

Beginaing of Silchar Municipality

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After the annexation of Cachar into the British dominion in 1832, it was placed under the administration of Captain Fisher, the first Superintendent of Cachar. Since then Cachar was administered from Cherrapunji which was the headquarters of the Agent to the Governor General.¹ But in consideration of practical difficulties, early in 1833 Captain Fisher, an Officer of proven ability, administered it from Dudpatil, which however, was again shifted to Silchar for administrative convenience after two years.²

Silchar is the only place in the District of Cachar which has many pretensions to the name of town. It is situated on the left bank of the river Barak in $24^{\circ} 49'N$ and $92^{\circ} 48'E$ and commands a charming view down the river, which is dotted with the sails of native craft and lined with the groves of the areca palm, while a little to the north, purple hills sharply rising from the plain.³

During the early years of its rule, the East India Company made no effort to establish local Government institutions because it was fully occupied with the act of consolidation of its power and with the suppression of lawless activities of the frontier tribes. It was when the insanitary conditions of the town of Silchar became alarmingly serious and consequently the mortality rate among the troops stationed in the cantonment areas was very high the District Superintendent had constituted the Municipal branch in administration within the limited scope. Its main object was to manage the affairs of the Municipal Police in order to maintain peace and tranquillity in the town. The Municipal Police was a small force in the town of Silchar, which in 1872 consisted of 9 constables, maintained at a total cost of Rs. 77 a month, defrayed by means of a house rate levied upon the householders and shopkeepers carrying on business within municipal areas.⁴

In 1865, under the Bengal District Town Improvement Act (1864), Silchar was constituted into a Municipality. But this experiment had failed to produce any tangible result and it was withdrawn in 1868.⁵ However, in 1882, under Bengal Municipal Act (1876) which divided the urban areas into first and second class municipalities, stations and unions, based on population, Silchar

was constituted into a Station Committee. Its longevity was, however, eleven years.⁶ On 26 January, 1882 the Station Committee had its first meeting and the members present were J. White Knox, President, Dr. Montith Civil Surgeon G. Blak, Senior E.A.C. ; (Ex-officio) Babu Jagat Bandhu Nag, Abhaya Charan Sarma, Dakshina Ranjan Sen, Baikunta Charan Gupta, Haro Kishore Gupta and Kali Mohan Deb were the selected members of the first meeting. This was the first meeting appointed to administer the affairs of the newly created station of Silchar. In the first meeting a budget of Rs. 1,344 for the year 1882-83 was prepared.

The Station Committee in its another meeting which was held on 31 April, 1882 divided the Silchar town into four Wards such as Janiganj, Ambicapur, Tarapur, and Malugram. The meeting was presided over by the Deputy Commissioner Mr. Wight as its Chairman. He suggested for the creation of a post of Vice-Chairman. In this meeting it was resolved that,⁷

“Mr. Wight dwelt upon the necessity of appointing a Vice-Chairman. He said that for the despatch of business the appointment of such an officer was urgently needed. He pointed out the evils of divided authority in the execution of public affairs. He said that the principle of self - Government may be put into force first in the municipalities, where there is a great number of educated and enlightened native gentlemen, and the example may be followed gradually in the district Committees. He urged that a beginning may be made by appointing a Vice-Chairman by election.”

Accordingly a plan for the appointment of the Vice-Chairman was accepted by the members. In the next meeting which was held on 23rd August, 1882 an election was convened and the members gave their votes under sealed covers and handed over to the Chairman. Babu Jagat Bandhu Nag was elected by a majority votes as its first Vice-Chairman.⁸

The local Government system was started in India by the British as palliative to quench the thirst for freedom and self-Government of the people. On 12 October 1882 the system of election for the municipality was introduced. Although the town was divided into number of Wards, each Ward consisted 20 to 50 voters only. During the time of election ballot papers were sent to the Voters' residence and voters had cast their votes in the office ballot box. On the day of election the Deputy Commissioner, after counting, declared the name of the elected members.

Moreover, the Station Committee had no authority to impose tax on latrines, carriage, animals and for the water supply. Naturally, its resources were limited and with the fast growth of population the sanitary condition of Silchar was on the whole intolerable.⁹ With its limited resources the Station Committee had failed to execute the plan of drainage system. The drains were constructed, they were often choked with mud and rotten leaves, so that the sewage, instead of passing through them, overflowed their sides, and remained exposed to the rays of the sun, soon polluting the atmosphere. On 26 December 1883 a resolution was passed "instead of exposing and throwing up the filth besides the drains as the practice seems to be, carts may be employed to remove it to a proper place."¹⁰

Some sanitary improvements had lately been effected in the Station, such as the construction of a good road, the formation of new tanks, and the cleansing out of the old ones. Many measures were carried out, among which the most pressing were the public latrines on the dry-earth system, the digging of new substantial wells and tanks, and the removal of all objectionable houses from the limits of the Station, such as the distillery and slaughter houses.¹¹ All the swamps in and near the Station was drained, as they were a fertile source of disease. A sum of money had been sanctioned for the purpose of completing the drainage system. The supply of water was obtained from the wells.

To quote R. Stewart, the Superintendent of Cachar :¹²

".....that defilement of streets or open public grounds in the vicinity of large towns should be strictly prohibited and severely punished and it would be easy to carry out this by making the police responsible of such nuisances. But it will be necessary to fix certain appointed places in the different quarters of large towns to enable the inhabitants to answer the calls of nature for this purpose, I think that small neighbouring fields should be strictly confined. A number of small openings should be made round these walls of giving free entrance to jackals at night to act as scavengers should the latter not be found sufficient to keep the place clean a heard of pigs might be kept for the purpose by the municipal authorities. I am afraid no other system of public necessaries themselves would become a nuisance whereas in a field surrounded for this purposes and prejudices would be answered and neither the eye or nose offended."

The charitable dispensary was established in 1864. Later on it is known as the Civil Hospital of Silchar. In 1874 it was attended

by 1849 out-patients and 570 in-patients. The daily average number of in-patients was 30.06, the number of deaths was 84 or 14.73 per cent. The maximum aid came from European subscriptions and a charitable portion of the remainder from 'the Labour Transport Fund' and was administered by 'the Station Committee.'¹³

In Assam three municipalities were established under Act III of 1884; Six Second Class municipalities under Act. V of 1876, two stations and three Unions - an aggregate of fourteen municipal institutions with a population of 84,727.¹⁴

In 1891, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar recommended to the Govt. of Assam that Silchar Station be converted into a Second Class municipality which was accepted by the Govt. and this arrangement continued till the end of the Colonial rule.

The elective system came into force in Six municipalities. A general election was held in Silchar in February 1900 resulted in the election of 12 members, 10 of whom were members of the retiring body. Only 14.6 percent of the persons qualified to vote at the election. So far the constitution of Committee was concerned, it appeared that there were 20 number of members (2 ex-officio, 6 nominated, 12 elected). Races like natives and Europeans were 16 and 4 respectively; and on occupation or profession there appeared 7 officials and 13 non-officials.¹⁵

References

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