

CHAPTER V

OCCUPATION OF THE MATAK COUNTRY

The British, after expelling the Burmese, occupied the Brahmaputra Valley. The western part of the valley was referred to as Lower Assam and the eastern part as Upper Assam. The Upper Assam, according to the division of Scott, covered roughly the present districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and a small portion of Darrang. The territories to the east of Upper Assam was occupied by the Moamarias, the Khamtis and Singphos.

The Moamaria or Matak country, inhabited by the Morans, Kacharies and the Assamese, lay between the Brahmaputra and the Buridihing. Its ruler was called the Barasenapati, whose independence was first acknowledged by Purnananda Buragohain. During the Burmese invasion, the then Barasenapati protected his people from the inroads of the Burmese: The Barasenapati was an efficient ruler and he had his capital at Rangapara on the Dibru river. At the end of the Burmese war the Barasenapati was left in semi-independent possession of his country. In 1826 he entered into an agreement with David Scott in which it was provided that he should furnish the British Government 280 pykes. As this arrangement did not work well, the British abandoned it and made a new agreement in 1835 whereby the Barasenapati was to pay a tribute of Rs. 1000/- annually for the term of his own life. Moreover, the Barasenapati, when required, was to furnish a contingent of troops, for whose armaments he was given ammunition and three hundred muskets.

The Barasenapati maintained friendly co-operation with the British. Though there was no evidence of his army's anti-British activities, yet the local authorities doubted his fidelity and suspected that he was an accomplice in the anti-British movements which had taken place in 1828, 1829 and 1830. There were other reasons for which the local British authorities were not favourably disposed towards Barasenapati. One reason was constant emigration of people from Upper Assam to Barasenapati's territory. A second reason was

that Barasenapati's territory was most fertile for the cultivation of tea. The British, enterprisers very much wished to get this territory under British occupation. In 1830 taking advantage of a quarrel between Sadiyakhwa-Goham and Barasenapati, the Commissioner brought the territory on either side of the river Lohit-Sadiya and Saikhow—under control of the British Government. Jenkins, who became the Commissioner in 1834, was very eager to occupy the whole of the Matak country, but with regard to this he did not get any encouragement from the Government of India.

The Barasenapati, after nominating his second son, known as the Maju Gohain to succeed him, died in 1839. The British agreement with Barasenapati was for the term of his life only, and so the agreement came to an end with his death. Here was an opportunity for the British to tighten their hold on the Matak country. In 1839 the Political Agent Mr. White went to Rangapara and proposed the terms of a new treaty following which the Maju Gohain was to pay Rs. 10,000/- as tribute. Maju Gohain politely said that he was too poor to pay such a heavy tribute.

Meanwhile dissensions had broken out in Matak country. The Morans, living in this country, made several representations to the local authorities requesting them not to place them (Morans) under the rule of Maju Gohain. White suggested the reduction of the proposed tribute to Rs. 2500/- and recognition of Maju Gohain as the ruler of the country. Jenkins did not like this suggestion as he was in favour of more stringent conditions. So the matter was referred to the Governor-General-in-Council which proposed new terms and conditions under which a new agreement was to be made with the Maju Gohain. The conditions which appeared galling to the Maju Gohain were: (i) Pyke system was to be abolished; (ii) The Maju Gohain was not to have any authority over the tea-gardens to be established in his territory; and (iii) The Moran occupying territory in lower Matak was to remain excluded from the control of the Maju Gohain.

The Political Agent of Upper Assam was directed to occupy Maju Gohain's territory in case the latter refused to accept the conditions offered. The terms were rejected by Maju Gohain; they were then offered to other members of his family, who also refused to accept them where upon the British representative Captain

Vetch, assumed direct management of the entire country. The measure was subsequently approved by the Governor-General. Pensions, however, were awarded to Maju Gohain and the members of his family. In 1842 a proclamation was issued announcing the incorporation of Matak and Sodiya with British territory. Both tracts were added to the Lakhimpur district.