

CHAPTER II

ADMINISTRATION OF CRACROFT AND ROBERTSON

Administration of Cracroft (Sept. 1831-April 1832): On the death of Scott, pending permanent arrangements, Cracroft was deputed in Sept. 1831 to officiate as the Commissioner of Assam. In the meantime on the death of Neufville Captain White was sent to take over the charge of the office of the Political Agent of Upper Assam.

The Officiating Commissioner discovered that one very important cause of mal-administration in Lower Assam was that, as an administrative unit it was too big. So early in 1832, with the approval of the Govt. of Bengal he transferred six western parganas of Kamrup to the jurisdiction of the officer-in-charge of North-East Rangpur.

To deal with the criminal cases of minor importance, Cracroft procured the appointment of Haliram Dhekial Phukan, an Assamese of rank and honour as an Assistant Magistrate at Guwahati.

To find out the causes for existing disorders in administration, the Commissioner deputed two British Officers.

After making extensive tours they submitted reports pointing out the causes of disorders. The causes were: (i) Paucity of European Officers; (ii) ignorance of those employed about the resources of the country and conditions of people; (iii) scattered condition of parganas; (iv) and corrupt practices and intrigues of the amlah are the Sadar Station.

They also suggested certain remedial measures, but as Cracroft was relieved of his duties in April, 1832, he did not have time to introduce any reform.

Administration of Robertson (April 1832-April 1834): Robertson began his official career in 1806, and had served in various capacities in Bihar, Bengal and Arakan. He rendered valuable assistance during the peace negotiations with Burma.

On assuming the charge as Commissioner, he felt that a thorough overhauling was necessary in all departments. He first turned his attention to revenue reforms.

Revenue reforms : His aim was to straighten the revenue system so that there might not be difficulty in collecting the taxes.

The collection of arrears in several parganas were held in abeyance. Towards the close of 1832, the barangani and other imposts were abolished in Darrang and some areas of Kamrup throwing the entire burden on land a Capitation tax. The Capitation Tax was on house in Kamrup, on hearth in Darrang and on head in Nowgong. As a security against extortion, every revenue officer was now obliged to submit detailed statement of land, house, hearth etc., on the basis of which settlements were made. Title deeds called pattas were issued to the ryots. The ryots were to pay taxes for which receipts were to be issued to them. Settlements were thus made directly with the ryots and all revenue officials became nothing more than Tashildars. Revenue officers were now paid 7 to 15 p.c. of the gross collection as remuneration. They could try trifling cases either of land or of petty quarrels ; but they were strictly prohibited from inflicting a fine or any other punishment without a reference to the collector-in-charge. The results of the new measures were beneficial to the ryots. Though extortion was not totally checked, yet harassment for taxes was reduced to a considerable extent.

Administrative reforms : Robertson had a belief that Assam was a much neglected province, and that was why its administration was left to one single functionary i.e. the Commissioner, who as the Agent to the Governor-General North-East Frontier, was over burdened with multifarious duties. Robertson held a poor view of the efficiency of Indians and he felt convinced that nothing could succeed in Assam without effective supervision by European officials. It was following his suggestions Assam's administration was reorganized in 1833. Territories to the west of the river Dhansiri were divided into five districts and each district was placed in charge of a European Officer designated as the Principal Assistant. The Principal Assistant in each district was to be assisted in his duties by a Junior Assistant. The Principal Assistant was to officiate as a Judge, magistrate and collector.

Judicial Reforms : The judiciary was also reorganized during Robertson's time. In civil cases, the Principal Assistant was vested with powers of deciding original suits from rupees five hundred to

one thousand and to hear all appeals from the lower courts. All suits exceeding rupees one thousand as well as special appeals were to be referred to the Commissioner.

In each district, apart from the Principal Assistant's court, there existed two others courts. (i) The munsif's court vested with the powers of trying original suits from rupees one hundred to five hundred, and to hear appeals from the Panchayet Courts. (ii) The Panchayet Courts were vested with the power trying petty suits up to rupees one hundred.

In criminal cases, the Principal Assistant exercised the same authority as a Magistrate of Bengal with the additional duties of investigating heinous offences with the aid of a jury. At the end of investigation, the proceedings were sent to the Court of the Commissioner along with the verdict of the jury and the Magistrate's statements for final orders.

The Mufassil Panchayet Courts were abolished. So also were all revenue officials deprived of all judicial powers. Cases so long tried by the mufassil Panchayet Courts were henceforth to be tried by the Civil Panchayet Courts at Guwahati and by the munsif courts set up for the purpose at Biswanath, Charduar, Na-duar (Darrang) and Nowgong.

Important political events : The important events in the time of Robertson were the termination of the Khasi War, the restoration of Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam, and the annexation of Cachar to the British dominion. Each of these events will be dealt with in details separately in subsequent chapters.