultivators' ability and willingness to reduce consumption in order to save and invest but on the effective incentive to additional work put in by the increased number of family members. If the land tenure system provides the cultivators with access to additional cultivable land or if they enjoy sufficient security of tenure so that benefits of land improvements are reaped by them, they will have the incentive to work more. She has, of course, noted that in rapidly growing tribes, a large part of the investment work might have been carried out by slave labour.¹⁷

5. Modes of resource use

Geographical features, climate, environment and the kind and quality of available natural resources, such as, flora, fauna, water and minerals in a region largely determine in the initial stage what kind of commodities should be produced there. These geo-environmental features constitute the ecological infrastructure of the region, like the basic economic infrastructure (social and economic overheads) the ecological infrastructure also influences economic performance of the people. The thrust of productive endeavour of the people is conditioned by, what Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha have called, modes of resource use.

In compiling an ecological history of India, Gadgil and Guha have rightly emphasized the need for appreciating the role of ecological infrastructure in shaping progress of human society. They have conceptualized the modes of resource use related to (i) gathering, including shifting cultivation; (ii) nomadic pastoralism; (iii) settled cultivation and (iv) industry. Each mode is distinctly characterized by its respective 'aspects of technology, of economy, of social organization and of ideology'¹⁸.

"With respect to relations of Production", according to Gadgil and Guha, the mode or resource use is conditioned by "the forms of property, management and control, and of allocation and distribution, which govern the utilization of natural resources in different societies and historical periods.

And with respect to productive forces, it analyses the varying technologies of resource exploitation, conversion and transportation that characterize different social orders"¹⁹. Generally agreeing with this approach, in constructing economic history of the North Eastern Region, which is richly endowed with a wide variety of flora, fauna, water courses, minerals, etc, changes in the mode of natural resource use having a bearing on the trend of economic performance will be taken into account.

6. Women's Role in Economic Activities

Historians are to look at the past in terms of the present because past illuminates the present, which in turn illuminate the past. In recent decades the output of scholarly works on gender and development has grown steadily. Ester Boserup's work, *Women's Role in Economic Development* published in 1970 actually started the process. In India also a number of field-work based studies in women's position in society and change in their economic entitlement resulting from economic growth, women's contribution to national income, etc. have been published. Bina Agarwal in her well-researched work,

A Field of One's Own, Gender and Land Rights in South Asia, has dealt with women's land rights in traditionally matrilineal and bilateral communities including that of the Garos, Khasis, and Lalungs of North-East India. Her findings confirm that "Women played a major role in crop production and the gathering of forest produce. Their labour input in *Jhum* was greater than that of the man; and their knowledge of indigenous crop varieties was extensive"²⁰. She also notes that there was considerable equality in class and gender terms at the turn of the century. These observations need to be verified more thoroughly before assessing women's role in conducting and shaping economic changes during the colonial rule.

7. Periodization of History

Change in history, be it political or social or economic, is a continuous process, which, strictly speaking, cannot be divided into distinct periods. Yet periodization of historical changes serves, what Carr has said, as a 'necessary

hypothesis or tool of thought, valid in so far as it is illuminating²¹ The extension of the British colonial rule over Assam and the adjoining areas, now known as Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland and the establishment of British colonial suzerainty over the princely states of Manipur and Tripura began taking shape after 1826.

The colonial rule engendered significant structural changes in social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of lives of people of the region, besides administratively integrating the areas in varying degrees of effectiveness into the rest of India.

The colonial policy of imposing state monopoly over land and forest resources and regulation of and or even stopping of access of the local people to forests and pastures in certain circumstances in order to facilitate the process of commercialization of forest resources critically disturbed the traditional mode of resource use which maintained the resource stock in tact. These developments resulted in basic economic changes in the region. The entire period of the colonial rule had been a period of integration of the region's economy into the colonial economy of India. And therefore this colonial phase of economic changes in the region merits an intensive study in the appropriate historical context.

8. Source Materials

An important advantage of writing the economic history of North East India during the colonial period is the availability of written records and studies related to natural resources. Books on people and their socio-economic conditions written by bureaucrats, missionaries, travellers, scholars, etc., administrative reports prepared and submitted by local officers throw light not only on the administrative development in the region but also on changes in the economic condition of the people. There also exist several ethnographic and anthropological accounts of the tribes of the region based on field studies conducted by trained anthropologists and administrators. Reports and studies of the colonial administrators and scholars cannot, however, be taken as infallible, coloured as their views were by their objective of using these materials for effectively enforcing colonial domination. Even more importantly, some of their

findings were based on the wrong premise that these people were a fossilized tribe in every sphere of life and the colonial rulers were there to modernize and civilize those subjugated by them.

The first census of population of India including this part of the country had been taken in 1872 and it was published in the same year. Thereafter the process continued regularly as a decadal exercise. These census reports are a store-house of information about demographic as well as economic changes which must be useful for our study.

Reports of different committees appointed by the government from time to time, such as, the Banking Enquiry Committees, Labour Enquiry committee which contain data that are pertinent to the assessment of socio-economic changes in the region shall also be referred to.

Legislative proceedings, enactment of laws and regulations, press reports and observations on the contemporary scenario constitute another important area to be explored.

Several works by noted historians like H.K. Barpujari, Amalendu Guha, et al. throw light on the economic and revenue policies of the British rulers as also on the development of Assam. These works are of considerable consequence which might be profitably made use of in constructing economic history of Assam and the adjoining areas. Moreover, quite a good number of young teachers, scholars and researchers do present learned papers on different aspects of economic history of the region at the annual conferences of the North East India History Association. Some of them have also to their credit well-researched publications on several themes pertaining to economic changes in this region.

9. Constructing Economic History of North East India: Summing Up

Economic History of North East India during the colonial period, that is, from 1826 to 1947, is proposed to be written by studying the changes in political and economic institutions, structures of everyday life of the people (growing of grains, eating habits, foods, drinks, stimulants and drugs, dwelling houses, costume and fashion, spread of technology,

sources of energy, metallurgy, transport, money, towns, etc), demographic development and technological change, particularly that involving switching over from shifting to settled cultivation, growth of market economy, trade – both internal and external – process of accumulation and investment of capital, changes in modes of resource use, women's role in economic performance, trend of human development, etc.

The thread that links the parts of the chain of these events needs to be perceived as the movement, though at a slow pace, towards approximating the capitalist system of production, distribution and resource use under colonial imposition, and for serving ultimately the colonial interest. The growth of the capitalist system in this region has, therefore, been sectorally, territorially and ethnic group-wise of an uneven spread over the region. What is more, the basic foundation for facilitating the process of accumulation and investment of capital for sustained growth of the economy was not built up. The colonial economic model was that of developing only a few selected industries through the involvement of the British capitalist entrepreneurs who were provided with access on preferential basis to the locally available cheap natural resources that ensured earning of high rates of profits. As a result, colonialism ushered in 'enclaves of capitalism' where the indigenous people did not have any significant involvement. The colonial rule also failed to effectively stimulate the creative and productive drives of the people of the region whether in the plains or in the hills. This then is the major thrust of our hypothesis and we shall endeavour to test it with available data and application of economic theory.

Conceptualization of North Eastern economic history in terms of patterns and tracing the continuity and change in the economic conditions of the people of this region during the colonial period will form the basic aspects of these studies.

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1. H.K. Barpujari's edited volume, *The comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. IV contains some papers written by him on different economic aspects for the period, 1826 to 1919.

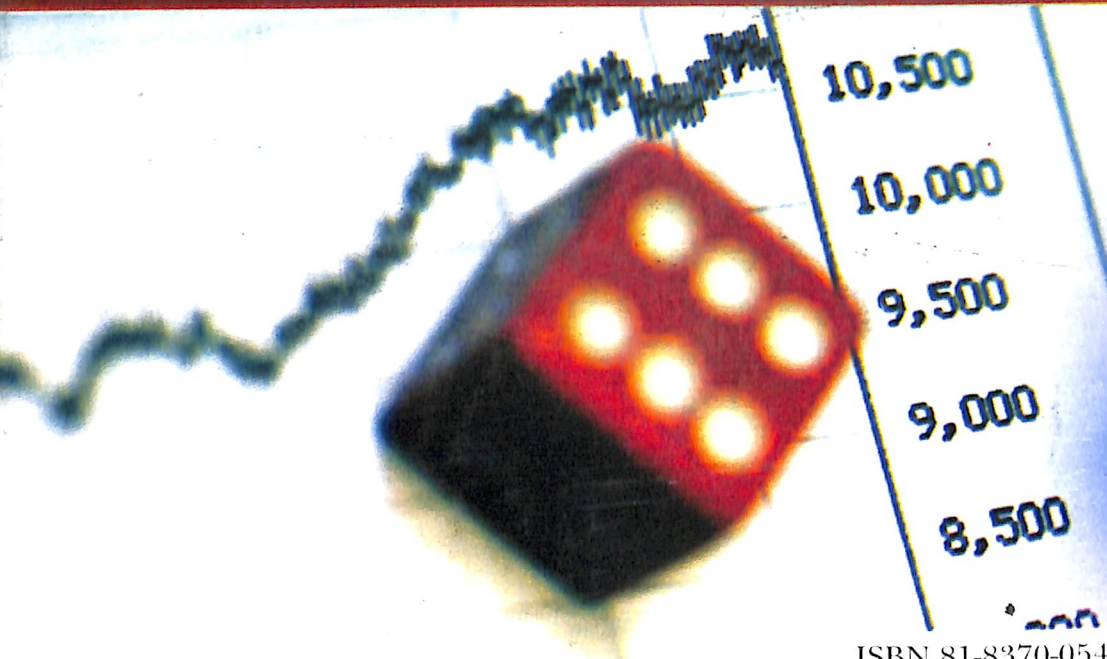
Amalendu Guha's *Planter Raj to Swaraj (1826-1947)* and *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, besides S. D. Goswami's work on *British Revenue Policy and Administration* and works of some other scholars represent such attempts. There are also other works of relevance in this field. However, a systematic analysis of economic activities and growth having a bearing on the well-being of different social groups remains to be undertaken.

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