UNIT 8: CONSOLIDATION OF THE BRITISH RULE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the administrative changes introduced by the British after their occupation of Assam,
- Discuss the administrative reforms introduced by the British after their occupation of Assam.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

We have already discussed the treaty of Yandaboo in our unit 5 in detail. The significance and the consequent changes that occurred in the political history of Assam after the Treaty of Yandaboo have been dealt with in detail in this unit. In this connection we shall discuss the various administrative changes brought about by the British in Assam after their occupation of Assam.

8.3 BRITISH ADMINISTRATIVE SET UP

We have seen how the British occupied Assam after the Treaty of Yandaboo. Now the supreme government found it necessary to make

arrangement for the administration of this region. Even before the Treaty of Yandaboo, the British adopted two different general principles in regard to the administration of the two territorial units, namely, Lower and Upper Assam. After the treaty Assam was divided into two divisions: Western or Lower Assam and Eastern or Upper Assam with Biswanath as the boundary on the North bank.

Lower Assam comprised Kamrup, Nagaon and parts of Darrang with headquarters at Guwahati. Upper Assam comprised the remaining parts of Darrang, extending from Biswanath to the river Buridihing, excluding the Matak country, with its headquarters at Rangpur. Each division was placed under the control of a commissioner. David Scott was placed in charge of Lower Assam and was declared the Senior Commissioner. Colonel Richards was appointed in charge of Upper Assam with headquarters at Rangpur and was declared the Junior Commissioner. He was to exercise civil functions in Eastern Assam in addition to his military duties.

Inspite of having two Commissioners, David Scott was made in charge of overall administration in order to maintain uniformity in the administrative set up. Scott was to hold exclusive charge of political relation with the states and tribes of the entire region. Thus, it is clearly seen that David Scott was the most powerful official of that time. Although each Commissioner was to perform his civil duties independently, they were expected to be in constant touch with each other even in respect of the matters connected with their respective units. They were empowered to decide civil disputes, to administer criminal justice, to organize police system and to set up jails. In December, Lieutenant Colonel Richards resigned from his post and he was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Cooper**.** At the same time Adam White was appointed as Scott‘s assistant in Guwahati and Captain Davidson was appointed as an assistant in Goalpara.

It may be mentioned here that even during the initial period of military occupation, the British felt it necessary to adopt two different general principles in regard to the administration of the two above mentioned territorial units.i.e, Lower Assam and Upper Assam. There was a possibility of retaining

Lower Assam under direct British rule and the British permanently annexed Lower Assam to the British territory in 1828. However that was not the case with Upper Assam. The future of Upper Assam still remained unsettled. During the Burmese rule, Upper Assam had suffered much from the cruelties of the Burmese and a sort of anarchical condition was prevailing there. The Ahom nobility was still strong in Upper Assam. Therefore, David Scott was in favour of continuing the old system of administration in the area. They were also actively considering the restoration of Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam.

8.3.1 DAVID SCOTT

The foundations of British administration in Assam were laid by David Scott during the period of military occupation following the expulsion of the Burmese by the Company‘s troops. David Scott, agent to the Governor General and the Commissioner of Assam turned his attention towards the revenue, judicial and police administration in the Brahmaputra Valley. In introducing new administration in Upper Assam, Scott tried to retain the old system as far as possible. In the words of A.C. Banerjee, ‘In Upper Assam conformity to the old system was the basic factor‘ However, in case of Lower Assam radical changes were introduced in all branches of administration.

Scott made necessary modifications in case of the administration in Upper Assam only to suit the colonial interests. With a view to win over the representatives of the old aristocracy he employed them in different services under the supervision of British officials. Thus, in Upper Assam, he retained the existing Paik and Khel system with some minor changes in the revenue system. Earlier, revenues were paid either in kind or in the form of personal services. Scott abolished this system and payment of revenue in cash was made obligatory. The post of Barbarua as introduced by Ahom king was retained. He was assisted by a Hazarika, a Saikia and a Barua. Janardana Barbarua, a former officer of influence and rank was placed in charge of the revenue department. Though no additional tax was imposed but poll tax of three rupees per Paik was introduced.



LET US KNOW

Paik and Khel System

The *paiks* in a khel were organized under a gradation of officials who commanded a set number of them. They were: *Bora* (20 *paiks*), *Saikia* (100) and *Hazarika* (1000). More important *khels* were commanded by a Phukan (6000); a *Rajkhowa* (a governor of a territory) or a *Barua* (a superintending officer) each of whom could command between 2000 and 3000 *paiks*.

Pargana System

A pargana is an administrative unit. Parganas were introduced by the Delhi Sultanate and the word is of Persian origin. As a revenue unit, a pargana consists of several *mouzas* which are the smallest revenue units, consisting of one or more villages and the surrounding countryside.

In Lower Assam, the revenue settlements were made on the basis of pargana system. Lower Assam was then divided into 26 parganas and settlements were made with the Choudhuris who were entitled during their term of office to rent free grants besides the services of a number of *paiks*. They could be removed from their duties at the pleasure of the government, although members of the same family were usually appointed as their substitutes. In collecting the revenue, they were assisted by Patwaris (accountants), Thakurias (subordinate collectors), etc. The revenue department of Lower Assam was placed under the charge of a Sheristadar. Nowgong and Raha, which formed a separate fiscal unit under the collectorate at Guwahati, were placed under two Farmers of revenue-Aradhan Roy and Lata Pani Phukan. Scott made a separate agreement with Raja Vijaynarayan of Darrang who agreed to pay annual revenue of Rs. 42, 000. He also agreed to give the service of 1500 *paiks*. Scott agreed to receive a voluntary contribution from the chiefs of Beltola, Rani, Dimarua and Naduar. In Lower Assam, a tax of rupees two known as *gadhan* was imposed on every *paik* in return for which he was entitled to 3 *puras* of land

each. In addition they were required to pay a poll tax at varying rates under different names. In both the divisions' professional tax on braziers, goldwashers, fishermen etc.and custom duties on *hats* (markets), *ghats* (river ports), fisheries, etc continued to be levied as under the former government. Arrangements were also made for the survey of land.

For the administration of civil justice, in Upper Assam, the post of Barphukan was retained. Scott appointed Lambodar Barphukan, a brother in law of Ex-Raja Chandrakanta Singha, as co-adjudicator with Janardan Barbarua in Upper Assam for trial of civil cases. Criminal cases were tried earlier by the Junior Commissioner. When that office was abolished in 1828 these came to be tried by a Political Agent. Trial of cases demanding capital punishment or long term imprisonment was held before juries presided over by the Barphukan but the verdict was subject to revision by one of the Commissioners.

In Lower Assam, the Senior Commissioner tried both the civil and criminal cases but he could not award a death sentence. As the number of cases increased three indigenous tribunals were set up. Of these, the first, under a Rajkhowa decided cases of minor importance; the second, under a Barphukan, tried civil cases to the extent of Rs 1000/- and also heard appeals from the lower court. The third under another Barphukan decided criminal cases and appeals from the Choudhuris and revenue officials who were also empowered to exercise judicial authority in their respective areas of jurisdictions. Besides, *mofussil panchayats* with elected members were also set up at populated areas to which minor civil cases were referred with a right of appeal to the courts at Guwahati.

David Scott set up a police organization on the lines of the British police system with a view to maintaining law order in the country. The police organization consisted of one *Daroga*, one *Jamadar*, and a number of constables. They were placed at headquarters under the direct supervision of British officials but *mofussil* police were left in the hands of the local chiefs like Choudhuris, Patowaris and other revenue officers in their respective areas. People of each area were given joint responsibility to maintain law and order in their respective areas. When the people of any

particular area failed to maintain law and order only then were the police deployed in the area. For this the people had to bear the expenses. Sometimes collective fines were also imposed to meet the expenses.

In this way, David Scott tried to introduce British administration in Assam. He had to face a number of difficulties in introducing the new administrative system in Assam but he tried his best to overcome these difficulties in order to provide an efficient administrative system in Assam. Inspite of all these, in some cases, he failed to a great extent. But his failure was not due to his lack of efficiency or competency as an administrator. It was actually due to his lack of understanding of the ground realities. He could not realize the basic differences between the Ahom and the British systems of administration. His hasty attempt to unite the old and new system proved to be a failure. In doing so he could neither satisfy the nobles nor could bring about happiness to the people. In spite of his shortcomings, David Scott was the first British administrator in North-East India who earned the love and respect of the people. He died of heart trouble prematurely at the age of forty five in August 1831 at Cherapunji.It is inscribed on Scott's tombstone at Cherapunji that, "his name will be held in grateful remembrance and veneration by the native population, to whom he was justly endeared by his impartial administration of justice, and his kind and conciliatory manners and his constant and unwearied endeavour to promote their happiness and welfare."

Thus we may conclude that David Scott laid the foundation of British administrative set up in Assam and his death marked the end of the first stage in the history of British administration in Assam.

8.3.2 T.C. ROBERTSON

After the death of David Scott in 1831, W.Cracroft officiated in his place till 1832. In April, 1832 T.C Robertson succeeded Cracroft as the Agent of the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam. Robertson was an able civil servant who had begun his official career in Bengal in 1806 and had rendered commendable administrative and political service in Arakan during the war with Burma. He served in Assam till 1834 and

then, after a brief term as a judge of the Sadar Court at Calcutta, became a member of the Governor General's Executive Council.

T.C. Robertson introduced a series of reforms in the sphere of administration that brought about far reaching changes in the history of British administration in Assam. Robertson was a man of tact, prudence and sound judgment. He could soon understand the prevailing conditions of British administration in Assam. Robertson felt that great injustice had been done to this frontier province by imposing its responsibilities to a single functionary namely the agent to the Governor General or Commissioner. Due to the immense responsibilities this official became overburdened and could not disburse his duties effectively. He also personally believed that nothing could succeed in Assam without the supervision of European officers. He, therefore, felt that a thorough reorganization of all departments of administration was essential to achieve efficiency in the administrative system.

With this in mind, Robertson first took steps to reorganize the provincial administration. On his recommendation in March 1833 the supreme government accorded its approval for the division of the province into five districts. Thus was laid the foundation of district administration in Assam. As per the order of the supreme government the territories on the West of the river Dhansiri were to be divided into five districts: 1) North-East Rangpur and Goalpara; 2) Six parganas of Kamrup, roughly corresponding to the present district of Barpeta including Nagarbera; 3) Lower Assam with twenty parganas, mostly on the North bank and nine duars (passes) on the South; 4) Central Assam comprising Naduar, Charduar and Darrang on the North. Nagaon and Raha on the South bank of the river Brahmaputra; 5) Biswanath from the river Bharali to Biswanath on the North together with the territory known as Morang extending from Kaliabor to river Dhansiri. Each district was to have an officer, designated as Principal Assistant to the Commissioner, on a consolidated salary of one thousand rupees. He was to be aided by another officer called Junior Assistant who was to get a salary of Rs 500 only. However, certain modifications had to be made to this system due to the non availability of

qualified officers. So the six parganas were placed under a Junior Assistant. The district officials were recruited from the army. Captain White was relieved of all civil duties but he continued to function as the Political Agent, Upper Assam, and to command the Assam Light Infantry at Biswanath.

In judicial affairs also Robertson introduced some reforms. The Principal Assistant was given the power to try original civil cases from five hundred to one thousand rupees. He could hear appeal from the lower courts. All civil cases exceeding rupees one thousand, as well as special appeals were to be referred to the Commissioner. In criminal cases, the Principal Assistant exercised the same power as a magistrate in Bengal. However, he was given additional authority to investigate criminal cases with the aid of a Jury.

In each district two lower courts were established for civil cases- the *Munsiff's* Court and the *Panchayats*. The *Munsiff's* court tried original civil suits from rupees one hundred to five hundred and heard appeals from the *panchayats.* The *panchayats* investigated petty suits up to rupees one hundred. The *mofussil panchayats* were abolished. The cases that were hitherto tried by them and also by revenue officials were to be investigated hereafter by civil *panchayats* at Guwahati and *Munsiff*'s courts set up for the purpose at Biswanath, Charduar, Naduar and Nagaon. But these investigations were to be carried on under the supervision and control of European officers. In this regard A.C. Bannerjee has rightly pointed out that the essence of the new system was the imposition of European supervision and control over the local agency.

In revenue affairs, Robertson brought radical changes that had a far reaching impact. In 1832 Robertson abolished additional imposts including *Barangani* (subscription) in Darrang, Nagaon and in some areas of Kamrup. The purpose of this was not only to relieve the cultivators of oppressive extortions but also to ensure the regular collection of revenue. Tax on land at different rates was imposed. The ryots (peasants) were required to pay a capitation tax on their house, from one rupee to three rupees in Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon in addition to the land tax.

Robertson introduced strict administrative measures for the cultivator's protection against extortion. Every revenue official was required to submit returns showing the name of the ryot, the quality and quantity of the land, and the number of hearths and homes. After scrutinizing these records, settlements were made directly with the ryots, and title deeds and *pattas* were issued to them specifying therein the amount of revenue to be paid, under signature and seal of the Collector. Copies of all records were to kept at the Collector's office for reference. Settlements were thus directly made with the ryots and the revenue officials. Choudhuri's became mere collectors of revenue. They received remuneration, in the form of commission, varying from 7 to 15 percent of total collection of revenue. The Choudhuris were deprived of the powers of the police and stipendiary officers were appointed to replace them. The Choudhuri's were, however, given the power to try petty cases relating to land. Their designation now became that of a mere *Tehsildar.* In trying cases they were not empowered to inflict a fine or any other punishment without reference to the Collector. The *Tehsildars* were helped by Patowaris, Thakurias and Gaon Kakatis in the dispensation of their duties.

Thus, by 1833, the foundations of British administration in Lower and Central Assam were strongly established. In Upper Assam also the situation changed with the restoration of Ahom monarchy under Purandar Singha on 24 April, 1833.Purandar Singha was restored to the throne of Ahom monarchy on condition of paying an annual tribute of Rs 50,000/- to the Company. Thus, Purandar Singha became a subordinate ruler of the British in Upper Assam. However, Purandar Singha could not remain the king for a long period. In the year 1838 Upper Assam was formally annexed to the British East India Company. This completed the process of British annexation of Assam.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Write True/ False:

a) The Treaty of Yandaboo brought an end to the 600 years of Ahom rule in Assam. (True/ False)

b) Lower Assam comprised Kamrup, Nagaon and parts of Darrang with headquarter at Nagaon. (True/ False)

c) In Lower Assam, the revenue settlements were made on the basis of pargana system. (True/ False)

d) In judicial affairs also Robertson introduced some reforms. (True/ False)

2. Fill in the blanks:

a) Colonel Richards was appointed in charge of ……..……

b) ……..…….. was appointed as Scott's assistant in Guwahati.

c) Lower Assam was then divided into ……..……. parganas.

d) T.C Robertson succeeded ……..…….. as the Agent of the Governor General.



8.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you will have learnt-

- The administrative set up introduced by David Scott after Assam passed into the hands of the British by the Treaty of Yandaboo.
- Administrative reforms introduced by Robertson as the agent of the Governor General.



8.5 FURTHER READING

1. Barpujari, H.K: *Assam in the Days of Company*
2. Barpujari, H.K (edited): *Political History of Assam, Volume-I*
3. Barpujari, H.K (edited): *A Comprehensive History of Assam Volume-II & IV*
4. Baruah, S.L: *A Comprehensive History of Assam*