Empire's Garden

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In 1825, on the eve of the British takeover, the East India Company official David Scott issued a momentous proclamation to the people of Assam. At that moment Assam was beset by an invading army from Burma. Scott drafted his proclamation with help from Haliram Dhekial Phukan (1802–32), a prominent member of the caste Hindu service gentry. Written in the Asomiya and Bengali languages, Scott’s proclamation assured the people that the British had entered Assam only “to restore peace and security to your distracted country.” Scott urged them to rise up against the Burmese invaders. He declared: “we will never consent to depart until we exclude our foe from Assam and reestablish in that country a Government adapted to your wants and calculated to promote the happiness of the people of all classes.”

Assam’s political history had only occasionally overlapped with that of other parts of the subcontinent. Aided by the ubiquitous monsoon rains and fevers, the past kings fought off Indo-Turkish and Mughal armies. The Mughals conquered parts of Lower Assam in the seventeenth century, but Ahom generals quickly recovered them. Only the Goalpara and Cachar districts, adjoining Bengal, stayed loosely under Mughal sovereignty. But over the course of the eighteenth century, as religious dissent and economic dislocation weakened the Ahom state, it became an easy target for Burmese and British imperial ambitions. Local warrior élites could do little to resist ambitious neighbours. From 1817 to 1824 Burma sent in a
series of armed levies. For decades afterward popular lore recounted tales of the Maan (Burmese) atrocities. The *Weissalisa* chronicles, by the scribes Cha-ang and Thaomung, who accompanied the Burmese armies, acknowledged the tremendous bloodshed that their compatriots had unleashed in this land of “golden Weissali.” While some Ahom nobles allied with the Burmese, the king and most of the gentry decamped to Bengal. The dethroned ruler, Purandar Singha, tried to raise reinforcements, but the Burmese retained their hold. The obvious interest of the Burmese Konbaung rulers in expanding into Bengal territory alarmed the ruling power, the English East India Company. During the ensuing First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824–25, Scott was given dual charge as collector of Rangpur district on the Assam-Bengal border and as newly appointed Agent to the Governor-General for the northeast frontier.

Scott presided from 1824 to 1831 over the Burmese ouster, the company’s annexation, and gradual incorporation of Assam into British India. Initially this territory seemed “of little value.” Assam’s acquisition seemed to confirm the historian P. J. Marshall’s theory that expansion by the East India Company often occurred haphazardly, instigated by the short-term opportunism of the men on the spot. But the prospect of growing tea drastically altered how the British viewed Assam, while colonial institutions simultaneously transformed the lives and destinies of its inhabitants. The nineteenth-century British tea industry in effect reintroduced Assam to the rest of India.

This chapter argues that the process of state transition engendered important cultural shifts for the region as the same time as a variety of power struggles took place among local élites and the functionaries of the new colonial regime. The British state’s chief claim was that it had introduced a regime of liberty and improvement to replace the existing despotic rule of Ahom rulers, dangariya lords, and Gosain priests. Among pre-colonial élites the group that did best under this new regime was the service gentry, whose bureaucratic talents proved well adapted to British service. The gentry’s monopoly of literacy and education allowed them to appropriate the resources that colonial modernity made available, whether through clerical jobs in the revenue offices or missionary access to print technology.
Administering Assam

David Scott’s proclamation raised high hopes for gentry families displaced by the Burmese. In his memoir the Assamese official Harakanta Barua (1813–1900) described how exiles returned from Bengal while the British fought the invaders. These gentry returned with high hopes of preferment. Some, like Maniram Barbhandar Barua, quickly found employment as interpreters and guides during the war. Others, like Harakanta’s elder brother, found clerical posts in the wake of the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), which transferred Assam into British suzerainty. In the first years of British rule the East India Company attempted to build an alliance with pre-colonial élites, and the British incorporated existing revenue functionaries such as Chaudhuris, Rajkhowas, and Phukans into their administration. In these early years a mere handful of British officials were appointed to Assam. To assist Scott there were three army captains, Davidson, White, and Neufville. Initially revenue assessments were still based on eighteenth-century Ahom surveys, with the exception of a few measurements hastily undertaken in 1825. Tributary chiefs of small territories were left undisturbed. The former Ahom king Purandar Singha became the tributary ruler of Upper Assam.

If élites momentarily regained some power, the transition to colonial control exacted a heavy economic toll on plebeian inhabitants, already dislocated by the Burmese invasion. Peasants fled to Bengal and Bhutan to avoid the high British rent exactions, even more onerous because of the commutation of the corvée into cash payments. The British mediated the transition from labour to cash rents by appointing influential, well-to-do locals as rent collectors, or mauzadars of a mauza (revenue circle). A mauza could be anywhere between 8 and 200 square miles, depending upon the number of villages. Ideally each mauza paid revenue of about Rs 10,000 and comprised between two thousand and ten thousand people. Rent collectors’ tenures lasted about five years, on renewable terms. Since mauzadars were paid by commission on the amount of their collections, they had an incentive to press hard on the peasantry. Their motive was short-term gain rather than the promotion of long-term land improvement. Many mauzadars became very prosperous. A mauzadar’s son recorded that his father at his death left a large estate of sixteen thousand bighas of land, and much other property.
For peasants, mauzadars represented the colonial state in a direct and visibly oppressive guise. To mitigate mauzadar tyranny, Harakanta Barua advised his British superiors to conduct a long overdue cadastral survey of cultivated lands. He advocated introducing longer leases, since more secure tenure and income might interest rent collectors in the long-term goal of improving land. The Assamese magistrate Anandaram Dhekial Phukan prudently suggested that the “public authority” keep a close watch over mauzadars’ actions. His advice was ignored. As the Assam correspondent for a Calcutta newspaper reported, the “ryot is obliged to keep survey officers and mauzadars in good humour by presents of sugar, butter, milk, goats etc, otherwise is sure to find that in surveying his holding, waste land has been classed as land under cultivation.”

During the mid-1830s, after the British resumed the charge of Upper Assam from Purandar Singha, the East India Company organized the Brahmaputra valley’s administration into a district system based on the standard British-Indian model. Each district came under the charge of a British principal assistant to the commissioner. He functioned as judge, magistrate, and collector, with the help of a junior assistant. Apparently this restructuring resulted from the Assam commissioner’s pleas to his superiors to provide him with more European assistants. As Captain John Butler stated, “Once his representations were acceded to, the revenue has consequently increased, and the people, as far as their vices will permit, have thriven in peace, security and comfort.” However Butler, a military officer posted in Assam for most of his life, was more sanguine than Indian Civil Service (ICS) officials who surveyed the region from without. For instance, in 1858 H. H. Wilson noted that the region might present future promise, but at the moment had limited prospects: “In an economical point of view... these territories are in a state of progress to still greater improvement; while they have a real political value in constituting a difficult and well defined frontier, presenting a ready access to Ava and Siam, and promising at some future period convenient intercourse by land with the opulent empire of China.”

Unlike boosters of the tea industry, Wilson and his ICS colleagues believed that the Assam tea discovery was unlikely to yield adequate returns without further “improvement.” In their eyes this objective was hindered by the region’s sparse population and archaic revenue system. The first census of Assam, in 1872, counted only fifty inhab-
The census rated the region’s direct revenue-generating possibilities as low, because the inhabitants had very slight acquaintance with a market economy. Over the nineteenth century further territorial expansion into the hill districts caused officials to constantly bemoan the region’s “revenue-deficit” status. The introduction of the Non-Regulation system confirmed the assertion that unlike other Bengal territories, Assam possessed a “rude and simple state of society.”\(^{20}\) Instituted in 1822, the Non-Regulation system allowed British India’s newly annexed territories, inhabited mostly by “aboriginal tribes,” to be governed directly by officers who were exempt from the general regulations. Although Assam remained within the Bengal Presidency, in practice the Non-Regulation system meant that it was ruled by military men appointed as civil officials, largely unfettered by the rule of law.\(^{21}\)

In 1874 Assam was separated from the Bengal Presidency and given the status of a chief commissioner’s province. Yet the Non-Regulation system persisted.\(^{22}\) Assam now comprised the Brahmaputra valley districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, and Goalpara, the hill tracts of the Naga, Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo, and the Surma valley districts of Cachar and Sylhet. The colonial regime hoped that populous Sylhet, newly separated from Bengal against its inhabitants’ wishes, would compensate for the scanty population and revenue of Assam proper. Including Sylhet, Assam’s total area was 54,000 square miles. The total population was 4,150,000, with gross revenue of 52.5 lakh rupees.\(^{23}\) The gentry of the Brahmaputra valley welcomed Assam’s new provincial status and independence from Bengal, since they expected less competition from Bengal’s middle classes. But the bulk of Bengali public opinion opposed the new province. In particular, Sylhet’s Bengali-speaking inhabitants disliked this political change. Sylhet’s élites submitted numerous memorials to the British government protesting the joining of their district to “backward” Assam, and the severing of its historical and cultural ties with Bengal.\(^{24}\) They hoped for a reamalgamation of Assam and Bengal. Such a reunification occurred in 1905, but for other reasons. Lord Curzon’s creation of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam aimed at suppressing Bengali nationalist sentiment by separating Bengal’s western and eastern halves. Facing immense political opposition, this partition of Bengal proved short-lived.\(^{25}\) Assam and Bengal were restored to their pre-1905 bound-
aries in 1912, but Sylhet and its adjacent Surma valley tracts remained in Assam for the remainder of British rule.

There continued to be a huge disparity between the different parts of the new chief commissioner’s province of Assam. The census of 1881 showed that the population density of the Surma valley was 335.82 per square mile, as compared to 105.03 for the Brahmaputra valley and only 20.54 for the hill tracts.26 Newspapers in Calcutta accused the government of having allowed tea’s “powerful commercial lobby” to extend despotic rule, aided by the legal minimalism of the Non-Regulation system. The Bharat Sangcharak remarked, “It is well known, that in such provinces, the administration of justice is not quite pure. The case would have been otherwise if it had continued to form part of Bengal, as the judicial officers then would have had to proceed according to law, and might at times punish offending planters.”27 Despite British claims to have delivered liberty to a benighted region, the support lent by colonial officials to Assam planters’ harsh labour regime lent credence to these accusations.

Labour and the Lords

Through the nineteenth century the rhetoric of liberty emerged as an essential part of the British imperial imagination, and an important justification for military and financial expansionism. Needing to bolster itself in British public opinion, the East India Company could not afford to ignore the language of liberty, in particular the impulse toward emancipation. The East India Company’s moral strictures against slavery distinguished it from older regimes and practices in India. Thus its court of directors declared in 1830 that “slavery in every form is peculiarly revolting to the moral feelings of Englishmen.”28 In Britain a strong abolitionist current turned its attention to eradicating slavery in the colonies after its victory over the metropolitan slave lobby. In 1834 it helped create a Parliamentary committee to examine slavery in the East Indies and enact prohibition.29 Act V of 1843 emancipated thousands of plantation slaves in the sugar-growing Caribbean colonies. In British India too, slavery became illegal even as the colonial administrators’ tendency to insist upon the rights of masters and the sanctity of property tended to moderate the act’s effect.30
In newly conquered Assam élite groups had long controlled large numbers of servile men and women. Given the region’s sparse population, forced labour retained considerable economic importance. Exemption from manual service was a privilege only for those entrusted with some office or status. Most of the remaining population bore stringent corvée obligations, directly to the state or to high officials. In addition, there were slaves, male and female, known as *bandis* and *betis*. The historian Amalendu Guha estimated that at the close of the Ahom period about 9–10 percent of the total population held this servile status. They mostly worked on agricultural estates which belonged to the aristocracy and the holders of *devottar* and *brahmottar* (religious endowment) lands.31

The term “slave” as used by British observers is misleading. It conflated war captives and agrarian and domestic bonded labour, as well as debt slaves. The last category was probably the largest, and growing, owing to economic dislocation. East India Company officials found “astonishing the number of people who from the pressure of rent have sold themselves for a trifling sum and become bondsmen with their wives and families until the original sum which they can never have the means of realizing is obtained.”32 This situation was actually encouraged by David Scott’s decree of 1825 that permitted peasants to sell themselves to their creditors.33 His decree passed muster at a time when Assam was not formally British territory and was distant from public knowledge. By the 1830s Scott’s policy caused tensions with his superiors. He ran foul of the general emancipatory current in the British Empire when he proposed to allow the continuance of the Ahom system of bonded servants who cultivated élite estates.34

Scott justified this continuity partly on grounds of economic necessity, and more strongly in terms of civilizational logic: “From the records of history, Jewish, Classical, Asiatic and European, it appears that slavery has everywhere prevailed in the less advanced stages of civilization; and I apprehend Assam, according to European notions, may be considered as a country exhibiting a still ruder state of society . . . Were the country further advanced in the career of improvement, and capital more widely diffused . . . this system of slavery and bondage would gradually diminish of itself.”35 Scott and his local officials were convinced that the condition of the slaves was not the most urgent issue facing them in war-ravaged Assam, being more
or less “comparable to the dissolute paupers in England.” But his sentiments were out of step with the tide of reformist ideologies seeking to banish vices from the body politic, at home and abroad.

As Scott had warned, Assam’s élites greatly resented the British decree of 1843 that announced the abolition of slavery. With status taboos against ploughing, the upper classes had long depended on servile labour. The labour shortages that resulted from the Burmese depredations became even more critical when the British announced the cessation of forced labour. A shortage of cultivating hands caused a breakup of many large estates. Sizable tracts of land were surrendered to the state by nobles who could no longer afford to cultivate them or pay the revenue. A paucity of sources makes it difficult to trace the subsequent fate of the erstwhile serf labour. Given that land was abundant but capital short, many became sharecroppers and tenants. The number of tenants showed a steady rise under British rule. At the same time, the practice of mortgaging labour to settle debts continued, relatively unaffected by legislation.

In 1830, when Scott wrote to his superiors in Calcutta on the issue of slavery in Assam, he had stated his desire to canvass the opinion of intelligent natives. He opposed the outright promulgation of the slavery decree. In its place he advocated its gradual introduction, so as to avoid a general disruption among the upper classes. As Scott predicted, Assamese élites quickly showed their displeasure at the outlawing of slavery. Harakanta Barua’s memoir describes his attempts to convince his British employers of its ill-judged nature. He narrated how the Brahmin landholders of the Kamrup district held a protest demonstration and submitted to the authorities a petition in which over a thousand signatories sought permission to retain their “slaves and bondsmen.” In 1853 the issue of slavery remained a major grievance when Maniram Barbhandar Barua submitted his views on East India Company rule to Justice Mills. In Maniram’s view the British rulers initially undertook to maintain “all respectable people in honour and affluence.” Now, under their altered policies, Assam’s élites, “whose ancestors never lived by digging, ploughing, or carrying burdens,” were forced into ignoble work to live.

In his robust critique of the colonial takeover Maniram singled out its adverse impact upon his own class, the notables whose displacement was exacerbated by the British decision to free their slaves.
Undoubtedly he was unaware of the larger context of this measure: that it was part of the British Empire’s far-reaching anti-slavery initiatives, which culminated in the Emancipation decree. He reacted solely to the labour shortage and its deleterious impact upon his class-fellows. Their main source of income was their estates, so far cultivated by servile labour. Loyal to his British employers, Harakanta privately sought out his superior, the commissioner at Guwahati, to warn him about the damaging effects of the emancipation decree. Maniram’s harsher remonstrations had no effect other than to render him an object of suspicion. Most probably, he came under state surveillance. Harakanta mentions that his superiors warned him not to keep company with Maniram, and that he in turn passed on the warning to others. This was a prescient warning, as a few years later, in 1857, Maniram’s dissatisfaction led him to join hands with North Indian military rebels against the British in 1857. His objective was an Ahom royal restoration. However, Maniram’s conspiracy was quickly detected. In the post-1857 hysteria this erstwhile British favourite ended on the gallows.

Disapproval in Calcutta and London of David Scott’s attempts to prevent an abrupt break with an older political economy provides an interesting insight into the British desire to extend the liberty of the “free-born Englishman” liberty to his less fortunate brothers elsewhere. The colonial regime was keen to emphasize the contrast between the liberties it had introduced and its Ahom predecessors’ despotic restrictions. When a memorial to the viceroy from the inhabitants of Guwahati and Sibsagar complained of the decay of old families, it earned a crushing putdown. “The nobility of Assam as of other parts of India was maintained chiefly by class privileges and by slavery, which are opposed to the whole spirit of British rule and the resuscitation of which would be an unmixed evil.” Official reports on the “State of Public Opinion” reinforced this view of British rule as promoting a free market. “The upper class of the Assamese’s opinion is that times are very hard for them as they cannot get servants to cultivate their lands and everything is so dear. The lower classes say that times are good, as they can make lots of money on tea gardens and can eat opium as much as they like.”

That the abolition of slavery had turned the Assam world on its head was argued even by the new generation of the gentry who joined British service, but their arguments often differed from Man-
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iram’s. Gunabhiram Barua, who later retired from British service with the rank of extra-assistant commissioner, compared the Ahom past and the British present, to the former’s disadvantage: “According to the present laws of the land, the grihastya [householder] and the ghulam [servant] enjoy the same status. Talented people, even if of low caste, have received high rank. In this regard, older people look at the Ahom days and say, this could not happen in the old days.” For Gunabhiram as for his British superiors, freedom was apparently the watchword of the day. The assumption was that the tea labour market would be the first beneficiary, as emancipated bonded servants might flock there for employment. But in their first flush of enthusiasm for this purported emancipation, local élites overlooked the harshness of the penal labour system that the British tea enterprise had introduced. Nor did labour emancipation go far enough in its impact. As the newspaper Assam Mihir noted in 1873, poor parents still mortgaged daughters to wealthy families, with “scarcely a man of substance in Guwahati in whose home there are not one or two slaves.”

Spiritual Lords and Service Gentry

Pre-modern authority in Assam took two distinct forms, military and spiritual. As in other pre-modern states, Assam’s kings acquired cultural capital through their relationships with Indic religious practitioners. These were the Gosains, the heads of satras (monasteries). By the sixteenth century the Ahom royal court patronized select aspects of devotional worship and nurtured a rich tradition of vernacular literary production. Royal bestowal of landed estates and servile labour on local religious sects created a powerful spiritual aristocracy. It helped to expand the kingdom’s settled agrarian frontier, as followers of the sects extended cultivation into fallow and forested lands.

The majority of these local sects followed Vaishnavite practices and beliefs. In its broadest form Assamese Vaishnavism was a monotheistic, congregational form of religious practice which rapidly superseded older forms of worship. The legendary founder of Assamese Vaishnavism was the fifteenth-century bhakti preacher Sankardeb. Within this faith the relationship between devotee and preceptor

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was modeled on that between God and man. This tie was institutionalized through the *saran* (initiation) ceremony, in which devotees received formal spiritual indoctrination from a preceptor, usually known as a Gosain, a term that served as a synonym for God. By the seventeenth century the Gosains, or heads of Assam’s three hundred odd monastic satras, were the linchpins of the faith. They usually ruled over large communities of *bhakats* (monks) and servile labourers.\

Satra lands enjoyed concessional revenue terms from the state and were often rented to cultivating lay tenants. Satra domination also extended over larger networks of villages inhabited by *shish* (tithe-paying lay disciples). By the late seventeenth century four competing *sambatis* (sects) emerged: the Brahma, Purusa, Nika, and Kala, with a marked social differentiation in doctrine and membership. The Brahma sect comprised the Auniati and Dakhinapat satras, located on the Majuli riverine island in Upper Assam, with close ties to royalty. Its social and ritual conservatism appealed to the Ahom rulers, especially its endorsement of Vedic rites and idol worship. Unlike members of other Vaishnavite sects, celibate Brahmin renouncers dominated the Brahma order, which accepted only upper-caste and high-status lay devotees, mostly from the service gentry and Ahom aristocracy. In contrast, other sects were headed by non-Brahmin householder Gosains, and their membership came from a similar, middling cross-section of society.

While royal patronage enabled the Brahma satras to become very wealthy, so did many satras belonging to other sects. Satra wealth derived from a combination of land grants from the state, unpaid labour services, and tithes from lay disciples. The spread of satras helped to extend the Ahom state’s reach and that of its cultivated lands, particularly over remote, frontier areas. Yet periodic clashes still erupted between state and spiritual authority. In this sparsely populated frontier region, control of labour was imperative for any regime. While the Ahom state imposed the corvée on its peasant population, satra initiates were exempt from this labouring obligation. Over the eighteenth century hard-pressed peasants often sought refuge from state service by taking on the identity of a satra initiate. This subtle form of resistance increased the tensions between these two nodes of local authority, the Gosains and the Ahom kings. The latter resented the pretensions of the spiritual lords and refused to become their disciples. Instead they imported Bengali Brahmins from the
sacred town of Nadia to officiate as royal preceptors. These Brahmins were given the title of Parbatiya Gosains and installed as heads of the historic Kamakhya shrine, a famous centre of Sakta worship. These Brahmin priests and a few Muslim Sufi preceptors were the Ahom kingdom’s non-Vaishnavite landed spiritual lords.

It was with the Moamoria order, the newest and the most socially diverse of the Vaishnavite sects, that the Ahom state openly clashed. Followers of this order were drawn from tribal and lower-caste groups, people whom other sects deemed unacceptably low. Encouraged by their Brahmin preceptors, late-eighteenth-century Ahom rulers scorned the Moamoria Gosain. His disciples, many from a lowly fishing community, took up arms to protest royal insults to their spiritual lord. This uprising began in 1769 and was not suppressed until 1805. It shook the very base of Ahom power and twice forced the rulers to flee the capital. After the Ahom kings regained their throne, the state’s bloody reprisals decimated the rebellious order. Other Vaishnavite sects held aloof from the Moamorias and condemned their social, political, and religious radicalism. Nonetheless, the long-term impact of the Moamoria revolt was considerable. This uprising greatly weakened the Ahom state and contributed to its eventual demise.

The late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century were years of immense political and economic strife in Assam. The upheavals caused by the Moamoria rebellion, the Burmese invasions, and the ineptitude of the last Ahom rulers made this a difficult period for Assam’s common people. These events did adversely affect the Gosains, but on the whole they managed to retain most of their wealth. Even after the British slave emancipation the Gosains were less hard hit than other aristocrats by the loss of servile labour. Their social and religious domination over lay tenants and sharecroppers gave them access to cultivating labour. Tenants were also attracted by satra lands’ lower rents, since Gosains enjoyed concessional revenue rates under the British state.

In contrast to the Gosains, by the 1850s the condition of the Ahom royalty and the rest of the lay aristocracy was so dire that the East India Company government at Calcutta expressed shock and unease at their collapse. Assam’s administrative head, Colonel Jenkins, insisted that this decline of the Ahom élites was inevitable, given their inability to adjust to changed times. The talents of the Ahom dan-
gariyas (great men) seemed redundant in a new age. In the past they were content to relegate tasks requiring literacy and numeracy to their social inferiors, the caste Hindu gentry. Now, with the loss of courtly offices and their absence of literate skills, most Ahom aristocrats had little to sustain themselves. They had little to offer to the British regime. The abolition of slavery meant that they lost most of their labour, rendering their lands fallow and unprofitable. Unable to pay the land revenue, many aristocrats resigned most of their holdings. Unlike their erstwhile service gentry subordinates, these aristocrats found that their lack of marketable educational and literary skills prevented them from earning a livelihood.

Noting the changed situation for Assam’s aristocracy and its gentry, Colonel Jenkins remarked, “The members of the late ruling class, the Ahoms have hitherto shown, with few exceptions, little aptitude for learning or qualification for our offices.” In contrast, the service gentry which previously held middling ranks prospered under the British. Comprising both high-caste Hindus and a few high-status Muslims, members of the service gentry carved out a livelihood in British-ruled Assam on the basis of the same recordkeeping skills which had previously made them indispensable to the Ahom state. For example, Harakanta Barua steadily ascended the British regime’s clerical ranks, retiring with the rank of Sadar Amin, while his patron Ghanakanta Yuvaraj, an Ahom royal prince, was reduced to penury. In his memoir Harakanta described how the prince struggled to sustain his large household with no income other than a meagre British pension.

The local gentry did face considerable competition from the established clerical cadres from Bengal who accompanied the East India Company into Assam. But the locals’ detailed knowledge of the region’s land tenures was a key advantage that allowed them to be appointed to many of the subordinate revenue and judicial posts in the British administration. The Assamese gentry’s firsthand knowledge of lakhiraj and nisf-khiraj pre-colonial grants (providing charity and religious land on revenue-free or concessional terms) was particularly important for the new administrators as they struggled to understand the local complexities of land rights and dues. Justice Mills wrote, “The officers who had the preparing and keeping of the lakhiraj records were Mozemdar Burrooahas and Mozemdars, in whose families the appointments were hereditary.” These men pos-
possessed invaluable experience with these land records, since either they or their fathers had administered the grants for the Ahom monarchy. In this manner the gentry’s specialized knowledge of land records greatly benefited the colonial regime while facilitating their employment in its new revenue and judicial offices. Rent-collecting (mauzadari) rights over land were a further component of gentry incomes, quite apart from their remuneration. Appointment to clerical offices allowed the gentry to further consolidate their hold over mauzadari rights. Harakanta Barua frequently referred to the mauzadari rights he held over certain villages and the periodic renewal of those rights by the government. The gentry’s control over land records and rent collection not only benefited them materially but proved an invaluable advantage for their spiritual lords, the Gosains. Their strategic placement in revenue offices proved important in smoothing the satra transition into the new order. By the 1840s the prominent satras recovered most landed privileges. For example, in 1841 satra lands in the Kamrup district accounted for “nearly one-half of its cultivated area . . . besides including an immense extent of garden and other lands of great value.”

Nonetheless, the first generation of colonial officials still distrusted the spiritual lords. The early British, in line with Protestant sentiments, held stereotyped opinions about Gosains as cunning, manipulative priests, and suspected their links with the old regime. They also disapproved of the satras’ wealth and influence over the common people. For all these reasons the East India Company feared the satra lords as potential troublemakers. In 1854 Captain John Butler warned Justice Mills of the danger from these wealthy and influential Gosains: “Possessed of great power over the minds of the people, bigoted, ignorant and avaricious, they do not, in the smallest degree, through the means at their disposal, aid in the education of the people . . . they may truly be said to be the only disaffected subjects of the government in the plains of Assam.” In 1843 the Political Department dispatched a confidential memorandum that “all the principal priests and Mahantas are dissatisfied towards our Government and would be glad of any change.” A decade later, in 1857, these fears seemed justified when Maniram Barbhandar Barua’s conspiracy with North Indian soldier-rebels to overthrow British rule was unearthed. The evidence against him included letters of support from key Gosains.
Shortly after the British discovered the plot, Maniram was speedily tried and hanged. The administration decreed severe punishments for those found guilty of involvement, but unlike in epicentres of the rebellion such as Delhi, there was no necessity to mete out wholesale retaliation, and the rebellion made little impact on the life of Assam’s general population. Rumour and discontent were certainly rife, both among elites and commoners. Contemporary sources such as Harakanta Barua’s memoir, the diary of a British soldier, George Carter, and letters circulated among the American Baptist missionaries provide vivid testimony of the tense atmosphere. The few white men in the Assam countryside, whether officials, soldiers, planters, or missionaries, nervously anticipated trouble from their suddenly sullen native subordinates. But active rebels in Assam were relatively few. Coordination remained poor given the immense bottlenecks of transport and communication. Maniram was already under surveillance as a malcontent. The British discovered his plot with the sepoys in its preliminary stages. Rumours circulated that Maniram’s captor Captain Holroyd had declared, “We will hang you first and try you later.” The British hanged another aristocrat, Piyoli Barua, for his part in the attempted uprising. Other conspirators were imprisoned in the Andaman islands’ penal colony. The teenaged Ahom prince Kandarpeswar Singha, whom the rebels planned to enthrone, was exiled.

Yet the state took no punitive action against any of the Gosains involved with these rebels. Clearly the colonial rulers feared the tremendous power vested in the Vaishnavite sects, which enjoyed the allegiance of “almost all people of middle and better lower classes” and “most of the lower classes.” Their immense reach was reason enough to allow the Gosains to rest undisturbed, for the time being, in their “arrogance and disaffection.” While the East India Company’s punishment of other rebels did not provoke open hostility, Assam’s public might have reacted very differently if the colonial rulers had chastised the spiritual lords. The Gosains’ lands remained untouched. As a result, they enjoyed much better prospects than their former royal patrons. Many years later a planter noted that the Gosain’s word was still paramount for most people—“no right-minded co-religionist would think of questioning his decisions.” Nonetheless there were heightened political tensions, as the British state and the Assamese spiritual lords continued to jostle for power.
Moreover, the satras faced spiritual and cultural competition from a new direction: Christian missionaries.

Preaching and Print: Missionary Ventures

In the 1830s British officials extended an invitation to American Baptist missionaries. The East India Company hoped that missionary activity would “elevate the character of the people” in newly conquered Assam. The Americans had established their first overseas mission in Burma in 1812. When political opposition forced them to retreat, these missionaries sought a new venture in British India. They were excited by reports that hill groups in Assam were related to the Karen people of northern Burma, among whom they had achieved many converts. In 1836, armed with the first printing press in the region, the American Baptists opened a new mission at Sadiya in Upper Assam, close to the experimental tea tracts.

Initially the American Baptists viewed Sadiya as a foothold enabling future penetration into other parts of Asia. But they soon confronted difficulties. A fundamental principle of the Baptist philosophy was that the Word should reach people in their own language. They found that this was no easy matter in a region with such diverse, polyglot cultures. Their notion of a unilingual field in Asia proved to be a chimera. Burmese dialects were of little use among Sadiya’s inhabitants. Instead the Baptists were forced to learn many local dialects (of the Tibeto-Burmese language family). Sadiya lay in a hilly, remote area sparsely populated by preliterate groups. To use their precious printing press, the Baptists needed to first transpose spoken dialects into new, written alphabets. As the discrepancy between their expectations and reality became obvious, the missionaries became disheartened.

Nor was this new terrain politically secure. After attacks by angry Singpho tribals who had lost their rights to land, the British tea enterprise decided to move from remote Sadiya into the mainland of the Brahmaputra valley. With the British retreat the missionaries were isolated. At this point they realized that in contrast to Sadiya, the valley below was inhabited by a settled agriculturist population of Asomiya speakers. In 1841 the American Baptists followed the British tea enterprise out of Sadiya. They chose Sibsagar town, once the capital of the Ahom kings, as their new base. The peaceful Brah-
maputra valley and its dominant language, linked to a Sanskritic script and the Indo-European language family, appeared to be the best possible vehicles for Baptist proselytizing. The missionary Miles Bronson enthusiastically described their new flock to the home board of the American Baptist Foreign Mission: “The Assamese are a most encouraging and inviting field; they are in great measure a civilized people.”

From Sibsagar the American Baptists decided to convey their message through Asomiya, the lingua franca for most élites and commoners in the Brahmaputra valley. This language had the advantage for the missionaries of an established script and a long written tradition. After their tours of the valley, the missionaries concluded that “[though] as many dialects are spoken . . . as were heard at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost . . . each of the tribes has a language of its own, while the Assamese is the common medium of trade.” This important conclusion set the mission at loggerheads with British language policy. In 1836 the East India Company had already ruled that for administrative convenience Bengali would be the standard language all over the Bengal Presidency. This decree disregarded the many local languages and dialects in use over the huge Presidency area, comprising Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. According to the decree, proceedings in Assam’s courts and offices were henceforward to be conducted in Bengali, marking a drastic break from the pre-colonial use of the Asomiya language for administrative purposes. William Robinson, the British government’s inspector of schools, ordered that children should be educated through the Bengali medium.

For the American Baptists, the goal of conversion clashed with the expediency of colonial administrators. Bronson urged them to reconsider the language policy: “I believe that so long as the courts and schools are in Bengali, there will be the greatest impediment to the education and improvement of the people.” The East India Company ignored this plea, but the missionaries decided nonetheless to use the local language for their activities. “We have by every means in our power endeavored to make ourselves acquainted with the people, and by daily familiar intercourse acquire their language, so as to be able to communicate to them in the most direct manner the blessings of science and Christianity.” The hierarchical nature of the official colonial project confronted the more assimilative approach of the missionaries.

The missionary objective was to win over the gentry, the most
influential section of the Assamese people. In 1846 the American Baptist mission decided to publish a periodical in the Asomiya language, titled the *Orunodoi*. Through it the Baptists planned to disseminate their notions of “Religion, Science, and General Knowledge.” This became the motto for its masthead. Concurrently they established mission branches at Guwahati, Jorhat, and Nagaon. After the remote, sparsely populated, and densely forested tracts where the missionaries had spent their first years, these localities seemed to offer better scope for Christian improvement. Rather than the lower-caste villagers whom they had so far acquired as converts, the Baptists desired a more élite constituency. The high schools and courts in these towns attracted precisely those educated youths whom the missionaries hoped to wean from traditional beliefs. As Cyrus Barker optimistically noted, “The principal government of the district is invested in this court, which brings together the most active, learned and intelligent part of the people . . . the population is a reading one.” The *Orunodoi*, the only periodical published in the entire region, seemed the best way to win their hearts and minds.

In 1858 the missionary Samuel Whiting informed the secretary of the Foreign Mission Board at Philadelphia, “Our paper is now in its thirteenth year and is regarded by Young Assam at least, as one of the institutions of the province.” The periodical’s contents were fairly eclectic. It clearly aimed to expand its readers’ horizons about the wider world as well as acquaint them with the Holy Word. As Whiting noted, “A brief sermon or exhortation, a chapter of church history, a chapter of the Life of Mohammad . . . of the history of Bengal, of the life of Luther, a geographical article, a chapter of Isaiah, together with the news of the month, contributions on various topics such as the marriage of widows, duties of wives, duties of parents, from Christian and other contributors, make up each monthly number.” The mention of “other contributors” is significant. The focus on enlightenment through religious exhortations and secular truths was supplemented by contributions from a local reading public. Their inclusion reflected shared concerns about education, language, and Assam’s social regeneration.

But apart from its literary appeal, it was as yet unclear whether and how the *Orunodoi* might actually win Christian converts, who remained few in the Brahmaputra valley. The missionaries tended to blame this failure on the defective character of the local people rather
than on any shortcomings of their own. Much as they disagreed with colonial policymakers on the language issue, as fellow white men they rallied to the side of British law and order, and civilizing imperatives.

Gosain, Mission, and State

Even as the American Baptist missionaries evolved their strategies to win over the Assamese, India came directly under the British Crown. In 1858, Queen Victoria’s proclamation to the princes, chiefs, and people of India formalized this handover from the East India Company. As the Queen’s representative and British India’s first viceroy, Lord Canning undertook a series of tours in different parts of the country to make manifest the new British relationship with Indians. This presence of the queen’s representative was a symbol of the re-establishment of political order after 1857. An important feature of these tours was the holding of official receptions for Indian notables and British and Indian officials, glorified as durbars in the tradition of Indo-Persian public audiences. In Canning’s place lesser plenipotentiaries were assigned to outlying regions. Assam’s turn came only in July 1862, when Cecil Beadon, the new lieutenant governor of Bengal, voyaged there from Calcutta. Beadon’s main objective was to study the condition of the Assam tea industry. At the same time he wished to impress local élites with the majesty of the British crown.ππ

Harakanta Barua was in that year a Munsif (subordinate judge) at the collector’s office in Guwahati. His description of Beadon’s durbars depicts them as momentous encounters between the old and new regimes. Like most of his contemporaries Harakanta executed a complex set of maneuvers between changing structures, and his memoir provides a rare direct insight into this process. Based on daily diary entries, the memoir was the first personal testimony in the Asomiya language. In all probability Harakanta wished for it to remain within his immediate family circle. Certainly he made no attempt to publish it, although he did publish another work, a buranji history of Assam.π∫ His memoir reached the public domain long after his death, through his grandson’s efforts. A strong sense of the author’s preoccupation with issues of hierarchy and deference permeates the text, as he describes interactions with various social superiors. They included the Ahom prince Ghanakanta Yuvaraj and his wife Padmabati Kun-
wari, the British commissioner and his wife (referred to as the mem-
sahib), and his spiritual preceptor, the Auniati Gosain.

Harakanta wrote at length about Cecil Beadon's shipboard recep-
tion for Assam’s dignitaries at Guwahati. This proved an occasion
when figures representing different interests actively competed for
allegiance. Harakanta and his colleagues, in their dual capacity as
disciples of the Gosains and clerks to the British, faced a moral di-
lemma. What took place at Beadon’s reception made visible the cul-
tural and political transition from the old to the new lords of the
land. The Gosains, Assam’s spiritual heads, faced a new order in
which the British regime took unto itself an entirety of authority.
During the period after 1857 tangible changes entered the equation
between colonial rulers and local notables in British India. The colo-
nial state maintained some external forms of deference to local élites,
but in a form domesticated within the increasing pomp of imperial
authority. The new rulers granted the Gosains a share in this author-
ity as long as they accepted subordinate roles. Élites in other regions
faced a similar situation. This accommodation between old lords and
a new regime took time to evolve and involved many a slip.

Harakanta’s narrative opened rather cryptically, with a mention of
the lieutenant governor’s imminent visit accompanied by the au-
thor’s confession of his nervousness. His anxiety was focused upon
one particular occasion: Beadon’s shipboard durbar at Guwahati.
Harakanta mentioned his reluctance to attend. He appeared only
when his superior, Captain Lloyd, sent for him. “I had no wish to be
present there, when the Gosains would all be sitting.” His nervous-
ness was due to his having to sit alongside the lords. In the 1830s
David Scott had recorded that “Gosains or archbishops residing at
or near Gowahatty get chairs when they call upon European officers,
but those in Upper Assam prefer to bring with them their own
particular seats as prescribed by ancient custom. No other individ-
uals are permitted to sit in the presence of the archbishops.” The
day of Scott’s respect for local precedents had long since passed.

At Beadon’s durbar, ushers showed Harakanta and his fellow
clerks to chairs near where the Gosains and the erstwhile royals were
seated. British officials sat at the other end of the ship. The occasion
passed without any overt ripple, but Harakanta rightly anticipated
that a reckoning would come. It arrived the next day, in the form of a
furious note from his preceptor, who cursed Harakanta for his impu-
dence at sitting on a chair in his presence. Harakanta nervously informed Captain Lloyd that a serious breach of custom had occurred. Lloyd flew into a passion. “I’ve never encountered such a land before. Respectable people like a Deputy Collector to sit upon the floor. Your Rajas and others may have been rulers once, who created aristocrats and Gosains around them. Maharani Victoria is at the head of India. She has created Deputy Collectors and others. Don’t they have rank and honour too?”

The Gosains would not leave this affront unchallenged. Cecil Beadon held his next durbar at Sibsagar. During the event Duttadeb Goswami, the powerful Gosain of the Auniati satra, vociferously objected to having natives sit in his presence. The Assamese deputy magistrate, himself Goswami’s disciple, hastily moved to squat on the floor, but the commissioner, Major Haughton, angrily ordered him back to a chair, and the durbar continued. Subsequently the Auniati Gosain wrote to Haughton, avowedly apologizing for his refusal “to be seated equally with the natives.” He attributed the entire misunderstanding to a failure to inform the British authorities of local customs: “I had been told that no native would take chair in the Muzhib except me, but upon entering the hall, I perceived the contrary. I declined to sit, for natives were not authorized by ancient Rajas to accept any respectable seat in my presence.”

This exchange was significant, as it revealed the limits that the colonial government imposed upon older élites. It asserted the British throne as the sole emanation of power and as the guarantor of an egalitarian status for all its subjects. In a sense this evoked the tone and spirit of the queen’s proclamation of 1858. As the anthropologist Bernard Cohn shows, that proclamation functioned as a cultural statement encompassing two divergent or even contradictory theories of rule. One sought to maintain India as a feudal order, while the other anticipated changes which would inevitably lead to the destruction of the order. Each theory incorporated ideas about the
sociology of India, and the relationship of the rulers to individuals and groups in Indian society. If the British ruled India in a feudal mode, then an Indian aristocracy had to be present to play the part of loyal feudatories to the British Queen. On the other hand, if the British ruled India in a modern mode, then a new kind of civic or public order had to be developed. In both modes, although Indians might become associated with British rulers as feudatories or as representatives of specific interests, the British would make all effective decisions.  

This fraught encounter between the Auniati Gosain, the representative of pre-colonial dignity, and the lieutenant governor, the spokesman for the queen, brought to the fore the contradictory impulses of these theories. It also illuminated the specific role that the British fancied for themselves in Assam, as emancipators of a people from a retrograde system of slavery. This logic allowed the chief commissioner to reject a petition for pensions from the old aristocracy, since “the nobility of Assam as of other parts of India was maintained chiefly by class privileges and by slavery, which are opposed to the whole spirit of British rule and the resuscitation would be an unmixed evil.”  

Ironically, after the British introduced an indentured labour system into the tea industry, they faced charges of having revived slavery under a new name.  

The British admonishment of the Gosain revealed another delicate balancing act. British administrators and an emergent intelligentsia sought to promote modern notions of merit as opposed to inherited privilege, of education as opposed to ancestral status. They viewed these as the reigning precepts of a new modernizing order. But in the aftermath of the revolt of 1857, the colonial state saw traditional élites as suitable supporters of the social and political status quo. The incident at Cecil Beadon’s durbar showed the tensions that could emerge even as the state socialized traditional élites into a new role. The Gosains had to realize that the uneasy oscillation between accommodation and challenge that characterized their relationship with the Ahom state was no longer permissible. The British regime claimed all authority for itself. Elites could share in that authority only insofar as they accepted their allotted place.  

Throughout the consolidation of the British Raj after 1857, tensions between state and temple still surfaced. Notably, a British court issued a summons to the wealthy Auniati and Dakhinpat Gosains
Local authorities in Assam had allowed opium to be grown upon their lands. Local rumors swiftly circulated that the Gosains had retaliated by placing a curse upon the unfortunate officer concerned with the case. The matter grew serious enough for official concern. In response to a query from Calcutta, the assistant commissioner reported that soon after the Gosains had been summoned and penalized, the deputy commissioner of Upper Assam, Captain Sconce, became seriously ill. Assamese public opinion believed that this was due to the Auniati Gosain’s curse.

In this fresh fracas between state and Gosain, the normally circumspect American Baptist missionaries publicly interceded, through the editorial pages of the *Orunodoi*. Usually they avoided polemics against local religious authority. They believed that “the most effective way of defeating the purpose of the Brahmins is not to attack them personally, but to enlighten the masses.” However, there had long been tensions between the missionaries and the Gosains. Ever since their move to the Brahmaputra valley, the American Baptists recognized the Assamese Vaishnavite faith and its Gosains as their main rivals. An early missionary dejectedly noted the power of “proselytizing mahants in Assam . . . they give a discourse on initiation, forms of Hindu worship and the shastras [scriptures] to local people, they ask for a house to be built for them. People then become bhakats or believers.” The authority that these religious specialists exerted over the people was evident in Nathan Brown’s wry comment after a visit to a Gosain in 1843: “The young man who was in attendance was somewhat displeased that I did not address his master by the title of ‘God’ as is their custom.” Far from acknowledging the missionary’s god, these locals wanted the missionaries to pay obeisance to theirs.

The missionaries had hoped that their printing press would prove a secret weapon. Through the *Orunodoi* the Baptists delivered enlightenment in affordable and popular monthly print installments in the local language. There was a growing readership among “Young Assam.” A Brahmin letter writer to the *Orunodoi* extolled the periodical as a *gyan bhandar* (store of wisdom). Similarly, a British planter noted the popularity of the *Orunodoi* among locals: “It has been in circulation for twenty years, and is largely read and apparently really appreciated by all those who can afford to take it in. I subscribe for a number for each of my factories, and I was much pleased to see some
fifteen or twenty coolies assemble nightly of their own accord, after their day’s work was done, to hear the Mohurir [supervisor] read it to them.  

Despite their periodical’s popularity, the American Baptists remained aware of the need to avoid being too heavy-handed with their religious agenda. Like other missionary periodicals, the Orunodoi promoted “improvement” by linking Christian accounts with apparently secular and quite objective facts. News headings included “Turko-Russian hostilities; War in China; Revolution in Spain; Telegraph from Calcutta to Bombay.” Educational articles on astronomy, geography, and natural history appeared alongside homilies on temperance, veracity, self-reliance, and family government. In this manner the periodical offered morsels of useful knowledge artfully scattered amid Christian teachings. The American Baptists followed the lead of other missionaries by offering writings especially on astronomy, designed as a combination of secular information and religious propaganda. Missionaries approved of disseminating scientific factuality partly as a laudable end in itself and partly as an effective means to ridicule indigenous cosmology and its guardians. The mission’s annual report smugly declared, “The Assamese, Brahmins as well as others, think it impossible to measure the distance of an inaccessible object . . . From the errors of the shasters on these . . . points, the people will readily see that they are only the work of man.” Still, these erudite measures did not bring actual conversions, even if they furthered the cause of rationality.

The missionaries were especially eager to convert Young Assam, the region’s literate and influential gentry youth. This focus on élites was common to almost all missionaries of this period, who evinced a profound distrust of the motivations behind the conversion of lower classes. The historians Antony Copley and Duncan Forrester have drawn attention to the missionary obsession with Brahmin conversions in different regions. Optimism was rife after even the slightest overture from a “higher class” of would-be convert. For example, Mrs. Bronson anticipated the conversion of “Two pundits . . . representative men of the educated Assamese. One is an old Brahmin, deeply read in Sanskrit . . . He seems to be like one of old, anxious to bow in the house of his god for appearance’ sake, while in his heart he worships the only living and true God. The other is a representative of young Assam. He is bound hand and foot by the chains of custom
and caste, like the old man, but he seems to have a conviction that there is truth in the new religion, and that he must seek for it.\textsuperscript{101}

Judging by the number of actual conversions, Mrs. Bronson’s hopefulness was somewhat misplaced. Despite the missionary desire to win élites, Baptist converts in the Brahmaputra valley were almost all from a lower-caste, unlettered background. These converts largely depended upon the mission for sustenance. Usually converts to Christianity found it impossible to continue with their occupations in the face of social ostracism. Kolibor, an early convert, was a washerman, but the Sibsagar church had to employ him as a preacher, since he could no longer make a living. The usual channels for mobility were fairly restricted even for educated Christians, since they came from humble backgrounds. For Assamese Christians the ultimate post within reach was that of a low-level clerk or school inspector. Hardly any were appointed to the coveted revenue jobs that most gentry youths obtained through patronage.

For almost three decades the American Baptist missionaries retained hopes for respectable converts to man “God’s garden” in the Brahmaputra valley. The reading public of the \textit{Orunodoi} was their main target. Baptists argued that only this educated class could intellectually accept the Christian creed; missionaries remained suspicious of the materialistic motivations of lower-class converts. At the same time, missionaries also believed in a “filtration” theory according to which subordinate groups might emulate higher-class converts. Yet there were comparatively few converts in the Brahmaputra valley, of whichever class. Peasant society in Assam, lacking strong landlord-tenant ties, had developed a powerful substitute in the patronage links maintained by the satras dotting the countryside, with tithe-paying disciples from every rank of society. Close ties between spiritual preceptors and their disciples were difficult to break for both peasants and gentry. Even more than the ubiquity of caste ties, these links may account for the scanty harvest that the mission achieved, and also for the frequent complaints of “backsliders.”\textsuperscript{102} Unlike in Punjab or the Madras Presidency, Assam’s looser caste structures meant there were no pariah groups to whom Christianity might offer deliverance. In 1858 there were only fifty Assamese Christians, after twenty-five years of exertion by twenty-two missionaries.

It is not surprising that the arrogance of the Gosain’s curse should have evoked pent-up missionary spleen. The missionary editor of the
Orunodoi roundly condemned a people so credulous as to attribute powers of life and death to priests, as well as the allegedly godly personages who encouraged their beliefs. But better sense later prevailed. The periodical’s next issue carried a disclaimer of the curse in a letter from the Gosain. The Gosain’s curse was depicted as an example of bucolic foolishness and rumourmongering. In the aftermath of this incident the colonial state took pains to mend its relationship with the major spiritual lords. The contrast could not be sharper between Captain Butler’s low opinion of Gosains in the 1840s and the eulogy delivered in B. C. Allen’s district gazetteers in 1906. Allen observed, “The Gosains have always been distinguished by their loyalty to Government and render a real service to the administration by encouraging purity of life and obedience to the authorities.”

The deputy commissioner’s annual tours now culminated in his stay as an honoured satra guest at the newly built guesthouses on the Auniati and Dakhinpat estates at Majuli.

Still, an important distinction should be made between the prominent landholding satras and the many petty Gosains with precarious economic positions and a large following among the lower castes. In 1894 these petty lords apparently “instigated” peasant protests at the raij mels (village assemblies) against an inflated revenue assessment. In contrast, almost all the major, wealthy satra heads stayed aloof from any kind of political activity. For the most part British incorporation of these grandees was successful. Most prominent Gosains were unwilling to defy the Raj. Their role as social leaders was gradually usurped by their disciples, the service gentry turned intelligentsia.

Once it became clear that the Orunodoi was not making inroads into the Gosains’ social constituency, many locals were ready to applaud its patronage of the vernacular. Almost a century after its inception, an author remarked that local villagers were still in the habit of referring to any periodical paper that they came across by what they regarded as its generic name—as an Orunodoi. Rather than face a head-on collision, the periodical saw its unique position gradually eroded as local groups began to employ similar techniques. The anthropologist Jean Comaroff’s argument is pertinent: while missions helped to establish the conditions on which the colonial state was founded, they simultaneously communicated “a language for contesting the new mode of domination.” In the 1870s the Auniati Gosain acquired a printing
press at Jorhat, the Dharma Prakash Press. The satra circulated a vernacular paper, the *Asom Bilasini*, as well as an assortment of devotional texts. In addition, Gunabhiram Barua and other members of a new generation of gentry publicists, who had started their careers writing in the *Orunodoi*, subsequently launched their own ventures such as the *Assam Bandhu* periodical. By the late nineteenth century an Assamese intelligentsia based in Calcutta evolved a variety of print enterprises in the Asomiya language. Indigenous cultural entrepreneurs almost completely displaced missionary-controlled print modernity. To borrow a term used by the historian Rosalind O’Hanlon in describing western India, missionary periodicals had articulated a “crisis in legitimacy.”

This crisis facilitated the emergence of small but vocal groups of social reformers who selected from an eclectic variety of ideas to form their own independent critiques of Hindu society.

As the influence of the *Orunodoi* waned, some Baptist missionaries began to look beyond the Assamese plains communities which had provided such limited gains. The shift in priorities by a fresh generation of missionaries in the 1870s is obvious. The *Orunodoi* was issued very irregularly, until its demise sometime in the 1880s. The mission press moved from Sibsagar to Guwahati and gradually “rustled away,” with the occasional print job farmed out to commercial concerns. New missionaries blamed the valley’s barren harvest on its people’s innately “conservative” character. “Their history proves them to have been always timid of innovation. When the Moham-madan faith spread like a flood over Southern Asia, it never gained a strong foothold here . . . This extreme conservatism has been one of the chief hindrances to the progress of missions.” The mission’s attention turned full circle, back to earlier attempts at claiming pre-literate hill tribes. In place of intellectual activity, missionaries undertook to provide basic medical and educational facilities to these groups, especially in remote tracts where state infrastructure was practically nonexistent. For instance, Edward Clark began work in the Naga Hills in 1871. As the hill districts became the new centre of Baptist activity, condemnations of the Brahmaputra valley’s caste society increased, making it a scapegoat for the missionary failure to achieve conversions. The failure in the plains made the prospect of learning hill and tribal tongues more attractive. Missionaries now eagerly anticipated working among “non-idolaters” with “no distinctions of caste, or priesthood.”

The missionary O. L. Swanson
noted encouraging responses from unlettered communities such as the “Kols and Mundaris” of central India, then entering Assam as indentured coolie labour for the tea industry. Another hill people, the Garos, also entered the Baptist orbit. Garos voluntarily sought out the Guwahati mission and returned to their villages as preachers for a new god. American Baptists began to avow that “missions seem to have been more successful among the aboriginals proper.” The gentry of the Assam plains gradually receded in importance, as missionaries decided that hill tribals and “aboriginal” migrant coolies were their true flock in place of the unresponsive caste gentry.