

Chapter 1

Introduction

Eastern Duars

The terms 'Duars' literally means 'Door' in English is used to refer the areas below the Bhutan foothills which always carries the sense of border mart at the foot of mountain pass and the areas in its immediate vicinity. Duars therefore means the passes and valley that led to the hills. It is known to all that social relation and economic interdependence between the hills and the plains on Northeast India have been there since the time immemorial. It is through this Duars that the people of Bhutan have been interacting with the plains people below their foothills since time immemorial.¹ Along Indo Bhutan borderline, there are eighteen such Duars or passes. The Duars on the frontier of Bengal and Cochbehar are together called "Western Duars" and the remaining Duars on the Assam frontier are called the "Eastern Duars".

The "*Eastern Duars*" holds an important a place in the history of Assam as well as in Indian History because of its typical geographical position. The entire tract called 'Eastern Duars' is the only connecting link between the entire Northeastern regions with the rest of the Indian Republic.

The tract called "*Eastern Duars*" forms an integral portion of undivided Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang District of Assam. The Eastern comprises several Duars. In the Duars, covering the narrow strip of the plains, that is, the foot hills providing access to the mountain region compressed within the limits of Assam there are 14 Duars; of these, five Duars, viz., Bijni or Bagh Duar, Chirang, Guma, Ripu and Sidli, collectively known as Eastern Duars, are situated in between the river Manas on the east and the Sankoch on the west. Five other Duars, viz., Baksa, Bijni, Chapaguri, Chapakhamar and Garkhola are situated between the

river Bamadi on the east and the Manas on the west. The remaining three Duars, viz., Buriguma, Killing and Koreapara are situated between the Dhansiri on the east and the Bamadi on the west and Chariduar, situated further east. Koreapara is now situated in the present Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh and Chariduar is included in the present Darrang district of Assam. The Eastern Duars form a flat strip of country lying beneath the Bhutan Mountains. It is bounded on the North by the mountain of Bhutan, on the East by the River Manas, separating it from the district of Kamrup, on South by the main portion of Goalpara district and on the West by the River Gangadhar and Sankash, which separates it from the Western Duars attached to the Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal.²

The term “*Eastern Duars*” to these geographical areas is a colonial term given by the British. Before the penetration of colonial rule into this area, it was under the control of Bhutan. At that time it was divided into small principalities and either administered by the ‘Subbas’ directly appointed by the Dharma Raja of Bhutan or by the local zamindars or revenue collectors like - the Bijni Raja, the Darrang Raja etc. It was only in 1866 after the treaty of Chinchula (when the Bhutias were defeated by the British) these Eastern Duars came directly under the British control. And since then, from 1866 to 1993, the ‘Eastern Duars’ have experienced transformation in different aspects of society, ethnicity, politics and administrative setup. From 1993 onwards ‘Colonial Eastern Duars’ came to be known as the ‘Bodoland Territorial Council’.

Here confusion may arise that the rule of Assam has been passed to British East India Company in 1826, after the treaty of Yandaboo between Burmese and the British. Then how come Eastern Duars came under British Rule in 1864? Again, it is because the Ahom rule was never consolidated in indo-Bhutan borderline. It was under the Koch rulers of Cochbehar and Darrang Raja. In later years, taking advantage of the weak successors of the Koch Kingdom, the Bhutias had consolidated their rule over this area. And thus, in 1864, the British

defeated the Bhutias in Anglo-Bhutan war and according to the treaty of Chincula, the entire Duars region in Assam frontier has been annexed to the British Empire. In 1866, the 'Eastern Duars' or the Duars areas of Assam frontiers has been separated from the Duars of North Bengal and was given name of 'Eastern Duars' with its headquarter at Goalpara.

Eastern Duars region is a very low plain with an altitude of about 200 feet above the sea level at the southern border. At the northern border, its altitude varies between 500 to 2000 feet. The Himalayan mountain ranges raise abruptly, several 1 thousand feet high, just beyond its border in Bhutan. The annual rainfall in this region varied from 150 inches to 300 inches. The climate was wet, the land was damp and for ages, the region had been covered with dense forest. This forest contained valuable timber and medicinal herbs were also found in the forest. In the past, the region had been notorious for life taking diseases like malaria Kalajar, Black water fever and the like.

In the past, human habitation must have been established in many places of the Duars from time to time. Naturally the damp and unhealthy climates of the place did not permit the long existence of those colonies. So they got extinct in course of time. Heavy rainfall, damp climate and frequent changes of the course of its turbulent rivers and the luxuriant growth of vegetation naturally lead to the decay of human habitations. Still there exists some ruins at various places in the jungles of eastern Duars which proves that once this region were ruled by an well organised administrative machinery for example –there exists the ruins of an old fort in the dense forests of Kokrajhar district on the bank of river Samoka, a few miles away of Indo-Bhutan boarder. This ruin is known as 'Chiknajhar', the capital of Chikna Jwhlwao a local Mech chieftain. It has been identified to be one of the frontier fortifications of the region as "Pundravardhan Bhukti". But excavations by a competent Archaeological department might show some more interesting and authentic facts of this brick construction.

Early Inhabitant of the Eastern Duars:

Eastern Duars has been inhabited by different people of different races and cultures of both hills and plains. Waves of people belonging to different ethnic groups poured into this region. The main tribes of Eastern Duars are discussed below:

1. The Meches or the Bodos
2. The Koches
3. The Garos
4. The Rabhas
5. The Dobhasias

This study has been strictly confined only with the socio-political transition of the Bodos of Eastern Duars.

Franchis Hamilton in his book “North East Frontier of Bengal” said that the entire Eastern Duars tract was formally inhabited by the people called Meches or Kacharis, the only classes apparently able to live in this malarial zone in consequences of the atrocities of the Bhutias.³

In, Brahmaputra valley, the Bodos mostly live along the Eastern Duars or Indo-Bhutan borderlines in lower Assam’s undivided Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang Districts. Francis Hamilton in his book ‘An account of Assam’ and Alexander Macknenjee in his book ‘North East Frontier of Bengal’ said that the entire Eastern Duars tract was formally inhabited by the people called Meches and Kacharis (Bodo), the only classes apparently able to live in these malarial prone zone in consequences of the atrocities of the Bhutias. W.W. Hunter in his book ‘A Statistical Account of Assam’ said that Meches are the most numerous class or caste in the Eastern Duars.⁵ They are known as Mech in the western part of the Duars, but in the more eastern parts they are called indiscriminately Mech or Kachari; and again farther east, in Assam, they are called by the name of Kachari alone, losing the name of Mech altogether.

They form the great majority of the population in the Eastern Duars. The Places in the foothills through which these passes opened up to the Indian Plains were and are still known as the Kachari Duars. The boarder districts of Assam along the International boundaries of Bhutan are still dominated by the Bodo-Kachari population. During the Bhutanese rule over the Duars most of the revenue collecting officers were recruited from the Bodos. These statement is supported by the accounts of R.B.Pemberton on his “Report on Bootan” and Baboo Kishen Kant Bose and Dr. William Griffith’s “Mission to Bootan”

Another class of people, the ‘Dobhasias’ lived in the Duars region. These people had originally been The Koches, the kacharies and the Garos and Rabhas. During the Bhutia inroads to the plains, on a occasion, a large number of these people, both men and women were taken away by the Bhutias as captives and they were detained in Bhutan for a number of years. Later on, in another fight, the Koch king Najir Deo Sahib defeated the Bhutias. Accordingly, the treaty that followed, the Bhutias released these captives. But when they came back, they were considered as ‘patit’s’ (outcast) due to their long captivity in Bhutan and were not accepted by their kinsmen. But they were allowed to settle in Duars. These people, during their long stay in Bhutan, had acquired knowledge in Bhutia language and were used as interpreters, in all communications between the Bhutias and the people of the plains. Hence they went by the name Dobhasias or the interpreters.

Colonial Migration

The demographic pattern of Eastern Duars begun to undergo a drastic change since the annexation of the area by the British after the second Anglo-Bhutan war in 1865.

After the occupation of Duars in 1866, the British inducted huge migration in the Eastern Duars. The British occupation of the fertile and rich Duars region had facilitated the British to extend their imperial economy by introducing commercialization of agriculture in the newly occupied land. The verdant area had been rich in valuable timber and in addition to

this the British introduced the cultivation of tea. Now for this new economic activity they needed manpower and mostly people of labour class to carry on their Colonial economic mission. At first the British recruited the Bodos in their tea plantations as labours because of their physical strength and proximity to the tea gardens. But the Bodos as they were independent spirited and could not obey the strict British rules and regulations in the tea gardens and because of the low wages paid by the British; they rebelled and refused to work in the Gardens. Therefore the British had to bring cheap labour from famine stricken Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to work in their tea plantation. These people were subsequently settled by the colonial rulers in Eastern Duars'.⁶

Secondly, the massive induction of immigrants triggered by the British are the land hungry Muslim peasants from East Bengal. At the early part of 19th century, the British Raj allowed the settling of land hungry peasants from the bordering districts of Bengal to the wastelands of Assam. This colonization scheme initiated by the British Government opened a floodgate for immigration of landless peasants from East Bengal to Assam, and at least 90 percent of these immigrants were Muslims. By the 1942, the Government of India had directed the Government of Assam to launch an intensive "Grow more Food" Campaign by utilizing all available land to provide adequate food to the allied troops stationed in Assam. Taking advantage of it massive immigration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal to Assam and settled them mainly in the Bodo inhabited lower Assam Districts. The real motive of the Assam Government (Muslim League) became so obvious that Mr. Wavell, the then Viceroy of India, could not help making the caustic comment that Sir Sadullah's "Grow more food" campaign was really a 'Grow more Muslim' campaign.

Thirdly, the third wave of migrations that took place in Eastern Duars during the colonial period are the Nepalese. They came to Assam with two roles

(a) as a part of the colonial army and

(b) as graziers. A large number of exp-serviceman and graziers were encouraged to come and occupy the fertile Duars region and engage in cattle keeping.⁷

The colonial period also saw immigration of Marwari merchants from distant Rajasthan. Though their numbers was small, they played an important role in opening up the Eastern Duars to trade under colonial patronage. They acted as moneylender; bankers and general agents to the managers of the tea Garden and throughout the state sold articles imported from other parts of India and became dealers in rice and grains'.⁸

Thus the colonial period saw a drastic change of the demographic set up in the Eastern Duars. Groups of communities having distinct languages, cultures and ethnic characteristics – hitherto unknown in the area came to the region under the colonial patronage they were settled in the area. This change of demography had created a social tension for the first time in the Duars region. The phenomenon of immigration had shook the very foundation of social set up in the region and lead to the hardening of the boundaries of social formation in Eastern Duars into 'sons of the soil' and 'outsiders'. The 'sons of the soil' generally wished to keep the 'outsiders' away from territorial resources and destinies.⁹

Now, the Bodos as they were major community of the area, they took the leadership in the protest against the immigration. They never reconciled themselves to their subjugation by the British. Their micro level freedom struggle and effort to consistently assert their ethnic identity insisted on enjoying exclusive control over the resources of the area like land, water, forest, minerals etc. The Bodos under the banner of 'Plains Tribal League' raised the question of land settlement and protection of tribal land under the Line System. From then onwards, the process of ethnic assertion of the Bodos in Eastern Duars begun.

Physical History

The eastern Duars is very fertile. The rainfall is generally plentiful and the soil is naturally moist and fertile. Owing to each sub-mountainous position and good rainfall the

eastern is ideal for almost all kind of agricultural purposes. About one-third of the total land of Duars region is covered by dense forest. This forest contains valuable timber like *sal* (*shorea*), *sisu* (*dalbergion*), *sonaru* (*cassia*), *titachapa* (*michelia campaca*), *ajhar* (*largerstromia flos reginae*), *sam* (*artocarpus chaplasha*), *khair* (*acasis*), *nahar* (*mesela*), *khkan*(*duabanga*), *amri* (*amoora*), *chum*(*mechilus*), *nooni*(*morus*), *era*(*ricinus*), *keseree* (*helerophancy*), *suanlee* (*tetrenthera*), *champa* (*michelia*), *mezenkari* or *adakari* etc. help in the rearing of silkworms, which nourish the silk industry of Assam. Varieties of medicinal herbs are also found. Agar and lac are two important products.

*“Besides, the rich florae, the forest region is also rich in its animals and birds. The animals and birds. The animals like one-horned rhinos, wild buffalo, leopard, tiger, elephant, bear, various kinds of deer, monkeys, black panther, wild boar, the yellow primula (Floribund, found only in this region) and the painted bat with its red wings which is the only coloured bat in the world. Some rare birds are also found in this region like pelican, imperial pigeon, green pigeon, blue coot, and different types of parrot etc.”*¹⁰

The tract called the Eastern Duars forms an integral portion of Goalpara District in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. It lies between 26 degree 19' and 26 degree 54' N and 89 degree 55' and 91 degree E. and is bounded on the north by the mountains of Bhutan; on the east by the Manas river, separating it from the District of Kamrup; on the south by the main portion of Goalpara District; and on the west by the Gangadhar or Sankosh river, which separates it from the Western Duars, attached to Jalpaiguri District, and the Bengal State of Cooch Behar with area of 1570 square miles and population of 72,072 (as per census 1901).⁵

The Eastern Duars form a flat strip of country, lying beneath the Bhutans Mountains. The only elevated tract is Bhumeswar hill, which rises abruptly from the plains to the height of nearly 400 feet, and may be regarded as a detached spur of the Garo Hills on the south of

the Brahmaputra.¹¹The remainder is level plain, intersected by numerous streams and overgrown with wild vegetation. In some parts stretch extensive tracts of Sal forest; but the greater portion is covered with heavy grass and reed jungle, amid which the beautiful cotton – tree (*Bombax malabaricum*) is the only timber to be seen. The Villages are enclosed by a fence of split bamboos to keep out deer. A few bamboo and plantain-trees stand in the enclosure, but there is none of the luxuriant jungle of bamboos, areaca – palms, and plantain-trees in which the Assamese village is usually embedded. At the foot of the mountains, where the river debouches upon the plain, the scenery assumes a grander aspect. The principal rivers are the Manas, Champa, Gaurang, Gangia, Gurupala, and Gangadhar which are navigable by country boats, for a portion at any rate of their course, throughout the year and in addition to that numerous small streams become navigable during the rainy season. By far the most important channel of communication is afforded by the Manas, which might be navigated by streamers of light draught. All the rivers take their rise in the Bhutan hills, and flow in a southern direction into the Brahmaputra. Their beds are filled with boulders in the hills, but they become sandy as they advance into the plain. A peculiar tract of pebbles, gravel, and sand, resembling the Bhabar in the United Provinces, fringes the hills; and the water of all the minor streams sinks here, during the greater part of the year, not again appearing above ground until it reaches the alluvial clay. The Eastern Duars were annexed in 1865 after the military operations which the Bhutan government had provoked by their repeated aggressions on British subjects, and the gross insults to which they subjected the envoy who had been sent to demand redress. They were at first placed in charge of a Deputy Commissioner, with its head quarters at the village of Dotoma, in Khuntaghat pargana of present Goalpara district.

Flora and Fauna

Nature has lavishly bestowed all her beauties on Eastern Duars. The hills and the forests, besides enhancing beauty to the land, contain valuable flora and fauna, some of which

are rare in the world. About one-third of the total area has been considered as forest region in Eastern Duars and in the period 1976-77 area under reserved forests was estimated at 16,514 sq. km. This forest region contains valuable timber like *sal (Shorea)*, *Khoir (Acacia)*, *Sisso (Dalbergia)*, *Gamari (Gmelina)*, *Sonar (Cassia)*, *Cham (Artocarpus)*, *Bonsom (Phoebe)*, *Nahar (Mesus)*, *Amari (Amoora)*, *Khokan (Duabanga)*, *Koroi and Maz (Albizia)*, *Simalu (Bombax)*, *Ajar (Lagerstroemia)*, *Champa (Michelia)*, *Hallang (Dipterocarpus)*, *Hollok (Terminalia)*, *Kadam (Anthocephalus)*, *Bola (Morus)* etc. and various kind of bamboos, canes, grasses and reeds. In addition to providing timber for various construction purposes, certain trees provide good tanning and dyeing materials as well as household fuel. Vegetable plants and essential oil producing plants are not uncommon. Lac and *Agaru* (a much valued perfume) are two important forest products of the State. The abundance of *Chom (Machilus)*, *Nooni (Morus)*, *Era (Ricinus)*, *Keseru (Heteropanax)*, *Suanlu (Tetranthera)*, *Champa (Michelia)*, *Mezankari or Adakuri (Tetranthera)*, etc. helps in the rearing of silk-industry of Eastern Duars. Sealing wax, gum and rubber are also produced. Medicinal herbs and many varieties of beautiful orchids, generally classed as *Kapauphul* and *Bhatauphul*, are exported from Eastern Duars, which are sold at high price in foreign countries. In the financial year 1976-77, Eastern Duars is very rich in different kinds of citrus fruits like orange, lemon, *ou-tenga (Dillenia)* and *thekera (Garchinia)*. Betel-nut and betel vine are so abundantly grown that they not only form the most common items in the daily menu of an Assamese but constitute an integral part of Assamese culture. Among other common fruits, mention may be made of jack-fruit, mango, banana, guava, pineapple, *leteku (Baccaurea)*, *ponial (Flacourtia)*, *jamu (Syzygium)* etc. Eastern Duars exports an average of one thousand quintals of dried fruit annually. She is well-known for her oranges and pineapples.

Besides these rich floras, the forest regions in Eastern Duars abound with many kinds of animals like one-horned rhinoceros, elephant, wild buffalo, tiger, leopard, bison,

Himalayan bear, black panther, sloth bear, various kinds of deers and monkeys, pigmy hog the smallest pig in the world, the yellow primula (*Floribunda*) which is found only in this region and the painted bat with its red wings which is the only coloured bat in the world. The Kaziranga wild life sanctuary is one of the best of its kind and is a point of attraction to tourists from all over the globe for its one-horned rhinoceros. This sanctuary has an area of about 410 sq. km and a population of 250-300 rhinoceroses, 500 wild buffaloes a magnificent species getting rarer in the rest of India and 300 elephants besides other animals and birds. The other game reserves are Manas (about 260 sq. km.), Sonai, Rupai and Pabha. The total area of game sanctuary in Assam at present is about 1188 sq.km. Besides the common species some rare types of birds are found of Eastern Duars, which includes pelican, blue coot green pigeon, different varieties of parrot, partridge, quail, florican, different kinds of pheasants, scarlet, yellow mi, hornbill, maina, egret, etc. and some water birds like whistling teal, snipe, adjutant, cormorants, white and black-billed strokes and a varieties of seasonal migratory ducks. Among the reptiles found in the State mention may be made of crocodile, king cobra, Lizard, monitor lizard and python.

Climate

Annual revolutions of seasons in Eastern Duars are not accompanied by sharp contrast of temperature and rainfall. Due to its constant high humidity, Eastern Duars has a moderate climate. Rise of temperature in Eastern Duars is checked by frequent showers and thunderstorms which bring heavy rainfall during the spring and summer. Eastern Duars is freely open to the moisture-laden winds from the Bay of Bengal. She lies beyond the influence of the dry air-current which flows down the Gangetic plain during the hot weather. The climate is, therefore, very damp. There is wide variation of temperature between summer and winter months, but neither the summer is extremely hot nor the winter extremely cold.

Shihabuddin Talish, the historian of Mir Jumla, who invaded Eastern Duars in the middle of the 17th century, made a correct assessment of the climate of Eastern Duars, when he observed that “it rains for eight months in the year and four months of winter are not free from rains.” In short “perpetual humidity, frequent and heavy rainfall and moderate temperature changes of warm summer and cool winter especially distinguish the valley of Eastern Duars.”

Floods are the most common and regular natural calamities in Eastern Duars. It is generally in early May that the first flood of the year is experienced. But it is of short duration and does little harm to the land or to the early cultivation. By early June, the south-west monsoon reaches the Eastern Duars valley and the continuous heavy rains raise the river levels rapidly and the Brahmaputra remains in space, registering a series of high flood levels until October. The plight of the people during this period beggars description. Villages situated on the river banks are submerged, paddy fields, standing crops and cattle are washed away and thousands of inhabitants living in these areas are rendered homeless. All important lines of communication are snapped, so that Eastern Duars becomes largely cut off from the rest of India. When floods subside, often pestilence creates havoc among men and animals. The flood of 1954 was one of the highest ever recorded.

Early History of Eastern Duars

Since the early period Eastern Duars had been ruled by different dynasties in different period. In the ancient period, it was under the rule of Kamrupa Kingdom. After the disintegration of the Kamrupa Kingdom, it came under the Koch Kingdom. Again in seventeenth century, the Mughals occupied the eastern part of Koch Kingdom. Finally, the Ahoms defeated the Mughals and the Ahoms established their control over this area. But the Ahom could not consolidate their rule over this area because of the Meches (Kachari) chiefs had resented the Ahom rule and tried to assert independence with help of the Dharma Raja of

Bhutan. In such circumstances, the Ahoms were compelled to enter into a compromise with them and accordingly ceded the Duars region to the Dharma Raja of Bhutan in exchange of some tribute. The Dharma Raja could realize the fact that at any time the Meches could try to overthrow his rule from the Duars plains; he adopted a very diplomatic policy towards the chief of Bijni, Sidli and Darrang. Instead of over lordship towards those Rajas; Bhutan's attitude was that of friendly and equality. These were allowed to collect revenue freely without any influence from the Dharma Raja. The Rajas were assisted in revenue collection with some 'Subbhas' or 'Choudharies' who were mostly the Kacharies and were directly appointed by the Dharma Raja himself. The policy of equality adopted by the Dharma Raja of Bhutan had proved to be fruitful in the long run.

A close and careful examination of all the available datas and sources on Eastern Duars reveals that this vast area bellow the Bhutan foothills were never practically ruled by any power till the independence of India in 1947. There was always a sort of independent rule under its local chiefs on payment of a nominal tribute sometimes to the Koch kingdom, sometimes to Ahoms, to the Bhutias and even to the British. While the British had consolidated and firmly controlled the administration of Western Duars (Bengal part of Duars area), they never extended their firm consolidation on eastern part of Duars. As a result, this region was deprived of all the good effects of the colonial rule whereas on the western Duars all sorts of development activities were undertaken by them for the benefit of the people.

It is for the nonpayment of tribute and the Bhutias atrocity on the plains of Assam, the conflict between the British and Bhutias started taking the advantage of the mountain passes, the Bhutias would come down to the plains and plunder the inhabitants and carry them as captives. In spite of repeated request and protests, the Bhutan Government would not stop it. The deputation of Captain Pamberton did not yield any result. In 1963 another peace mission of British government under Mr. Ashley Eden also failed due to lack of goodwill

from the Bhutan Government. At the same time, the occupation of Duars was gradually becoming important for the British for economic point of view as they realized the potential of tea plantation in fertile Duars region. In 1864, war broke out between Bhutan and the British and ended with the treaty of Chinsula and the Bhutias were compelled to surrender the Duars to the British in 11.11.1865. A year later in 1866, for the advantage of administration Eastern part of Duars were ceded from western part of Duars and amalgamated with the administration of undivided Goalpara district. Shortly after this treaty, the Indo-Bhutan boundary was permanently marked by a joint survey and by fixing permanent boundary pillars along the entire Indo-Bhutan border.

So, Eastern Duars had a misfortune of becoming a colony when most part of globe was experiencing the rise of nation and nationalism. In Khasi and Jaintia Hills under Tirok Singha rebellion took place against British rule and in 1857, Maniram Dewan had tried to spread sepoy mutiny in Assam unsuccessfully and after 9 years of that Eastern Duars came under Colonial Rule.

It is a happy thing that no further troubles, worth noticing, ever arised between the two countries and since then a very cordial relationship has been existing between India and Bhutan.

After the independence of India in 1947, when a fresh treaty was concluded between India and Bhutan, the Bhutan Government claimed the small border area of Dewangiri in the Assam Bhutan border but after a friendly discussion, this claim of Bhutan was conceded to. By the existing treaty, India has responsibility in the defense of Bhutan against foreign aggression and India has been paying its best attention to the all round development of Bhutan.

The demand for a Bodo homeland no doubt is animated by the memory of ancient Boko Kingdoms and of a distant past when the great Bodo culture may have flourished

uncontaminated by other cultures. Bodo is not a homogeneous category in the sense that even within Assam they have had a history of living under different socio-political norms. In the present geo-political context of Assam, the demand for a separate state was made from the Northern Bodos (living the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh) and if one goes back in history one will find that they are the section of Bodo people living outside the influence of Ahom state formation and also of the neo-vaishnavite of Sankardev. Even within this active region two powerful divisions could be seen cantering Kokrajhar and Udalguri. The Bodos of Kokrajhar and those of Udalguri show a kind of difference in terms of awareness, organization, goals and modes of movement. Kokrajhar group had had long history of socio-political activism since the period of Guru Kalicharan Brahma. The Brahmas remained active in formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha and also in PTCA's political mobilization, whereas Udalguri has been more exposed to missionary activities and it also the area where from the radical faction first raised their heads, the birth place of Bodo security force.

The Strategic Importance of the Duars

The strategic importance of the Duars regions is due to its geographical location. The Duars always played an important role in the development both in the hills as well as in the border areas of plains. It was through this Duars business transactions were carried out. Most of the times the businesses were carried on by barter system. It was through tin basis of the hills-plains contracts his Eastern Duars the regular trade was carried out between ancient Assam and Bhutan. As a matter of fact the extensive trade was the main basis of the hill-plains contact in the entire north east India in the pre-colonial period that was accomplished through an organized market system in the adjoining plain and foothills to the mutual benefit of the people of both sides as the surplus generation in an area balanced deficit in the other. The hills society was generally self sufficient in view of the limited ones in their lifestyle and in a situation of inter-ethnic confrontation. The Bhutanese brought down for barter gold

dust, rock salt, musk, cow tails, blankets, knives rubber, elephant task, ponies, Chinese silk, woolen cloth etc. in exchange for rice, dry fish, cotton cloth, glass, breads, salt, utensils, brass metal, eri and endi cloth from the people of Assam.¹²

The winter migration of large section of Bhutanese towards warmer areas of south must have brought them into contact at an early day with the local tribes inhabiting the plains, it is also said that the Khen or Khengpa, the ancient people of Central Bhutan (Khen means wild or orphan), were perverted cattle herders and warriors. For ages they used to bring their cattle and sheep down to the plain for grazing in winter months and also barter yak-tails, blankets and other products they brought down from their country against rice, dried fish, cotton, silk cloth etc.¹³

Thus Bhutanese directly or indirectly obtained almost every article of consumption or luxury from the trade with Duars. A considerable amount of revenue seems to have been collected from the Duars customs houses in Kamrup and Darrang.¹⁴

Another strategic importance of the Duars was that it was through Bhutan that Assam carried on trade with China and Tibet at a place named Geegunsur, about six km distance from Chouna lying on the border of Assam which the Assamese merchants passing through Koriapar Duar used as the most important market. Tibetan trade across Bhutan and Tawang was carried on by the Khampas or the Tibetan traders through two passes Dhansiri and Udalguri. Trade with Tawang showed an increase in almost all articles particularly in ponies which was stimulated in 1880 by the growing demand for these animals for Shillong Tonga service and Transport services in Naga hill. The Tawang people obtained higher price for ponies Rs.50 each as against Rs.40 obtained by their neighbours in Bhutan. There had been increase in trade in blankets, salt, rubber, wax, musk and spices. In Bhutan, export of gold dwindled while in Tawang it nearly doubled. Increase in export of salt from Tawang was a

serious concern of the local authorities; it was untaxed and available at about Rs. five while imported variety was sold in Darang at Rs.5-8.

The British Government first realized the importance of the Duars in terms of its natural resources, economic prospects and strategic importance.¹⁵

In the colonial period the strategic importance of the Duars was felt by the British in view of the position of Bhutan, Sikkim and the Chumbey valley of Tibet just to the north of the Duars. The eleven Bengal Duars were the gate ways to Bhutan as well as to the Chumbey valley, Sikkim and Tibet. From the year 1774, this importance along with its commercial potentiality for trade transactions with the Himalayan countries and Tibet was realized by the British East India Company's Government. After the treaty of Sagarly in 1816 with Nepal and more after the virtual annexation of Darjeeling in 1835, though entrance into Sikkim came more or less within the reach of the British government but the more important alternative route to Tibet from the Duars through *Kalimpong* and Bhutan remained out of grip; and therefore, the annexation of the Assam Duars in 1842 and of the Bengal Duars and *Kalimpong* in 1865 remained to be a matter of vital importance. Viceroy Lord Curzon with the apprehension of the strategic and commercial importance of the Chumbey valley, kept the provision of British Indian predominance over the valley in the Treaty of Lhasa in 1904. The British Indian Government's Tibet policy and attitude towards Bhutan and Sikkim ever since were guided by strategic consideration and that was reflected in the Shimla Agreement. Evidently after 1914, the year of the Shimla Agreement signed by Tibet and British India but not ratified by China, in the sphere of overall strategic view of the Himalayan zone the position of the Duars always played a role of significance.

After the virtual annexation of Tibet by the Chinese Red Army in 1950s, the eyes of the Chinese Government fell on the Duars like that of a flying vulture for landing in search of a feast in terms of imperialistic adventure, for the narrowest stretch of India between

Chumbey valley and the border of Bangladesh is only fifty kilometers. The Duars is the bottle's neck of India connecting the North East including Assam with the rest mainland of India; it is the only narrow strip of communication of India between two unequal halves of the country which the more powerful China may take on by a sudden air and missile strike supported by a land.

After the partition of India in 1947, the significance of the Duars has increased manifold for the chicken's neck of the Duars is the only corridor of communication of India with its seven eastern states. Bounded by the international borders of Bhutan, Tibetan part of China and Bangladesh, the strategic position of the Duars is of paramount importance to the people and the Government of India. With abundant reserved forest, tea gardens and green agrarian fields and inhabited by different stocks of people speaking various languages and practising diverse religions, the Duars of late has become a cockpit of identity-politics and statehood-movements.¹⁶

Social Importance of the Duars

The Duars played an important role in maintaining peace and harmony between the hills and plains since time immemorial. Bhutan is a hilly country and she is not self-sufficient in her food production. Therefore the people of Bhutan had to depend by and large on the plains of Assam for their requirement of foodstuff and other necessities. Every winter through the Duars, the Bhutias came down with their mule-loads of rock-salt, gold dust, Musky, yak tail, Chinese silk etc and carried up different kinds of cloths, raw silk, cocoon, rice etc. The routes through which the Bhutias descended were Bijni, sidli, Ripu, and Guma Duars leading to the districts present day Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Baksa and Chirang districts. The trade was carried on in the three fairs adjacent to Bhutan-Udalguri, Khagrapara and Doimara. Later on Subankhata and Darranga Mela were started. Another market in

Kherkheria was started by Bhutia chief in Killing Duar in 1874. In 1883, another very successful market or mela was started at Dewangiri.

These fairs and markets not only played an important role in economic exchanges it also played as centre for cultural exchanges between the people of Assam and Bhutan. As these Duars were mostly lived by the Bodos, a very cordial relationship grew up between the Bodos and the Bhutias. The Bodos of these Duars region preferred the Bhutia rule over the British rule.¹⁷.

The Bhutias maintained cordial relationship with the Bodos. The historical records further strengthen this view. The Meches (Bodos) preferred the Bhutanese Government over the British Government as it evident from the following testimonies:-

The testimonial of a Meche, Jnan Mandal, 80 years, extracted by Charu Chandra anyal in late 1990 states that,

“At the time of Bhutabese Government the Meches were not tortured unlike others. They were in good terms with the Bhutanese Government. Harnath was made a Mandal... Bhutaese Government took rupees seven per family per year and allowed to cultivate as much as the family could do so”

Another Meche, Phade Saiba, more that eighty years old, living Mechua-Dhura-Balabathan village commented, *“we used to eat rice, vegetables, fish or meat three times a day. But now we can hardly afford two rice meals a day”*.

Kalsing Saiba, sixty years old Meche’s testimony is equally anguished: *“My father had vast plot of land and was well-to-do. Now I have no land. I work as a share cropper or sometimes as an agricultural labourer on cash wage of rupee one a day and three meals”*.

The fate of Gashat Machari, 98 years, is no better. He rues, *“At that time the land was plenty and men were few, so we had mush land to grow crop now I have only five acres of land under cultivation”*.

Dhansing Meche, a centenarian, living in Sisu-Jhorna was bitter about the British administration *“My father’s name is late Khayer Sigh. My father was in Bhutan holding a large lot of agricultural land. The whole of Duars was under Bhutan Government. My father was at Chamrchi near the present Reabari Tea Estate (in the Duars). My father had a large plot of land more than one hundred acres where the present Ambari Tea Estate is situated. Then we shifted to the present site of Bandhapani Tea Estate, then we came to Maraghat and from then there to this place we were cultivators. We grew plenty of rice and we ate rice and vegetables three times a day. As far as, I can remember and so far I heard from my father that the Bhotias were good. The collectors came once a year, collected rupees eight per family and left us to enjoy as much land as we could cultivate. The British came. They spoke sweet words. They gave us protection no doubt but they increased the rents, introduced many laws and we gradually lost our lands and we shifted to this place. Now I have only four acres of land that can hardly maintain my family”*.¹⁸

The above statements of the Meches shows the close relationship between the Meches and the Bhutiyas.

Objective of the studies

In spite of hare importance as the only connecting link between the entire north east region with the rest of Indian republic, Eastern Duars’ has failed to receive adequate justice in the hands of historians, both regional and Indian. The present work expects to evolve many critical aspects of socio-political and cultural condition of the Boros of Eastern Duars in a new dimension.

The period from 1866-1993 is a formative epoch in the history of Assam in general and to the Bodos in particular it marked not only the beginning of British rule having radical change, it also ushered in a new element in the area, the social tension, ultimately leading to

political consciousness among the people of the area. The object of this work is to provide in the light of available and original sources, Assamese, English, Bodo and Zangkha, a narrative not merely of the successive stages in the establishment of British supremacy in the Duars, but also the period of subsequent reactions in its true perspective leading to the early phase of the so called Freedom movement in the Duars area.

The investigation of my research work mainly based on the process of changes, progress and development of the socio-political transformation of the Bodos of the eastern Duars. The motivation of this research is:

- 1) to ascertain what led the Bodos to assert their linguistic, cultural and political identity in the first quarter of the twentieth century and
- 2) to identify the social forces that were instrumental in the articulation of this identity.

The objectives of the research are:

- (a) to explore the role of the educated middle class in the consolidation of Bodo national identity and
- (b) to examine the factors responsible for the transformation of the Bodo movement from autonomy to secession.
- (c) What were the factors leading to the transformation of Eastern Duars into present BTC?
- (d) Since when and why the socio-political conflict between the Bodos and mainstream Assamese society begun?
- (e) What was the immediate reason of the Bodo slogan "Divide Assam Fifty Fifty"?
- (f) Which section of Bodo society took leading part in the Bodo Movement?
- (g) What was the impact of Bodoland movement on the Bodo society, on mainstream Assamese society and other smaller tribal groups in Assam?

(h) What is the contribution of the Bodo movement in the History and society of Assam in particular and in India in general?

This research is likely to contribute towards an understanding of the politics of social forces such as the middle class. The study may also stimulate future research on the nationality question in India because it highlights the response of the Indian State on this issue as a significant factor responsible for the alienation and marginalization of smaller nationalities like Bodos.

My thesis the “**Incorporation of the Eastern Duars to the Colonial Rule: The Socio-Political Transformation of Bodos of Eastern Duars (1864-1994)**” has been divided in to 6 chapters. Formulation of the chapter scheme has been done in such a way that it would be convenient to deal with the topic methodically.

Area of Study

The investigation of my research work is mainly based on the process of change, growth progress and development of the socio-political and ethnic transition of the Bodos of colonial eastern Duars. It also critically examine the process of transformation of colonial eastern Duars into present BTC.

Methodology

For the entire study the historical method of research has been adopted. Primary and secondary sources have been complemented by field work in the form of interviews.

Discussions

The chapter one deal in details of the physical & historical introduction to the ‘Eastern Duars’. It discusses that the Eastern duars had been ruled by different rulers at different times. It also discusses how this particular tract called Eastern Duars had been incorporated to the British rule when already other parts of India had been fighting against the British rule.

The second chapter discusses in details about the origin, early settlement and distribution of the Bodos in different parts of eastern India. It also discusses about the culture, religion and tradition of the Bodos.

The third chapter discusses about historical process of socio-cultural transition of the Bodos. It also explains historical background of the Bodo movements and the genesis of the transformation of Colonial Eastern Duars into present day BTC.

The fourth chapter deals in detail about the various socio-political movements of the Bodos for the protection their identity and ethnicity. This chapter also discusses about the nature and different phases of Bodoland Movement.

The fifth chapter discusses about the women participation in Bodo mass movement. This chapter also examines the impacts of these movements on the socio-political scenario of Assam from Academic point of view without any bias.

The chapter sixth is the summary of the previous chapters.

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