

Manipur and the Defence of the Eastern Frontier 1824-35

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Frontier policy in India has been so long dominated by the north western borderlands that it is often forgotten¹ that its style and content had originated in the early days of the Company in Bengal. Fort William's concern for the security of its fragile inheritance expressed in a system of treaty relationship with contiguous states marked the Company's earliest diplomatic activity. Clive's treaty with Oudh during his second governorship is now text-book knowledge. Less known perhaps is Warren Hastings' treaty with Cooch Behar in the north east in 1773 which brought that petty state under more than British influence. What these treaties achieved in practical terms was the establishment of protectorates on frontiers exposed to destabilising influences of local powers. Oudh's position as a buffer against the Marathas continued till the extension of the Company's rule to northern India by the turn of the century. The eastern Bengal district of Rangpur was secured against Bhutanese encroachments by the interposition of Cooch Behar though the latter's importance was quickly overshadowed when Hastings established closer relations with the Himalayan state as a channel of communication with Tibet.²

Bengal's Eastern Frontier, in the linear sense that it was represented in contemporary maps,³ ran from Bhutan southwards roughly from the Manas river and across the Brahmaputra touching Assam in the east and skirting the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills that abut on the districts of Rangpur, Mymensing and Sylhet to where the latter marched with the petty states of Cachar and Tripura. From here it ran further south along the hill tracts of Chittagong to the river Naaf which separated that district and British territories from Arakan. What lay beyond was of little interest and less of concern. As the geographer James Rennel noted :

*The natural situation of Bengal, is singularly happy with respect to security from foreign enemies. On the north and east it has no warlike neighbours ; and has, moreover, a formidable barrier of ... mountains, rivers, or extensive wastes towards those quarters should such an enemy start up.*⁴

The Company's accession to authority in Bengal, however, coincided with the emergence of a power in central Burma under the young Alaungpaya (1752-60) that was to weld together the petty chiefships in and around the Irrawaddy valley into a powerful kingdom. Their absorption of Arakan in 1784-85, Manipur

in 1813 and their appearance in Assam in 1816-17 brought them into immediate and direct contact with the British. It was in this context that Assam, Cachar and finally Manipur was to play a dominating role in the Company's policy in the Eastern Frontier.

By 1822 the six-century-old Ahom Kingdom of Assam was reduced to a province of Ava. Response to this change came not from Fort William but from the youthful magistrate of Rangpur, David Scott, who was soon to lay the foundations of British rule in north-east India.⁵ If Scott's reports to Calcutta conjured up visions of Burmese war boats ⁶ sweeping down the Brahmaputra to sack Dacca it was only to emphasise that an aggressive and expansionist power should not be permitted to entrench itself permanently on Bengal's eastern periphery. Left to himself Scott would have intervened in the affairs of the troubled kingdom to ensure its survival as an independent or protected state. His hands were effectively stayed by an official declaration that Assam having become a Burmese province was outside his brief.

On 23 September 1823, less than two months after the new Governor-General Lord Amherst assumed office a Burmese force overran a small island on the Naaf driving off with some casualties a detachment of Bengal Infantry.⁷ Efforts at localising the incident by treating it as an unauthorised act by the raja of Arakan failed when the latter in the name of his Sovereign threatened war if any attempt was made at reoccupying the island. Amherst at once recognised the logic of Scott's arguments. In a directive in October 1823 that is significant as the first explicit expression of the Eastern Frontier as region he set forth the objectives of British policy that was to form the basis for the Treaty of Yandabo (1826): *to expel the Burmese from the countries of which they have recently possessed themselves on our frontier, such as Assam, Munnipoor, and even Arracan, by encouraging and supporting the original inhabitants of these in any attempt which they may be disposed to make to restore the line of their native princes, and thus securing for ourselves a barrier of friendly states between the British and Burmese dominions along the whole of our Eastern Frontier.*⁸

The appointment in November 1823 of David Scott as Agent to the Governor General North East Frontier and of Thomas Campbell Robertson in a similar capacity for the South East was an essential concomitant of the development of British interests beyond the linear frontier. Of the states that made up the Eastern Frontier, Cachar was the first to be drawn into the vortex of the Company's system.

Cachar in the early nineteenth century presented a classic example of an unstable state between two expanding powers. It was clear even in the middle of 1823 that its absorption into the more dominating of the two political systems was inevitable. Three Manipuri princes evicted from their own kingdom were in control of much of the country sending off into virtual exile the ruler Govinda Chandra.⁹ Burmese claims to intervention rested on Cachar's position in former times as a vassal of the Ahoms.

The British case was presented by the magistrate of the exposed Sylhet district : 'The occupation of Cachar by the Burmese would lay this country open to the entrance of a force from the east ward' he told his superiors in Calcutta convincingly, 'to which we could oppose no adequate resistance.'¹⁰ When reports reached Fort William of Burmese forces converging upon Cachar Amherst acted swiftly. Scott's alternative proposal for a joint British and Burmese guarantee of Cachar's independence was rejected and instead it was resolved to bring the state under the Company's protection. Scott was instructed to tell the Burmese that Cachar was under British protection and that no interference could be permitted. He was further authorised to use the army to enforce the claim. Amherst's decision to extend protection to the relatively peaceful Jaintia raj completed the 'general system of defensive arrangements for the frontier'.

It is curious that treaties with these states should have been concluded long after Amherst's resolution to bring them under protection : with Jaintia it was almost a week after the formal declaration of war and in the case of Cachar of more than two months. Nonetheless, the extension of influence into these areas gave the British important and substantial advantages. Scott whose attitude towards Cachar had been somewhat indecisive in contrast to his settled views on Assam makes the following assessment of British gains :¹¹

The occupation of the country will..... tend materially to the easy defence of the frontier, not merely by giving us possession of the passes leading to Munnipore.....but chiefly as depriving them of the advantage they would have derived from the possession of so convenient a retiring place after their passage across the mountains and compelling them to meet us immediately after a harassing journey through the hills and risk a battle without further supply of provision than what they may carry with them.

Scott's ambivalence towards Cachar resulted in all likelihood from a knowledge of the difficulties of climate and terrain for military operations. Under the most favourable conditions the strategic hills around the Barak valley were unhealthy and difficult to occupy and in the monsoons they became with the flatlands an impossible theatre. His worry that Burmese troops even, with their inferior equipment and poor organisation could prove very destructive to the disciplined regiments was well founded. So rather than see these corps unnecessarily entangled in the defence of that state he would have liked one of the Manipuri princes to undertake the protection of the principal passes. But the declared protection over the state acquired an urgency after the first skirmish with Burmese forces on 17 January at Bikrampur that demanded immediate attention.¹²

In February 1824 Scott made two recommendations that were to have an immediate impact upon the Company's Eastern Frontier policy. The first related to the mobilisation of the large number of Manipuri settlers in Cachar and Sylhet who had fled

their country after it was occupied by the Burmese a decade back. They had impressed him as 'a hardy, muscular and warlike race imbued with a deadly hatred of the Burmese' and with the backing of military officers persuaded Lord Amherst to raise from them a local battalion. On the Sylhet Local Corps, as the battalion was designated, fell the task of defence of the Sylhet and Cachar frontiers.¹³ The second related to Gambhir Singh one of the three fugitive Manipuri princes, whose willing hand in the storming of Burmese stockades in the clashes that followed Birkampur had caught Scott's imagination. He quickly realised that the Manipuri mounted troopers in the absence of cavalry with the British would be very useful in cutting up retreating Burmese. His recommendation was the organisation of fifty horse and three hundred foot soldiers under the personal command of Gambhir Singh. This too was immediately sanctioned. Reports of Gambhir Singh's action in the operations against the Burmese following the formal declaration of war on 5 March 1824 were well received in Fort William. The Council saw in him a leader capable of inspiring an uprising in Manipur and establishing a 'further barrier' on the Eastern Frontier.¹⁴ It was considered 'highly important' to provide him the means to make the attempt.

Manipur's importance came to be more fully appreciated when later in the month reports on the routes across the frontier came in. It then appeared doubtful whether the passes between Cachar and Manipur were so few and so easily defended as was earlier supposed. Rather there were evidences that suggested that the Burmese from Manipur could easily find the means of opening new passes in various directions through Cachar and Tripura. Scott's recommendation in these circumstances was explicitly stated :¹⁵

The establishment of an independent government in Manipur in alliance with us would undoubtedly prove the most powerful check upon the Burmese government that could well be devised by affording us at all times a ready passage into the heart of their dominions, and as finally, a military power that could on occasion prove really useful to us.

Governor General Lord Amherst as his private papers show went¹⁶ over the recommendations in great detail. It seemed quite obvious that the occupation of Cachar would be inadequate to stop the Burmese so long as Manipur remained in their possession. It was equally clear that in her scanty population Cachar lacked the prerequisites of an effective buffer state. Amherst's conclusion was that no opportunity should be lost to help Gambhir Singh establish an independent government between the British and Burmese territories.¹⁷ The five hundred stand of arms on the way to Cachar was diverted to the Manipuri chief. He was to be assured recognition as ruler of Manipur should he be able to reconquer it.¹⁸

In June 1825 Gambhir Singh occupied Manipur and by early next year cleared the Kubaw valley of the last elements of Burmese. By the Treaty of Yandabo, 16 February 1826, he was recognised as an independent raja of Manipur by the Burmese. Manipur

presented a sharp contrast to Assam and Cachar. The division among the Ahom princes and their unpopularity with the people led Scott to postpone the question of restoration. The expected rising in Assam against the Burmese which Scott had anticipated and Fort William hoped had already diminished as the war progressed. His attention was diverted towards the Singphos, Moamorias and the Khamtis as more effective screen to the Burmese.¹⁹ Doubts were expressed about Cachar's ability to pay the tribute and there were hints about taking over the country.²⁰ Above all, Assam and Cachar lacked the means to defend themselves and Scott was convinced²¹

that the defence of those countries, however necessary for the security of our own territories, must be provided for in a great measure by extraneous means.

The Manipuris on the other hand were found to possess all the qualities that distinguished the Rajputs. When in June 1826 the question of withdrawing the subsidy for the maintenance of the Levy was under discussion the Commissioner of Sylhet reminded the authorities in Calcutta :

*There can be no doubt but the possession of Mannypore by the Burmese afforded the greatest assistance in advantage in their invasion of Cachar forming a most convenient asylum for the assembling of their forces and make preparations at leisure for an enterprise they might be contemplate in either direction. It would also furnish supplies for an army for sometime which would not otherwise subsist itself at such a distance from their own resources.*²²

The subsidy and military stores were accordingly continued to Gambhir Singh until he was in a position to undertake the defence of his state. Military officers were to be provided for the maintenance of discipline and for training the Levy.

In the years immediately following the first Anglo-Burmese War an extreme indulgence towards Gambhir Singh characterised British attitude towards Manipur. He was encouraged, for example, to establish his control over the tribal areas that surrounded the valley. By the early thirties with the completion of the Survey of the North East Frontier by Captain Francis Jenkins and Lieutenant Robert Pemberton British policy underwent a radical change. The enquiries by the two officers revealed that since the death of the first commanding officer of the Sylhet Battalion who had a very high opinion of their capabilities, the Manipuri element had been reduced by discharges and the enlistment of only choice individuals. Subsequent commanding officers never placed great reliance upon them. After obtaining the opinion of several officers both civil and military Jenkins and Pemberton observed :

Generally speaking they (Manipuris) would prove indifferent soldiers under our strict routine or drill and discipline to which they have a great aversion ; for the description of guerilla warfare they are exposed in their own country they are admirably adapted and inferior to no troops.

Their best classes preferred service in their raja's Levy with

its comparatively lax discipline. Manipuris appeared to them more suited to agriculture and for the role of pioneers and it was to these pursuits, they said, their efforts should be directed. ²³

But it was their report on Manipur submitted a month later that had a decisive effect upon Lord Amherst's successor Lord William Bantynck. Jenkins and Pemberton showed that there was no improvement in the country since the expulsion of the Burmese. Manipur's military resources had not been developed, communications hardly existed and the population virtually stagnant. The vital region between Manipur and Cachar was in a state of desolation, Their report on the Levy was even more depressing : ²⁴

In the present state of the Levy so little under the control of British officers attached to it no longer accustomed to drill, exercise no ball practice, the Government must be aware that the reliance to be placed on the 3000 men composing it must be very limited. The Muneepooree troops can scarcely be considered as more than equal to the like number of Burmese except in the advantage of being led by British officers and in the moral effect this and the connection of the British Government with Muneepoor undoubtedly produce.

In the event of war the Burmese troops would outnumber the Manipuris and the latter's only security could come from fortifications. But Manipur's impoverished state made such constructions well high impossible. If Manipur were to continue as an important outwork in the defence of the Eastern Frontier the Company would have to make a good deal of investment.

The report made a number of recommendations with a view to developing Manipur so that it could play a vital role in another war with Burma. When Bantynck saw this report he recorded a Minute on 23 March 1833 setting down his view that the country was of little use for the defence of the British frontier. ²⁵ Lord Bantynck's policy can be seen in the terms of the two treaties concluded with Manipur in 1833-34. Scott's successor Thomas Robertson, however, disagreed with the survey reports. He recorded his *Full acquiescence in the opinion entertained by Mr. Scott of the importance of this little state to the tranquility of our dominions . . . It is interposed between us and the Burmese and white steady in its attachment to the British Government must ever be able to keep it acquainted with the schemes and machinisation of the common foe, in whose hands the province would prove a screen behind which preparations for our molestation might have been carried on with that secrecy and mystery in which the Burmese rely and which we formerly found in every quarter so difficult to penetrate.* ²⁶

Bantynck was not convinced. He recorded another Minute, on 7 February 1835, a little before he left India reiterating his views expressed two years earlier. His conclusion was to prove decisive ; ²⁷ *I cannot agree in the opinion expressed by the late commissioner of its (Manipur's) importance, for, so far from considering it an useful outworks in the event of a war with the Burmese, I am*

rather inclined to regard it as an useless and inconvenient post to defend, in doing which we might loose, but could gain no advantage.

Even a cursory glance at the provisions of the treaty with Burma would show that its basis lay in the declaration of policy by Lord Amherst in October 1823. Though Assam and Cachar were renounced by the Burmese King the buffer policy in regard to these states had been long abandoned. If Manipur continued as a buffer for some years longer it was entirely on the basis, as Fort William saw it, of Scott's "highly coloured description" of the country and its people. The operations of 1824-26 convincingly showed that Burma was not the formidable military power that they were imagined to be. The concept of Manipur as a buffer had lost its relevance by 1835 if the transfer of the Kabaw Valley to Burma is any evidence. The frontier now really lay in the hill area between Assam and Burma. This was what Bentinck was in reality expressing in his two Minutes.

Notes and References

1. Cf D K Ghose, "Studies in the History of the North West Frontier", in S.P. Sen (ed) *Studies in Modern Indian History* (Cal. 1969).
2. Alistair Lamb, *Britain and Chinese Central Asia* (London 1960) Ch. I.
3. See for example : H. H. Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War* (London 1827), Frontispiece.
4. James Rennel, *Memoir of a Map of Hindustan*, quoted in Ainslie Embree, *Imagining India* (New Delhi 1989) p.cxv.
5. See : *Papers Relating to the First Burmese War Presented to Parliament*, 1825. "The substitution of a warlike and comparatively speaking powerful government," wrote Scott, in the place of the feeble administration that had hitherto ruled Assam in a situation so commanding and with such extensive means of offence will no doubt render it necessary that some permanent measures should be adopted for the security of the frontier...."
6. Scott had derived his knowledge of Burmese war boats from Michael Symes, *An account of an embassy to the Kingdom of Ava in the year 1795*.
7. Details, L. S S O' Malley, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers, Chittagong*, pp. 41-4 .
8. F (oreign) S(ecret) C(onsultation,) National Archives of India (New Delhi) 31 October 1823 : No. 17. Scott was informed that the Governor General-in Council 'contemplates the expediency of adopting measures for assisting the Assamese in expelling the invaders of their country and restoring the line of their native princes' and that he therefore 'be prepared to encourage this disposition on the part of the Assamese.....'
9. For an account of the confused state of affairs in Cachar see J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in North East India* (New Delhi 1977) Ch. II.

10. FSC 12 December 1823 : No. 8.
11. FSC 2 April 1824 : No. 6 Scott to Swinton, 20 March. The Governor General-in-Council told Army HQ that the extension of 'authority or at least a preponderating influence' in Cachar would keep the Burmese in Assam in Check' FSC 24 December 1823 : N. 5 : To Adjutant General.
12. FSC 30 January 1824 : No. 11 ; Scott to Swinton, 14 January.
13. FSC 19 March 1824 : No. 11 ; also General Orders of the Governor General, No. 64, 19 February 1824: FSC 20 February 1824. The historian of Sylhet hold Corps, later in Gorkha Rifles. Colonel H. J Huxford, *History of the 8th Gurkha Rifles, 1824-1949* (Aldeshot 1952) makes no reference to Scott.
14. FSC 26 March 1824 : No. 16
15. FSC 8 April 1824 : Nos. 5-8
16. India Office Library and Records (London) ; Amherst Collection, MSS Eur F140
17. FSC 9 April 1824 : No. 8
18. A C Banerjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India* (Calcutta, 1946), p. 248
19. FSC 11 June 1824 : No. 15
20. FSC 23 June 1826 : No. 18
21. FSC 26 November 1824 : No. 11
22. FSC 15 1826 : Nos 57/58
23. F P (olitical) C 27 August 1832 : NO. 87 ; Report on Cachar
24. FPC 15 October 1823: No. 114
25. Alexander Mackenzie, *A History of the Relations with the hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal* (Cal. 1884) pp. 150-51.
26. F. P. C. 19 December 1833 : No. 85
27. Mackenzie *Loc. Cit.*