

**PATTERN OF BRITISH ADMINISTRATION IN THE HILLS OF
INDIA'S NORTH EAST FRONTIER**

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Abstract

One of the basic problems faced by the British after their acquisition of a vast empire in Asia and Africa was whether to supersede or establish dominance over the existing political authorities. In most parts of their dominions, they had adopted a system of utilising the pre-existing political authority, indigenous rulers or traditional chiefs, to carry out most of the processes of local government. This was the situation where an imperial power did not supersede the pre-existing political authority, but established its dominance over it, where traditional rulers were allowed to exercise as before in the local governance. This system, called 'Indirect Rule', meant government through the pre-existing political authority. This was a well-established system of British colonial administration and was followed in Africa, Malaya states and elsewhere.

The British system of indirect rule was the exercise of determinative influence and exclusive political control over a nominally sovereign state, a control recognised by both sides. Under it the administration of native state continued to exist under the aegis of the imperial power. But, the traditional rulers, who continued to rule under the domination of the imperial authority, had lost their independence and were subject to supervision and owed allegiance to the imperial authority. Under such conditions the district officers and residents became the guardian of their power and authority. Not surprisingly, these local authorities came to be identified with the interests of the British. Still indirect rule had its obvious attractive feature to the indigenous rulers in contrast with direct rule: under the system they retained their position though with limitations while direct rule meant deposition. In fact, the British system of indirect rule was motivated by the basic principles of governing a large territory with

minimum expenditure. While the outline of the system was much the same as imposed elsewhere, its actual working differed from place to place. Hence, the process of establishing indirect rule in the hilly regions of North East Frontier of India and the manner of its working makes an interesting reading.

Keywords: Indirect Rule, Traditional, Chiefs, Hill tribes

Introduction

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the British policy makers saw the need to strengthen the position of Indian princes a bulwark of the “British Raj”. The issue became particularly acute as Indian Nationalism started to become a problem for the directly ruled parts of India- but, significantly, not in the vast majority of the indirectly ruled states.¹

Little known is the policy of indirect rule² in North East India, particularly in the tribal areas. The British policy towards the native states and the tribal peoples of North East India changed from time to time.³ The two opposing policies: annexation advocated by the local officers and non-intervention dictated by the authorities in Fort William continued unresolved till the middle of the sixties when the concept of the frontier and the attitudes towards the tribes underwent a fundamental change. Eventually non-intervention gave way to active intervention and annexation.⁴

The acquisition of these hills provided an interesting example of the introduction of the British system of indirect rule. The hill tribes were conquered one by one and the nature of rule imposed upon them also differed from place to place. To maintain the purpose of colonialism, the British imperialists perpetuated a policy of restructurisation of the indigenous administration of the tribal people. Altogether the idea of hills administration was village self-government under the immediate superintendence and watchful eye of the British officers stationed therein.⁵ The uninviting terrain and warlike traditions of the hill tribes made the local administration rather

concerned about the possibility of uprisings. Thus the hills of North East India enjoyed a status of special administrative area under British India.

Among the hill tribes of Assam, the Khasis and Jaintias first became under the colonial rule. Their resistance and the subsequent pacification process only completed subordination of the thirty odd chiefships and the essential apparatus of native administration was retained intact. A Political Agency, separated from the Assam Commission had been created for the Khasi Hills in 1835. While describing the condition of affairs and the policy adopted in the Khasi Hills, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Lister, responsible for the pacification of these hills thus reported on what had been achieved:

At the expiration of about four years the British power had been sufficiently felt, and the dis-affected chiefs gave in their adhesion to the Government...Engagements and Treaties were entered into... their territories were then restored to them with the general jurisdiction of the same subject to such control as the government might determine.⁶

Further that:

The general instructions given were that in those few villages which have become ours by right of conquest and form the jurisdiction of the Agency as little interference as possible should be exercised. Those villages which retained their independence and which have been restored to their former chiefs, are only to be interfered with politically.⁷

While approving Lister's report, the Government of India declared:

It is for the obvious advantage, not only of those over whom the British authorities exercise direct jurisdiction, but also of the several chiefs to whom a kind of qualified independence has been either expressly or tacitly reserved, that the paramount and direct authority of the British Government over the whole assemblage of the territory

comprised within the Agency, should be asserted and proclaimed in legal form. It is with a view therefore not to extend...intelligible footing.⁸

Sir Cecil Beadon, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal (1862-67) who had inherited the Jaintia Rebellion of 1862 as well as various other disturbances on the frontiers and elsewhere from his predecessors laid down the object of the hill administration:

A main principle to be adopted in dealing with these people when they have been made to understand and feel the power of the Government and have submitted to its authority is not to leave them in their old state, but while adopting a simple plan of Government suitable to their present condition and circumstances, and interfering as little as possible with existing institutions, to extend our intercourse with them, and endeavour to introduce among them civilisation and orders.⁹

Beadon was thus not prepared to make any radical change. He rather wanted to have a form of Government acceptable to the people suitable to the needs and circumstances without much change in the existing institutions.¹⁰

Thus, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills remained under the traditional *Syiems*, *Dalois* and *Sirdars* or head of villages. By treaties and engagements they placed themselves under the protection and subjection of the Imperial authority. The chiefs were bound to run the administration of their respective areas on behalf of the paramount power. The British Government assumed to itself the right to appoint and dismiss them. Petty cases were disposed of by them while heinous offences were brought before the British Courts.

In the early period of the Anglo-Garo contact the traditional chiefs called "Nokmas" were made tributary. But in 1869, the British took over the administration of Garo hills, and recognised the Nokmas and other chiefs with their traditional functions.¹¹ In this connection

Lieutenant Colonel Agnew, Commissioner of Cooch Behar Division, remarked:

...I would leave the administration both civil and criminal justice in the hands of the chiefs except as regard crimes of heinous nature, and civil actions between parties belonging to the different clans and that these Assistant Commissioner should himself decide.¹²

Accordingly, he had directed his immediate subordinate Lieutenant W.J Williamson, Assistant Commissioner of Garo Hills to “be cautious not to interfere in any matter of either civil or criminal nature that a chief can dispose of and to uphold their authority”.¹³ When the British found the collection of revenue through the chiefs was ineffective they created a class of village officials called *Laskars* and *Sirdars* who served as rural police and as honorary magistrates and revenue collectors.¹⁴ They were remunerated according to their functions.

In the Naga Hills, Beadon and the local officers felt that the only course left to the Government to bring peace to the troubled region was “re-assert its authority over the tribes through a system of administration suited to them and to gradually reclaim them from the habit of lawlessness to those of order and civilisation”.¹⁵ Accordingly, a forward policy was inaugurated in June 1866 resulting in the establishment of the Naga Hills district with a headquarters at Chumukedima (Samaguting).¹⁶ The institution of chiefship among the Nagas east of the river Dikhou made the system of indirect rule workable while with the democratic Angamis there was no such scope.¹⁷ Henry Bivar, Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur District, who knew the Angami well, had written of them:

The have no internal form of government, they acknowledge no supremacy except that of spear... brook no authority, each man is his own master and ...in the absence of any influential person whose advise they might respect they are exceedingly difficult to deal with.¹⁸

In the Naga Hills the so called chiefs were in reality leaders of clans or *khels* and not heads of villages and were constantly at war with each other.¹⁹ Here the British introduced the institution of *Dobashis* and *Goanburhas*. The former were selected men from various clans who stayed in the headquarters. They acted as interpreters and represented their clans. The Goanburhas were not government servants and in reality selected to work as village chiefs. They were responsible for the maintenance of law and order, collection of revenue and in trying petty cases. In fact, they were liaison officers between the Government and the villagers. Both of them were remunerated. In course of time, they wielded governmental authority and became powerful pillars of British authority.²⁰

When the frontier line was once defined, the local officers were instructed to leave the tribes as far as possible to manage their own affairs, to cultivate trade and friendly intercourse with them, to endeavour to establish personal influence over the chiefs, and to maintain such vigilance along the line of defence as to deter the tribes from committing raids, or to cut off parties that may attempt them.²¹ The British policy of governing large territories with minimum expenditure was expressed by Colonel Johnstone, Political Agent of Manipur in 1878 when he suggested the annexation of Sukte²² country, which lay between Manipur, the Chin and the Lushai hills:

The cost to us would be small, and through him (Raja of Manipur) we should be able to move effectually to coerce the Eastern Lushais, if at different time necessary, as they, with their Western brethren, would then be completely hemmed in between us and our feudatories...At present we are not directly concerned with the Sooties, but we may be twenty years hence, and timely, and not to us inexpensive action now, may save trouble and money in the future.²³

The acquisition of the Lushai Hills* by the British in the last decade of the nineteenth century provides an interesting example of the system of indirect rule in the tribal areas of North Eastern India. These Hills, which remained administratively a district of Assam province until

relatively recently, was one of the last major areas in India to be annexed and the introduction of indirect rule therein may be regarded as a continuation rather than an innovation. In the Lushai Hills the British authority have attempted few administrative changes, except where it was necessary to bring the existing political and judicial practices in rough alignment with its policies.

With the reduction of the Lushai chiefs known as “*Lal*” to submission, the question of the future administration of the newly acquired tracts began to engage the attention of the Government of India. In this connection James Wallace Quinton, Chief Commissioner of Assam, on 15 May 1890 remarked:

Mere occupation by a Police force of certain points in the tract referred to would not in itself be sufficient to bring under our influence the chiefs with whom we have been so lately in collision, and that, if this object was to be adequately attained, it was essential that an officer possessing both experience and judgment should be at the same time appointed to feel his way among the people and gradually accustom them to our control.²⁴

Hence, from the very beginning it was a settled policy to maintain and strengthen the position of the Lushai chiefs. In January 1890, David Robert Lyall, Commissioner of the Chittagong Division, in his note on the future management of the Lushai Hills, thus explained:

The nature of the people is such that for any attempt at governing minutely would be expensive, and our knowledge of the people and their custom is small. I would, therefore, recommend that for the present system the government through chiefs should be fully recognised...recognising a chief for each village and not recognising any one chief as paramount over any tract or country, unless compelled to do so hereafter by the force of circumstances... we should begin much as we did in the Hill Tracts, by placing in

central position officers with efficient forces to command obedience.²⁵

This proposition became the basis of the British administration in the Lushai Hills. In carrying out the policy, A.W.Davis, Political Officer of the North Lushai Hills, thus told to his successor, Alexander Porteous in 1894:

I always held the chiefs of villages responsible for the behaviour of the people, and upheld their authority to the best of my ability. I have repeatedly told them that this policy will be consistently followed, and that, as long as they behave themselves as they should, their orders will not be interfered with, even though the orders may appear to us at times a little high-handed, and not quite in accord with abstract ideas of justice... In upholding the authority of the chiefs, I have, as a rule refused to take up appeals against their orders on petty cases as it only diminishes a man's authority.²⁶

John Shakespear, Superintendent of South Lushai Hills, who as has been seen, played a prominent role in its conquest and pacification, in his Administrative Report for 1895-'96, had also suggested entrusting tribal and village responsibility to the chiefs.²⁷ The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, while considering the suggestion for reduction of expenditure in the Lushai hills administration equally remarked: "I should think that the people might be very well left to govern themselves according to their own customs subject to the Political Officer's advice and supervision".²⁸ Sir Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam had endorsed this policy in the following words:

The policy of the Political Officer and of his Assistants should be to abstain from avoidable interference with existing Lushai traditions and customs, but while maintaining the patriarchal powers exercised by the hereditary chiefs to insist at the same time on implicit

compliance with their own orders in respect of really important matters. Thus the maintenance of the supremacy of British rule is quite consistent with this policy of working through the chiefs, and not independently of them and with the fullest recognition of the authority of the chiefs in their own villages and over their own villagers.²⁹

Thus for an effective and cheap administration in the difficult terrain of the Lushai hills, and for political reasons the British thought it fit and expedient to continue the indigenous system of village administration through the chiefs.³⁰ A minimum presence and interference, respect for tribal laws and customs, and allowing chiefs to exercise their authority on all local matters as before were the basic principles of administration.³¹ The British Officers were, therefore, to confine their attention mainly to the preservation of peace leaving the chiefs absolutely free in their respective villages in matters of administration, and in criminal, civil and social justice.³² Absolute non-interference, it was clearly laid in principle, was not in all cases necessary and that some sort of a “protectorate” might in some cases be justified by circumstances.³³

The Lushai chiefs were thus reduced to a subordinate position and were required to recognise British supremacy. One of the basic objectives of indirect rule was to make the local chiefs act largely as the British government wanted them to do without having to assume the entire responsibility of administration by themselves. To achieve this end, a distribution of power and responsibilities was arrived at among the chiefs and the British administrators. This policy was carried on all through the British regime and even after India’s independence when the District Council abolished chiefship in 1954.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Michael H. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System, 1764-1858* (New Delhi 1998) p.450

² D.A Low, *Lion Rampant* (London, 1973) pp. 10-12. "Indirect Rule" as an explicit term was not current before the twentieth century, even in India where the practice developed. There, the officials used a variety of labels including "Paramountcy" or "suzereignty" or "native administration" over "Princely State", or "Protected Native States" and so on. Much more consistently, however, other imperial administration, following British pattern, commonly used the title "Resident" to designate their agent of indirect rule. This continuity suggested that the pattern of indirect rule developed by the British in India served as the model in the later colonial governments.

³ For an exposition of this please see, HK Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes: North east Frontier*, 3 Vols. (Gauhati, 1970-1985).

⁴ Imdad Hussain, "Problem of the Frontier, 1822-1860" in H.K.Barpujari (Ed), *The Comprehensive History Of Assam*, Vol.VI. (Guwahati, 1992) p. 140. The British forward policy towards the hill tribes of Assam was not the outcome of the conscious desire to extend suzerainty over them. In fact, non-intervention remained the watchword of Imperial power for a long time. But atrocities and raids committed by the hill people in the British frontiers compelled them to intervene and to adopt forward policy.

⁵ Pioneer, 16 March 1870, Appended in Sir Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*. (Calcutta, 1884. Reprint) *op. cit.*, p. 554.

⁶ A.J.M Mills, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, 1853*. (NEHU Publications, Shillong, 1985), Lieutenant Colonel F G Lister to A J M Mills, Judge Suddar Court, Calcutta, dated 1 July 1853.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, Resolution of the Governor-in-Council, dated 24 November 1853

⁹ Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.242.

¹⁰ H.K.Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribe, Vol. II*. (Gauhati, 1976) p.106.

¹¹ Bengal Judicial Proceedings (hereafter BJP). June 1870, No.27, Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1870-71.

¹² Quoted in Parimal Chandra Kar, *Annexation of Garo Hills. op. cit.*, p. 41

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ S.Barkataki, *Tribes of Assam*. (New Delhi, 1984) p. 2

¹⁵ BJP. September 1866, Nos. 129-130.

¹⁶ J.B. Bhattacharjee; "Forward Policy, 1860-72", in HK Barpujari (Ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Volume IV* (Guwahati, 1992) p. 167

¹⁷ Imdad Hussain, *op. cit.*, p. 148

¹⁸ BJP. March 1855, No. 158

¹⁹ J.H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas*. (Bombay, 1963) p. 109

²⁰ B.B. Ghosh, *History of Nagaland*. (New Delhi, 1972) p. 152

²¹ C.U. Aitchison, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 4 September 1872, in Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.487.

²² Also called "Sootie" or "Kamhow". Though they had no direct dealings with the British, in between 1857 and 1871 they made seven raids into Manipur. For detail see B.C Chakravorty, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

²³ Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

* The Lushai Hills, now known as Mizoram is situated in the North eastern corner of the Indian Union, surrounded on the east by Myanmar (Burma), in the South by Myanmar and Bangladesh, in the west by Bangladesh, in the north by Cachar of Assam, in the North east by Manipur and in the north west by Tripura.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 19-20

²⁵ Foreign External. A Proceedings (hereafter FEAP). August 1890. Nos. 221-227. David Robert Layall, Note on the future management of the South Lushai Hills, dated 12 January 1890. The officer stationed should keep up (1) absolute cessation of raiding under penalty of destruction of the offenders' village and liability of the chief to death. (2) security of persons and property and free access at all time to villages. (3) responsibility of each chief to maintain roads, collection and payment of taxes and tribute. (4) compulsory meeting of the chiefs each year at the central post as an evidence of their acknowledgement of British sovereignty. 5) the chiefs be absolutely left free and should not interfere with the village administration of criminal, civil and social matters but confine to preserving public peace.

²⁶ Quoted in Robert Reid, *A History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*, (Shillong, 1942. Calcutta, Reprint, 1978) p.14

²⁷ FEAP. October 1896. Nos. 28-35. He said, "I am convinced that it is better to uphold the government of the chief and to govern through them. With this view, I have submitted proposals for educating the sons of the chiefs. I am strongly opposed to the formation of many petty hamlets...".

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Assam Secretariat Records Guwahati (hereafter ASR). Foreign A. July 1897. Nos. 28-31.

³⁰ N.E. Parry, *A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies*. (Assam Government Press 1928. Reprint, 1992) p.3 See also N. Chatterjee, *The Mizo Chief and His Administration* (Aizawl, 1972) p. 2.

³¹ Lalrimawia, "A Cultural Development Profile in Mizoram" in *Pialral*, A Historical Journal of Mizoram History Association. (Aizawl, 1995) p.43

³² H.K. Barpujari, *Problems of the Hill Tribes: North East Frontier* Vol III(Gauhati, 1981) p.98.

³³ Verrier Elwin, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*. (Oxford University Press, 1969) p.163