

Revolt of 1857 in Cachar District of Assam: A Re-Emphasis

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Abstract

The revolt of 1857 had a significant impact in the Cachar district of Assam like other national allied activities. Many national historians asserts that the Cachar as well as Assam remained largely unaffected by the great revolt. But there are evidences which suggests that the echoes of the revolt felt in the Cachar district of southern Assam. The British administration, under figures like Captain Stewart, remained vigilant against potential uprisings, indicating an underlying tension despite a facade of tranquility. The common folk of Barak valley composed innumerable ballads and songs on the incident of the revolt which occurred in this region. There are also official documents to prove that the revolt affected the Cachar district. The revolt in Cachar emerged primarily as an extension of discontent from Bengal, with the local populace largely indifferent to the mutineers. The mutineers of 34th Native Infantry regiment marched to Cachar from Chittagong and the British army tried to suppress them. while the revolt of 1857 marked a pivotal moment in Indian history, its impact in Cachar was characterized by a lack of local support for the mutineers and minimal involvement from the common people. This paper aims to explore the nature and implications of the revolt in Cachar, detailing its limited but notable manifestations. The study indicates that while Cachar did not experience overt mutinies like other parts of India, it was not entirely insulated from the turmoil. The paper also discusses how the British forces managed to suppress potential uprisings, with notable incidents involving the 34th Native Infantry Regiment. Encounters between mutineers and colonial troops led to casualties and highlighted the region's precarious situation, exacerbated by the presence of tribal populations and discontented soldiers.

Keywords: Revolt, National, Mutineers, Ballads, Folk

Introduction:

The Cachar district which is situated in the southern region of Assam was ruled by the Dimasa or Kachari kings during the medieval period. Raja Gobind Chandra, the last of the Kachari King was assassinated by a group of enemies on April, 24, 1830 at Haritkar of Katigora area and his kingdom was annexed by the British. The revolt of 1857, like other anti-colonial and other allied activities lefts its imprint in the Cachar district of southern region of Assam. But like some other pockets of India, the revolt did not acquire any mature outbursts. Many classical historians dealing with the revolt asserted that the revolt left no impact in Assam. About the revolt, colonial historian Edward Gait writes “the great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 left Assam almost untouched”ⁱ But there is sufficient evidence to proof that the echo of the revolt of 1857 was felt in Cachar. Edward Gait, on the other hand surprisingly writes “Situation was not free from danger”ⁱⁱ Thus, there prevailed tension in the official circle and formed the major substance of task among administrators in Cachar. Assam in spite of the people remaining quiet

and the British administration nipped the tension in the bud. The revolt of 1857 in Cachar was a simple extension of sepoy discontent from the core to an area of commonness between the upsurge in Cachar and general revolt in Bengal. Insurrection did break out in Assam but they did not take the form of a mutiny. Cachar has seen the British rule and its exploitation almost for 27 years but other parts of India suffered for many years. So, the common people of Cachar were not concern with the revolt.

All the prominent historians who have written the history of revolt of 1857 have not given any account of the revolt and its impact in Cachar district. Ramesh Chandra Majumder writes, “Bengal was practically unaffected by the mutiny with the exception of two sporadic outbursts at Dacca Chittagong. On November 18, the 34th Native Infantry at Chittagong mutinied and followed usual procedure. They found no sympathy among the people and being defeated loyal native regiment, marched northwards through Sylhet and Cachar. Being defeated they turned towards the east and were joined by some discontented chiefs of Manipur living in Cachar. But they could not enter Manipur whose ruler at the request of the British sent their troops and captured a number of them. They were handed over to British and the rest betook themselves to the neighbouring hills and jungles”ⁱⁱⁱ But there are sufficient evidences which confirm that the great revolt affected the Cachar district of southern Assam. British historian Edwart Gait Writes “The great sepoy mutiny of 1857 left Assam almost untouched. The situation was at a time by no means free from danger; and the comparative immunity which this part of India was due very largely to the watchfulness and recourse displaced by the civil and military officers on the spot. Shortly before the outbreak, Mr. Allen of the Board of Revenue had been deputed to visit the Khasi and Jaintia hills and the Lieutenant Governor Sir Fredrick Halliday took advantage of his presence at Cherapunji, the then capital of the district, to place him temporarily in charge of the Eastern Frontier including Sylhet and Cachar.”^{iv} In this paper effort will be made to explore how the great revolt of 1857 left its imprint in Cachar district.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the present study are:

1. To discuss the impact and density of the revolt of 1857 in Barak valley.
2. To explore the events of the revolt that occurred in Barak valley.
3. To explore the reactions of the British authority and the revolt.
4. To analyse the nature of the revolt in Barak valley.

METHODOLOGY

In writing the paper, historical, analytical, empirical and descriptive method will be employed. Primary sources of data will be collected from published government records, letters etc. Secondary data will be collected from books, journals, research papers and souvenir etc.

The historians did not emphasize on the situation of Cachar during the revolt but the British authority was very sincere about the happening of the revolt in this area. Captain Stewart held a different view. He asked the government to invest him with the powers under Act XI of 1837 as it was apparent to him that a section of their own subjects of the district were in rebellion against the government. He had genuine apprehension that a section of his own troops might join the Manipuris and there was Intelligence that there was a plan to attack the treasury and magazine^v. Where can be no denial of the fact that the bordering district of Cachar, surrounded by the warlike tribal population in three sides, and surrounded by the presence of the mutineers sepoys, created a situation of potential danger. During the initial Period

of the revolt, the Cachar district was not affected by it as it is clear from the letter of R. Stewart, Superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal. The letter state " I have much pleasure in reporting for the information of his honour that the popular mind in Cachar seems in no way affected by the disturbances which are occurring in the North West. The Bangalee proclamation receipt by me was duly distributed, and this condition of the district is as peaceable as it possibly could be, there being no appearance of popular movement or excitement deserving of any notice."^{vi}

The various correspondence of captain Stewart, the Superintendent of Cachar shows that the revolt had its impact in this district. The common folk of Barak valley composed innumerable ballads and songs on the incident of the revolt which occurred in this region. These ballads and folk songs are known as "*Jangiyar Geet*" means songs of the warriors which constitute as a valuable source material to understand the echo of the great revolt on this region. The 34th Native Infantry Regiment at Chittagong of Bengal revolted on November 18, 1857 and shortly its echo was felt in Sylhet district of modern Bangladesh (Bordering district of Barak valley of Assam. "In November 1857, the three companies of the 34th Native Infantry stationed at Chittagong mutinied and after burning their lines, breaking open the jail and plundering the treasury, marched in the direction of Comilla; they then turned of into the jungles of hill Tippera, whence they subsequently emerged in the south-east of the Sylhet district. Their intention was to push on, through the South of Cachar, into Manipur. As soon as Mr. Allen heard of their movements, he determined to intercept them. Under his orders Major Byng, the Cammandant of the Sylhet Light Infantry set out with about 160 men and reached Pertabgarh. Then, hearing that the rebels were expected shortly to pass through Latu, he made a night march and arrived there early next morning. The rebels, numbering about two hundred, came up soon afterwards. They tried to taunts and solicitations to prevent the Hindustanis, but they only answer they received was a steady fire, which put them to fight with a loss of twenty-six killed. Major Byng was also killed."^{vii} Therefore, the Superintendent of Cachar sent a small troop to the villages of Lushais to resist the sepoys with the help of the Lushais. R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar, in a letter states "The troops were sent with a message which states "that if men come to them through the jungle from the West with red coats and heavily laden, they are our enemies and must be opposed in every possible way, if it is the wish of the Lushais to endeavour to please our government. That the men themselves are most probably wealthy, and it will afford easy and good plunder, that moreover I will give Rs.50/- for each sepoy for whom they account to me."^{viii} The Superintendent of Cachar, Captain Stewart, was involved in containing the mutiny. By that time the British established a good relation with Lushais and the Superintendent of Cachar tried his best to utilize the Lushais against the mutineers. The British administration of Cachar was very much apprehended about the arrival of the rebel sepoys and prepared themselves to face and suppressed them and that is why the Superintendent of Cachar urged the Secretary to the Government of Bengal for the expediency of posting more troops in this district.^{ix}

The revolt in Cachar district started on 18th December, 1857. The mutineers of 34th. Native Infantry Regiment marched to Pertabghur (Pertabghur or Pratabghar is the old name of Patharkandi of present district of Karimganj, Assam) and then to Latoo with a view to make towards Cachar and Manipur. In the morning of 18th. December, an encounter was taking place between the mutineers and colonial force where about 30 mutineers lost their lives^x but Edwar gait states twenty-six mutineers lost lives. After receiving information, R. Stewart, the Superintendent of Cachar immediately sent 50 British army along with 25 Kookie levy for position at Panchgram, the border of Sylhet and Cachar to resist the entry of mutineers into Cachar. The troops were sent under the leadership of Lt. Ross and S.L Infantry. In the

night of 19th. December, the mutineers have split into three or four groups and one group comprising of 40-50 men marched towards Budderpoor^{xi}(present Badarpur). Another group of mutineers marched towards Serespore of Hailakandi via Chandpur and on 22nd. December, they stationed in the jungle of Mohunpur where an encounter took place between the mutineers and the army of the company and some mutineers lost their lives and other escaped.^{xii} Subsequently, the mutineers reached Jalingah, where the British army opened fired on them on 24 the. December and the mutineers escaped. After the battle at Jalingah the mutineers pursued a south-eastern course and entered the heavy and dense jungle of Chuttla hawar (haor) where they stayed for five days. Here the mutineers faced acute food crisis and were compelled to jungle leaf and berries and some of their children died out of hunger. They were tracked by Kookie scouts who killed two sepoy. from Chatla haor the mutineers moved towards east Bunderaj pargana. Now the Superintendent deployed one troop of army at Sonaimookh (Sonaimukh) and other at Nugdigram. On 31st. January, 1858, the mutineers entered into the jungle of Bunderaj(Sonai) where an encounter took place but no casualty had been reported.^{xiii} Afterwards the mutineers marched towards Boobun hill and the British army followed them. At Boobun, the British army surrounded them from all sides. To prevent the mutineers to collect food grains from the local village, the small villages skirting the jungle have been emptied and scouts were posted in all directions.^{xiv} The mutineers, joined by a Manipuri prince named Narendrajit Singh, the prince of Manipur and his followers, came out of the jungle into a village to the West of Binnacandy on 12th January. At that time British armies were stationed at Binnacandy and Luckipoor (Lakhipur). The mutineers fired upon the British army stationed at Luckipoor. Then the British troops stationed at Binnacandy marched towards Luckipoor and encounter took place between the British troops and the mutineers which lasted for two hours. In this encounter, seven mutineers and two British armies lost their lives.^{xv} After the battle at Binnacandy, the mutineers were still in the Boobun hill and were broken into four to five groups.^{xvi}

In a correspondence of Captain Stewart, Superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, the following is a list^{xvii} showing the total numbers of mutineers, bonafide sepoy killed since then entered Cachar:

1. Tried and executed by civil authority	= 13
2. Killed in action	= 37
3. Died of wounds	= 2
4. Killed by scouts	= 17
5. Found dead in jungle	= 2
6. Caught by villagers, scouts, troops both of booth government and Manipoorie and tried and executed by military law	= 39
Total	= 110

The following individual belonging to the camp of the mutineers have been taken prisoners and await trial:

1. Regimental Bheestie Imprisonment)	= 1 (His name was Nuttah khan and sentenced to 14 years
2. Regimental Barbar	= 1
3. Sikh Faqueer (camp follower	= 1
4. Chittagong convicts	= 10

5. Women (two badly wounded = 12	
6. Children	= 7
Total	= 32

On 22nd January, 1858, the scout found a group of mutineers who were scattered into groups after the Binnacandy incident. The scout fired upon them and thirteen sepoy were left dead and other escaped.^{xviii} Up to January, 1858 total 162 number of mutineers in Cachar and 206 in Sylhet were killed. Apart from this, many other sepoy died in the jungle due to starvation and wounds.^{xix} After the battle at Binnacandy, the mutineers were dispersed. The number of the mutineers also reduced as many of them died. Until February, 1858, total 185 mutineers died since they entered Cachar. The British army recovered about 110 or 120 stand of arms and about Rs. 30,000 of plundered Chittagong treasure recovered from the mutineers. The official letter^{xx} of Stewart mentioned the following data about the mutineers

1. Tried and executed by the civil authority	14
2. Killed in action	57
3. Found dead in jungle	8
4. Killed by scouts	37
5. Brought in by troops, both government and Munipoorie scouts, Kookies and villagers	69

Conclusion:

The revolt of 1857 significantly affected the Cachar district of Assam. While many historians argue that Cachar remained largely untouched by the revolt, there are compelling evidences that suggest the district was influenced by the broader discontent originating from Bengal. The British administration, particularly figures like Captain Stewart, maintained vigilance against potential uprisings, indicating underlying unrest among the local population. The revolt in Cachar manifested as an extension of the broader sepoy discontent from Bengal. The 34th Native Infantry Regiment, stationed in Chittagong, revolted on November 18, 1857, before making their way towards Cachar. However, local support for the mutineers was minimal, and the British forces successfully quelled any potential uprisings. The British response involved significant military action. Major Byng and his troops engaged the mutineers, leading to casualties on both sides. Stewart's correspondence highlighted concerns regarding the loyalty of local troops and the potential for rebellion. He sought additional military support to prevent any spillover from the neighbouring Manipur region, where discontent was brewing. The mutineers, despite their initial momentum, faced several encounters with British forces. Notable clashes included an encounter at Latu, where British troops managed to repel the rebels, resulting in further casualties among the mutineers. The British employed local tribes, such as the Lushais, to assist in tracking and combating the mutineers, thereby leveraging local dynamics to their advantage. Ultimately, the inhabitants of Cachar did not support the mutineers; local aristocracy and nobility, unlike in North India, played no role in the uprising. While oral traditions indicate some level of popular engagement with the revolt, official records show minimal involvement from the local populace. The revolt in Cachar can thus be characterized as a localized extension of the Bengal mutiny, lacking the substantial mass support seen in other regions. The 1857 revolt remains a critical juncture in Indian history, influencing the trajectory of the independence movement. In Cachar, despite limited direct impact, the echoes of the revolt

contributed to shaping local political consciousness and resistance against colonial rule. The involvement of the 34th Native Infantry and subsequent encounters illustrated the complexities of local loyalties and the pervasive tension during this period of upheaval. In summary, while Cachar may not have experienced a full-scale revolt, the region was not entirely insulated from the consequences of the 1857 uprising. The interplay between local dynamics, British suppression efforts, and cultural responses paints a nuanced picture of this pivotal moment in Assam's history.

1. Gait, Edward, *History of Assam*. Thacker Spink & Company, Calcutta- 1926. P. 326.
2. Ibid.
3. Majumder, Ramesh Chandra, *Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*. Calcutta-1957. P-88
4. Gait, Edward, *History of Assam*. Thacker Spink & Company, Calcutta- 1926. P. 326.
5. Choudhury, Sujit. "*The Mutiny Period in Cachar*" Silchar-1981. p.iv
6. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 12th. December, 1857.
7. Ibid.
8. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 7th. December, 1857.
9. Ibid. P-5
10. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 22nd. December, 1857.
11. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 7th. December, 1857.
12. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 24th. December, 1857.
13. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 26th. December, 1857.
14. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 9th. January, 1858.
15. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 13th. January, 1858.
16. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 16th. January, 1858.
17. Choudhury, Sujit. "*The Mutiny Period in Cachar*" Silchar-1981. Pp 26-27.
18. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 27th. January, 1858.
19. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 30th. January, 1858.
20. Letter of R. Stewart, superintendent of Cachar to the Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated, 13th. February 1858.