

The annexation of Upper Assam, Sadiya and Muttock was undoubtedly of great importance to the British. Francis Jenkins, commissioner and agent to the governor-general for Assam and northeast Rangpur, was elated for he was convinced that the rich economic potential of the region would ultimately prove extremely lucrative for the British. But he was also aware of the formidable task before him. Soon after the resumption of Upper Assam, he painted a bleak picture of crumbling families, struggling peasantry and a nearly non-existent communication network when he wrote:

The great roads and embankments have been neglected for years and are in a dilapidated condition. Heavy forest and reed grass intercept one part of partially cultivated territory from another ... trade has been annihilated by vexatious imposts ... the country is saddled with an immensely numerous ... aristocracy that made serf of all productive classes, and the latter, weighed down by the accumulated burdens of exaction, (have been) rendered idle, dissolute and timid ... (and) have taken to the habitual use of opium in such vast quantities that they cannot now exist without it.¹

The difficulties that Jenkins had to face were indeed enormous. The administration was chaotic and complaints of high land assessments and of the arrogance and the corruption of the officials in power were rampant. He was required to administer a vast stretch of territory whose economy had been ruined by long periods of political instability.

The region's negligible transport and communication network made the task of administration all the more difficult. Moreover, although as the commissioner of a non-regulated² province Jenkins was theoretically armed with dictatorial powers, in practice he found his hands tied because he had to constantly seek the sanction of the authorities in Calcutta, especially in cases involving financial matters. This invariably resulted in inordinate delays. Jenkins was also expected to keep the authorities informed of all his activities on a regular basis. However, even basic infrastructural facilities were virtually non-existent to enable him to carry out all these tasks. He had neither a secretariat nor a team of capable assistants apart from James Matthie, the Deputy Commissioner. Whatever help was available was not qualified or efficient simply because the salaries offered were not attractive enough to get experienced persons to work in a frontier province. In the circumstances, district offices were filled largely by army officers who were liable to be recalled to their regiments at any time. The temporary nature of their tenure moreover, deprived them of the opportunity to acquire knowledge of local institutions, customs and traditions, a comprehension of which was essential for executing civil duties. Problems were compounded because the officers were burdened with multifarious duties. It was with these severe constraints that Jenkins started his work.

His first task was to instil confidence in the minds of the people. He had to assure them that the rulers were capable of maintaining law and order, that their rule would be just and liberal, that their demands would be moderate and that under them the people could hope for happiness and prosperity. With that objective in mind, he introduced certain changes in the administration.

JENKINS ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

The province was divided into a number of districts. Each of them was under a principal assistant who had to shoulder enormous responsibility. In addition to his normal duties as a collector, the principal assistant was also required to perform the functions of a civil judge, superintendent of police, executive engineer, education officer and post master. He was further expected to deal with the numerous problems of the tribes bordering his district and to visit the neighbouring hills from time to time to cultivate friendly relations

with the tribes. This involved his being out of station, often for long periods. The principal assistant was assisted in his duties by a sub-assistant and three junior assistants. A major problem, however, lay in the paucity of capable officers. As mentioned earlier, their pay was so meagre compared to the nature and volume of their work that even army officers were reluctant to join civil duties. Local persons with knowledge of the British system of administration were few and far between.³

Judicial Reforms

In 1834, the principal assistant had been placed under the *Sadar* Court for both criminal and civil cases and under the Board of Revenue for revenue cases. But in 1837 a set of rules, known as Assam Rules, was enforced which laid down guidelines for the establishment of courts, their jurisdiction, mode of appointment of officers, provision for appeals, procedure to be followed in mortgage cases etc. In all cases not specifically provided for in the Assam Rules, the commissioner and his subordinate officers were expected to act according to the spirit of the Rules. Jenkins found that these Rules were followed more in breach than in observance. The sub-assistants and junior assistants were so overburdened with multiple duties that it was impossible for them to examine each case individually. This authority was normally delegated to the omlahs who were hardly qualified for the purpose. Moreover, the courts of law were not readily accessible as a result of which any litigation involved a considerable outlay of time, energy and expenditure. Justice was, therefore, a luxury beyond the reach of the poor and consequently, most people preferred to suffer patiently rather than get into legal hassles.

Jenkins realised that the first step towards consolidation was to set up an effective judiciary. It could be done only if an adequate number of *moffusil* courts were set up under qualified judges. This would not only expedite matters but also help in making justice easily accessible to all. He introduced several measures that have been listed below.

- In order to reduce the undue influence of the omlahs and to hasten the process of judgment in petty cases, he substituted oral examination by the magistrate in lieu of written depositions by *mohururs* (clerks).
- Panchayats were placed under munsifs.

- The post of munsif was open to all but preference was henceforth given to local persons with some social standing. Applicants from outside the province were required to have at least ten years of public service in Assam to be considered fit for selection. Assamese apprentices who had rendered assistance to European officers in the past were also considered for employment.

Jenkins hoped that these measures would break the monopoly of the Bengalis who had occupied almost all the high posts that had been available. Matthie later remarked that 'the success of the system was beyond expectation'.

Reforms in Police Administration

Jenkins' other priority was the reorganisation of the police administration. He was convinced that unless the life and property of the people were secure, he could never hope to win their confidence. The existing system was so weak and inefficient that the position of the people was extremely vulnerable. The thana was the unit of the police organisation. It was under the charge of a *thanadar* or a *daroga* who was empowered to arrest criminals and hold preliminary trials before sending them to the headquarters. He was aided by a *jamadar* or one of the *mohururs* and a few constables. There were no *chowkidars* or village watchmen and the revenue officials, like the *choudhurys*, *patgiris* and *mouzadars* were expected to aid the *daroga* in detection of crime and the apprehension of criminals. Had the jurisdiction of the *daroga* been restricted to a small area, this system would have been effective, but in most cases this was not so. The district of Nowgong for instance, which covered an area of approximately 9,000 square kilometres, had only three thanas. It was humanly impossible to provide security over such a large area. Moreover, the salaries of the staff were totally inadequate considering the nature of the work,⁴ thereby tempting them to resort to corruption. Far away from the control of the higher authorities and vested with powers of both prosecutor and judge, the police official had become a symbol of extortion and oppression. As Anandaram Dhekial Phukan rightly pointed out, in a province full of jungles and marshes and where mobility was severely restricted, the extensive jurisdiction coupled with inadequate staff, made the police system totally ineffective.⁵ Aware of the ground realities, Jenkins repeatedly brought to the notice of the government that unless

more thanas were set up and the salaries increased substantially, the situation was not likely to improve. Much to his disappointment, the government, was reluctant to incur further expenditure and merely upgraded the salary of the daroga from 25 rupees to 100 rupees.

Revenue Reforms

Jenkins had to face problems in the revenue sector as well. Soon after the British took over the administration of Assam, they had introduced certain radical revenue reforms. The paik system, which had involved payment in the form of personal service to the king, had been replaced by taxes. Although attempts had been made from time to time to prevent forceful exactions, the interests of the ryots were not always protected. Assessments were made at the headquarters on the report of petty officials and investigations were ordered only in cases of serious doubts. Even then, the enquiry was not conducted by the officer in charge, but by a subordinate person. Allegations of over assessments, illegal imposts, corruption and bribery were rampant but it was practically impossible for a ryot to get redress for his grievances. In spite of such gross anomalies, the government had, from time to time, seriously considered the enhancement of revenue on rupit lands on the plea that the rates prevalent in Assam were too low in comparison to other provinces. Jenkins opposed this move persistently. He was convinced that in the existing circumstances, the enhancement of revenue would have the reverse effect of driving the ryots away from the cultivation of rice. In his opinion, it would have been possible to increase the revenue only by bringing more land under cultivation. His views were corroborated by Captain Butler, the principal assistant commissioner of Nowgong, who wrote:

It is not our *Ryotwaree* system that retards the increase in revenue, but the want of a large population; our extensive wastes or jungles cannot be cultivated with a scanty population decreased by epidemics. The people are not industrious or enterprising, and will not cultivate more land than is sufficient for their own wants; unless Assam is colonised from Bengal, there is no prospect or hope of the province being brought fully under cultivation for centuries to come.⁶

Jenkins further insisted that if at all rates had to be enhanced, it had to be on those non-rupit lands which had shown an increase in production in the years immediately past. He, moreover, pointed out

that in view of the differences in the development and paying capacities of the ryots in the different districts, a uniform rate was in any case not feasible. Keeping these in mind, he put forth several measures to improve the revenue administration.

- In 1852, Jenkins raised the revenue on non-*rupit* lands in all the districts except Kamrup. In recommending the tax on *bari* lands, Jenkins stated his desire to convert the wastelands and 'haunts of wild beasts into fruitful fields of sugarcane, mustard, mulberry, lac, tobacco and vegetables'. He believed that taxation would motivate the people to increase the productivity of their *bari* lands.
- In an effort to further increase revenue receipts, he introduced a number of additional taxes. For instance, gold washing and fishing rights were farmed out to the highest bidder, taxes were levied on reeds and timber and excise and stamp duties were introduced on the plea of discouraging litigations.
- He also provided incentives for agricultural production of food crops as well as cash crops like sugarcane, tea, coffee and indigo by initiating a set of rules known as Waste Land Rules for the settlement of the vast tracts of lands lying fallow in the province.

These Rules came into effect for the first time in March 1838.⁷ By encouraging cultivation of crops that were easily marketable and creating a class of speculators to exploit the resources of the province, especially tea and coal, Jenkins attempted to increase commerce and industry in the region. But he realised that his efforts would be futile unless the communication network was improved. Hence, he introduced steamers on the Brahmaputra and tried to restore or construct a number of roads to facilitate the movement of goods and people. This had the immediate effect of not only opening up the province to the outside world but also providing an impetus to trade and industry.⁸ Further, in an effort to focus the attention of the outside world on this frontier province, Jenkins wrote a series of articles in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* on Assam and her history.

Reforms in Education

When Jenkins took over as commissioner of Assam, he was alarmed at the predominance of non-Assamese people in all government offices.

He strongly believed that 'the natives of the soil' must be relied upon and that it was necessary for the government to educate and train them to take positions of responsibility. He said that it was essential to win the confidence of the erstwhile aristocracy by providing them employment, even if in the subordinate ranks of public service. The early anti-British uprisings had made it clear to the colonial administration that it was unsafe to withdraw the privileges that the upper classes had enjoyed for generations. It was, therefore, essential to accommodate them as far as possible in the new administrative set up and this called for the introduction of a modern system of education. Jenkins realised that unless the prevailing system was remedied, the future of the British in Assam was 'bleak and fraught with problems'. Writing to the government in 1834, he remarked: 'This state of things appears to me pregnant with evil (consequences) and I know no other method by which it could be remedied than by the Government taking some active measure to provide instruction to Assamese youth.'⁹

In the same dispatch, Jenkins strongly recommended the establishment of schools to impart English education at each of the *sadar* stations of Gauhati, Darrang, Nowgong and Bishwanath. Jenkins believed that these institutions would produce local teachers within a short time during which period teachers capable of teaching English and Bengali could be procured from outside. As anticipated by Jenkins, the response was very encouraging and the demand for English education was so high that many schools, funded entirely by the public, began to spring up. Most of these laid considerable stress on the study of English, because it was commonly believed that knowledge of the language was the gateway for obtaining employment in the government offices.

James Matthie, the district collector of Gauhati, however, believed that the solution lay not in setting up English schools but in establishing anglo-vernacular schools. Accordingly, he formulated certain proposals which, in fact, formed the foundation for the genesis of primary schools in Assam.¹⁰ But unfortunately, most of these schools did not follow a uniform system. There was neither a fixed curriculum nor adequate textbooks. William Robinson, Inspector of Schools, reported that 'even the most advanced students were just able to read only a few pages of their textbooks without any comprehension whatsoever of their meaning ... their handwriting was illegible, orthography much worse, and of arithmetic they literally knew nothing'.¹¹ Thus, it is

apparent that in spite of the efforts of Jenkins, the educational system was far from encouraging. Mills observed that not a single student from Assam had qualified for a government junior scholarship till the time of his filing the Report.¹²

Like David Scott, Jenkins too was deeply concerned about the people of the region. Considering the severe limitations under which he worked, his achievements were indeed significant. S. K. Bhuyan has observed: 'His philanthropy and magnificence combined with his intimate knowledge of the history, habits and feelings of the governed as well as his zealous watchfulness of their interests made him, in the imagination of the people, a worthy successor of the Assamese *Swargadeos* and *Barphukans*.'¹³