



Protest, Conflict and Consolidate: The British Colonial Policy in the North-East Frontier of India

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The annexation of the Ahom kingdom by the East India Company in the early decades of the nineteenth century has loomed large as an important moment in the establishment of the British Raj in Assam. The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) gave the British East India Company an opportunity to establish its commercial and political interests in the frontier region of India. Throughout British colonialism, the North East region of India was treated differently from other parts of British State of India. The ability of the colonial administration to maintain peace and order in the frontier areas was crucial to the colonial economy in Assam, which was the hub of tea, petroleum, coal and rubber production. To further strengthen their footing in Assam and other hilly areas in the North Eastern region of India, as well as to safeguard the company's financial interests, the British administrators had to take a number of strategic changes towards the frontier areas of India, which is the primary purpose of this article. This study also looked at the process of colonial expansion in India's North Eastern region and its formal integration into the dominions of the British East India Company.

Key Words: Assam, British East India Company, colonial expansion, frontier territories, integration, North Eastern region

1.Introduction:

The India's north-east frontier region lacked a distinct geographic connotation until the 20th century. Throughout the colonial period, the north-eastern area of India had little or no communication with the rest of the British India. It is a factual matter that the multiple tribes in the vicinity have maintained their separateness or autonomy not only from outside influences, but also from one another. Since time immemorial, the people of India's North East region have had a stronger bond with the people of Southeast Asia, and the region has been considered more a part of Southeast Asia than the Indian subcontinent because its culture and racial structure are more similar to those of Southeast Asia. The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed on February 24, 1826, under which the Burmese king consented to surrender power over Assam and other portions of North East India, effectively ending the struggle over the Ahom kingdom, and the British East India Company occupied the Ahom region. The agreement provided an opportunity for the British East India Company to establish its economic and political dominance in India's frontier region. It is an important moment in history because the British acquisition of the entire Ahom kingdom and its neighbouring princely and tribal territories solidified this land to India's mainland as soon as Assam was placed under unified administrative control of the British India State. The British colonizers were obviously intrigued with North-east India for the sake of administration. Furthermore, its enormous natural riches and great cultural diversity piqued their curiosity. Most of the hill tribes on India's North-East frontier live within or on the borders of the state of Assam, and it would not be unfair to suggest that while tracing the history of these tribes during British administration, one should keep a close eye on political trajectory of Assam (Chakravorty, 1964, p.11). The previously independent kingdoms and political entities, such as the Ahom Kingdom, Cachar Kingdom, or Jayantia Kingdom, were gradually brought under direct British administration, with the exception of the hill settlements. Because the North-eastern region was physically distinct from the rest of India, the British devised a multifaceted strategy to maintain authority over the North East Frontier (Pathak,2020, p.1). The British were

forced to implement several strategic policies, such as the strategy of subversion, exhaustion, intimidation, and annihilation, in order to prevent further Burmese invasion. This research paper discusses the strategic policies taken by the British colonial power to secure the North Eastern Frontier.

2.Objective of the Study:

The article investigates the main concerns and captivates that influenced British colonial policy towards the frontier tribes of Northeast region in India. The main purpose of this paper is to look at the strategies adopted by British administrators for maintaining political supremacy in India's North Eastern region.

3.Methodology of the Study:

The article is historical and descriptive in nature, and it relies solely on both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary source has been obtained through official reports, unpublished Ph.D. theses, and other sources. Similarly, this work relied on a variety of secondary sources, including publications such as journals, books, and research articles. Furthermore, internet resources such as eBooks and articles on this area have been examined.

4.Discussion

The history of North-eastern region until India's independence is a history of expansion and isolation by the British for administrative ease and resource acquisition. Since the overthrow of the Nawab of Bengal and the establishment of de facto authority there, the British East India Company came into contact with the semi-independent tribes of the North-Eastern Frontier region in 1765 (Barpujari, 1970, p.21). Similarly, under colonial administration, the British Government of India treated the North East region distinct from the rest of mainland India or the provinces of the country. Since the British colonial era, the north-eastern region, occupied by aboriginal communities of different cultural and language backgrounds, has been regarded as an arduous border region. Under the terms of the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the British power controlled only four 'Assam Valley Kingdoms': Ahom, Manipur, Cachar, and Jaintia. But the indigenous tribal communities who lived in the area, including as the Abar, Naga, and Singphoos, were not subject to the British. It is also noteworthy that in the past, the Ahom king was unable to subjugate these tribes militarily, and had to coexist amicably with them. To keep the peace between the mountains and the plains, and to keep the hill tribes from invading the plains settlements, the Ahom monarchs used rotting agricultural fields as a means of appeasement. However, the British Raj was inexperienced of the region's political complexities and, after 1826, repealed the measures and pursued a harsh aggressive attitude towards these indigenous groups. Due to a lack of supplies, hill tribes frequently mounted protests against the British. British officers stationed in the region retaliated against the raid. They established outposts in tribally ruled territories, sent missions and even got involved with the tribal community's turmoil. Another most important fact is also that, with British military triumph over the Burmese and the occupation of the Ahom Kingdom to the Bengal Presidency, the British colonial state occupied the entire Brahmaputra Valley by 1835, and it constituted part of the mainstream India. The British rulers representing the East India Company's primary concern was to identify an appropriate label for the newly created territory and to establish a unified system for administration on the structure of Bengal and other territories under its jurisdiction (Gohain, 2019, p.233). Until 1874, the whole present-day North East was administered by the Government of Bengal Presidency. As a result of the initiatives of expansion and governmental reform took during the Revolt of 1857, the Province of Assam was created and was also administered by a Chief Commissioner under the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. However, as administrative policy changed, a new system was created in which the province of Assam became a separate unit directly managed by a Governor General. As a result, between 1874 and 1935, new judicial and bureaucratic rules was made. But there was always conflicting situation with the hill tribes of this frontier. Major James Rennel, the British East India Company's first geographer, thus wrote:

The natural situation of Bengal is singularly happy with respect to security from attacks of foreign enemies. On the north and east it has no warlike neighbours and has moreover, a formidable barrier of mountains, rivers and extensive waste towards these quarters should such an enemy start up. (Rennel, 1793, p. cxv; Barpujari, 2007, p.20)

4.1. Problem of the frontier and annexation of the tribal territories:

In its formative years, the British Company was reluctant to assume administrative responsibilities on the frontier areas, and in fact, shied away from too close interaction with the hostile tribes (Barpujari, 2007, p.130). The weather-related issues and rugged terrain of frontier region made it difficult for British East India Company to carry their military expeditions on the tribal areas. As a result, the British East India took an exhaustion policy towards the frontier tribes. This meant suspending military actions. The company's principal goal was to prevent any such Burmese attacks. To that goal, troops were stationed at strategic points along the eastern border. Sadia was important to the British as it served as a meeting point for traders from Tibet and

the lowlands. For the sake of political and economic stability, the British could have used the tribal communities surrounding Sadiya as friends (Rowlatt, 1845, p. 495).

However, negotiating with the Singphoos, Mattoks, and Khamtis in Upper Assam's Sadiya region proved more difficult for the British Government. These tribes joined the Burmese in their plundering and slave-running forays as far west as Jorhat during the Burmese invasion (Barpujar, 2007, p.134). Captain John Bryan Neufville became the commander of the British troops in Upper Assam, and a fort and military station were built at Sadiya under the guidance of Commissioner Jenkins. After the Anglo-Burmese Conflict, David Scott, the Governor-General's agent, negotiated a treaty with sixteen Singphoo chiefs in which they pledged loyalty to the British, committed to supporting British troops, and helped build roads (Barua, 2015, p. 144). The remaining twelve chiefs were warned with legal papers stating that if they did not accept the company's offer within two months, they would be compelled to leave Assam and their property would be seized. A couple of days later, negotiations were made with the Khamti leaders, under which they committed to provide paikes and fighting men to the British army at Sadiya (Aitchison, p.119-120; Barpujari, 2007, p.135). Another principality, the Muttock kingdom, was controlled by Barsenapati and had healthy area along the frontier that was also perfect for cultivating tea. After the British recognised Barsenapati's legitimacy, he gave permission to allow tea planting on waste land in his region and recruited a British officer to negotiate Muttock's dispute with the British East India Company. But he was not successful and battle broke out between Muttock Kingdom the British mission used his position of power to seize the Muttock kingdom. Maju Gohain, the Chief of the Muttock Chiefdom, vehemently opposed this, and as a result, the entire Muttock region was eventually seized in December 1839 (Barpujari, 2007, p.121). Captain Neufville succeeded in conquering these tribes thereby establishing British authority over the whole eastern region of Assam.

4.2. Shifting strategy of subversion in Manipur:

Manipur was the subject of a subversion plot because the British considered it as a zone of protection and a line of defence against Burma. Officials from the Company believed they might be able to make the journey directly to Burma from Manipur. After conquering the Burmese in the First Anglo-Burmese War and signing the agreement known as the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the British East India Company seized Assam and integrated it with Bengal. Although Manipur became a protectorate, the British also supported two Manipur kings and their army in flight in Cachar in freeing the state. Similarly, the British occupied the entire area of Cachar in 1851 (Barpujari, 2007, p.123). Burma would no longer be an impediment to the British after the war if they established British supremacy in Manipur and the Cachar kingdom. Manipur remained a strong friend of the British from 1826 until 1891, supporting multiple of the British's expeditions to secure their eastern border.

4.3. Conflict with the Naga tribes:

It is to be noted that an intimidation is the most effective strategy for establishing fear among the hill tribes. The Government of British East India Company launched punitive expeditions to keep control over the frontier communities. Since 1835, the Angami Nagas had caused problems in Cachar area, and military outposts were established by the British within their habitational zones to keep them under control. However, it produced no fruitful results, therefore rather than attacking the Naga communities, British authorities met with the headmen and attempted to create terror in their minds. So, the Naga people decided not to engage in any conflict with the British after seeing their military might and weapons, mostly the firearms of the British. The British officer named Butler also claimed that the Nagas were always afraid of war with the British since their culture followed a democratic structure. He wrote:

The Government of every Naga tribe is a purely democratic one, and whenever anything of public importance had to be undertaken all the chiefs met together in solemn conclave as to one single chief exercising absolute control over his people, the thing is unheard of. (Barpujari, 1970, p.7; Butler, 1875, p. 86)

As a result, the English had the ability to bring even the most powerful member of the Angamis confederacy to justice. British military officer named Bigge embarked on his mission in December 1840. On his route to Dimapur, he stopped in Golaghat for a few days and saw Nagas trading their cotton for salt, dried seafood, pets, fowls, ducks, and other items. He won over the Rengmas' chief, Gasinga Phukan, a "shrewd and sensible man" who promised to pay a small amount of ivory homage as an acceptance of British authority in exchange for security against Lhota raids on the opposite side of the Dhansiri (Barpujari, 1970, p.181). The British had to change their policies several times due to the Nagas' reactions, which continued until 1881, when the Naga Hills were taken over by the British. By 1885, the Lotha Naga lands had been annexed, and a British officer had been placed at Wokha. The regions dominated by Ao Nagas were then conquered in 1889, with headquarters created at Mokokchung. As a result, the British gained control of the Naga hills.

4.5. Anglo-Burmese relationship after the Yandoo Treaty (1826):

The British East India Company tackled the issue of Burma (now Myanmar) using a combination of exhaustion tactics, military battles, diplomacy, and control over administration. Frontier issues and economic tensions between the British and the Burmese caused the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). The British wanted to increase their impact on Southeast Asia and weighed Burma as a possible trading partner. The Treaty of

Yandaboo (1826) prompted Burmese King to hand over the kingdoms of Ahom, Manipur, Arakan, and Tenasserim to the British East India Company (Barpujari, 2007). Despite the agreement, tensions between British East India Company and Burmese King remained, culminating to the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852. It was fought mainly over the rights of British merchants and the exploitation of British subjects in Burma. After the war, the British occupied the southern part of Burma, including Yangon and the fertile Irrawaddy Delta region. It is to be noted that the British state of India ultimately annexed Burma Kingdom as a result of the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885). Because of cultural and ethnic distinctions, as well as active resistance groups, the British encountered several obstacles in managing Burma. They established an indirect rule structure, appointing regional politicians and rulers who were prepared to work with British interests (Callahan 2002, p.516). It is worth noting that after World War II, Burma gained momentum in its battle for independence, and the British eventually handed her independence in 1948. The legacy of British colonial authority and the manner in which they confronted Burma had a long-lasting effect on the country's socio-political environment.

4.5. The British Policy towards the Tibet Question:

India and Tibet shared a 2,000-mile-long common border, part of which runs along the North-Eastern Frontier. It is a factual matter that the ruler of Tibet adopted an isolationist stance to protect his political and cultural traditions. After gaining the majority of the land of the North East Frontier, British Government of India tried a variety of approaches to learn more about Tibet. They attempted to win over Tibet's ruling class by sending them gifts and westernized weapons. In the meantime, rumours swirled that the Russians were manufacturing weapons at Lhasa to supply the Tibetan army. In August 1904, a team of British Government headed by Younghusband, a British military officer, signed the Anglo-Tibetan Treaty, in which the Tibetans agreed to establish Gyantse, Gartok, and Yatung trading centers where Britishers could trade (Majumdar et al., 2009, p. 896). Thus, Viceroy Lord Curzon was successful in opening Tibet after a century, but the Young Husband mission displayed impracticality by engaging China. China vowed to keep foreign forces out of internal Tibetan matters and from harming territorial integrity. In March 1911, Lancelot Hare, the Lt. Governor of East Bengal, directed N. Williamson, the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, to explore the hills up to the Tibetan border inhabited by the Abor hill people. The tribe slaughtered Williamson and his 42 soldiers because they were threatened by their incursion. This incident altered the British strategy for protecting the mainland by establishing a buffer zone to allow for a correct boundary line to be drawn through a thorough survey. In the meantime, the British installed military outposts close to the border to halt Chinese aggression. Similarly, semi-independent hill villages of modern-day Arunachal Pradesh came under direct British authority when the boundary line in the north was drawn. The boundary dispute between India and the People's Republic of China still involves the McMahon Line.

5. Conclusion:

Thus, it can be said that the North East frontier of Assam was unknown topography during the British occupation. There was no confrontation with the tribes dwelling in the Frontier Hills after the East India Company controlled Assam. The British government intended to use the Frontier Hills as a buffer zone in the Northeast border of India and never took part in disputes within hill villages. As a result, the British East India Company power initially avoided serious wars with the hill tribes. Later, in Assam, tea cultivation received more immediate attention to the British from commercial point of view. Therefore, they clashed with the hill tribes to expand the tea plantations to the hills and took them under their control.

The also revealed that the Company's administrators placed troops at Sadiya as it was a navigation stream and stored a big armament in order to protect the new seized Brahmaputra Valley. Subversive tactics were another efficient tackle adopted by the British government to accomplish its economic and political goals. Similarly, in order to maintain their authority, the British authorities used extermination measures against the hill tribes, particularly the Naga hills. Indeed, the wars against the hill tribes showed the British Army's methods of warfare in the Northeast Frontier highlands. Thus, the British colonial state of India expanded throughout the entire part of North-eastern region. The British were also responsible for incorporating this large hill area into India and taking away it from its historical connection of South East Asia.

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