

THE FUTURE OF THE HILLS OF NORTH-EAST INDIA 1928-1947 Some British Views

DAVID R. SYIEMLIEH

I

Speaking at the annual prize distribution ceremony of the Welsh Mission Girls' High School in Shillong on 13 November 1941, the Governor of Assam, Sir Robert Neil Reid, told the audience of school children, their parents and guests that India was on the threshold of great many changes. "Where do you come in this picture?" he asked them. He then went on to say:¹

"It may be – it is no new thought, for it has been canvassed in the press often enough, that the destiny of these hills and other areas in Assam will follow another course than that of being linked with those of India proper. It may be otherwise. But sooner or later the question is going to be canvassed and the decision will depend in great measure on public support."

The Governor had only six days earlier completed a confidential twenty-two page pamphlet: *A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam* in which he suggested to Government the separation of the hill areas of North-East India and North-West Burma from their respective dominions and placed "perhaps under some appropriate department

at Whitehall.”² Reid was not the originator of the ‘Crown Colony Scheme’. He had developed the ideas of N.E. Parry who had been Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills and later for many years served as Superintendent of the Lushai Hills District, and those of Dr. John H. Hutton who had served the Naga Hills District as its Deputy Commissioner. These two officers had each submitted separate memoranda to the Indian Statutory Commission (1928) on the future of the areas under their charge in a constitutionally reformed India. Hutton particularly showed how the hill people neither racially, historically, culturally, nor linguistically had any affinity with the people of the Assam plains, while their administration was wholly on different lines. He and Parry both suggested the formation of a North Eastern Frontier Province to comprise as many of the backward tracts of Assam and Burma as would be conveniently included in it.³

Hutton elaborated the plan in 1930⁴ and 1935.⁵ In all, the province would comprise 16 districts out of Assam and Burma. The advantages he believed were many but he stressed that it would enable people on both sides of the “so-called watershed”, having common customs, languages and living under similar conditions to come under one administration. It would provide an opportunity for their political advance on corporate tribal lines. He saw of the opinion that the separation of India and Burma (1935) would permanently divorce portions of tribes which naturally should comprise a single unit. He saw the possibility of consolidation of a polyglot area into an uniform administrative unit with ultimately a common language as English for official purposes. As a separate province it would justify its own provincial cadre recruited for the province as a whole instead of borrowing civil servants from other provinces in India and Burma. Hutton also touched on the strategic importance of such a province should China “ever recover from her internal disorders, the question of the Chinese Frontier is likely to become more important than it is at present.”⁶

The proposition for a North-East Frontier or some form of amalgamated administration had “great attraction” for

Government. However, when the constitutional changes took place, instead of the proposed province taking shape the backyard tracts in North-East India were redesignated Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas put under the special supervision of the Assam Governor. Sir Robert Reid said that the Act of 1935 had not given the hill people sufficient safeguards. As to their future, he argued that it would have to be decided by the British Parliament. "It cannot be left to Indian Political leaders", he believed, "with neither knowledge, interest nor feelings for these areas". He quoted the Secretary of State for India and Burma, L.S. Amery, who on 3 March 1941 said of Burma and its separation from India:⁷

"That separation was the natural consequence of the introduction of self-government, for in her racial type and her culture, as well as in her geographical position Burma belongs not to India, But to the projection of the main bulk of Asia and the Indo-Chinese peninsula."

This, the Governor stressed, applied just as closely to the people of the Assam hills and that the "boundary between our hills and the Burma hills is as artificial as it is imperceptible."⁸ Reid saw a way out of this situation by reviving Hutton's idea of a North-East Province or Agency embracing all the hill fringe from the Lushai and Lakher land in the south in a crescent shape round to the hills of present day Arunachal Pradesh. Included in this scheme were the Chittagong Hill Tracts (to provide an outlet to the sea), the areas inhabited by the Nagas and Chins of Burma "and perhaps the Shan States to." He also included in this plan the 25 Khasi states and Manipur and the unadministered territory - the Naga Tribal Area of the Naga Hills District and the Tirap Frontier Tract further north. The proposed Agency would cover a large area of 68,985 square miles of administered and unadministered hill areas and 'native' states territories under India. Its population, he calculated, would be about 2.5 million. If the Burma areas were incorporated the area and population of the proposed scheme would increase considerably.⁹

The radical point of the *Note* under discussion is that Reid planned to remove the areas mentioned above from both the Indian and Burmese Government. He wrote:¹⁰ "I would put this under a Chief Commissioner and he in turn would I imagine have to be divorced as is Burma from the control of the Government of India and put perhaps under some appropriate department of Whitehall". This was the message Reid tried to convey to his audience that November day. He was convinced of the practicability of the scheme and wanted to change the destiny of the hill people and their future by this bold and rather controversial subject. Reid did admit that what he wanted was only a tentative proposal. Much detail would have to be filled in. But supposing it were decided, for whatever reason, that the plan he had attempted to outline were impracticable, he felt it was necessary to consider alternatives. He concludes the *Note* with these lines:¹¹

"I trust that sufficient has been said to prove that to place the hills under the control of the Ministry of an Assam as now constituted is utterly impossible and unworkable. A workable intermediate arrangement, though I would not myself advocate it, might be found in the formation of a Province of the Assam Valley only and in placing the hills under that, if they must be placed under a Provincial Government without any of the safeguards that at present exist."

He believed that at least the "old Assamese friendly methods of dealing with the hillmen might be in part revived so that the hills would perhaps not get such a bad deal as they certainly would from the Bengali Politicians of the Surma Valley".¹²

II

The first person to have received a copy of the *Note* was the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow. He thanked Reid for the "valuable Note" and informed that he would send a copy

to L.S. Amery, the Secretary of State for India.¹³ Amery had this to comment:¹⁴

Supposing that Pakistan does come off, there will be possibly two Muslim areas, the whole of the states, Hindu British India.....and finally at least an important primitive hill tribe areas such as that which Reid has very interestingly outlined in the memorandum which reached me by the last mail.

He in turn passed the *Note* to the Oxford Professor, Reginald Coupland who carefully succeeded in changing a private and confidential report into a scheme that took his name.¹⁵ Burma found the plan "attractive and if other considerations are not involved would be worth pursuing".¹⁶ By then the plan had caught the fancy of the Government of Burma, operating from Simla. The issue of amalgamating the hill areas of Burma and India was discussed at length at a series of meetings of the Committee on Scheduled Areas between 5 and 11 December 1942. Although the Committee in its meeting of 11 December voted not to resort to the amalgamation plans,¹⁷ Governor Dorman Smith continued to flirt with the scheme well upto 1945.

That the plan was discussed in very high government circles, there was no doubt. Though it had its attractions to the last of the British administrators it came at a time when India was in the final phase of its struggle for independence. If implemented it would have added a new dimension to the partition of the subcontinent. The only difference would have been that the areas in the Agency or protectorate would still not have been independent but would have been:¹⁸

"on lines of the High Commission territories in South Africa i.e that they should remain directly under the Crown representative until such time as His Majesty's Government, after the inhabitants have been consulted, feel justified in transferring them to an Indian Government."

III

Meanwhile serious discussions were in progress through 1943 to 1946 on the question of administrative amalgamation of the India and Burma tribal areas. It is not possible here to go into the details of the discussions and the decisions that were taken.¹⁹ However, some of the developments need to be highlighted to see the trend of thinking on the future of the hill areas under study. The question of the readjustment of the frontier between Assam and Burma and Tribal Areas and the desirability of some system of coordination of administration was discussed at an informal meeting, held in Delhi on 10 March 1945. Attending the meeting apart from Sir Olaf Caroe, the Secretary of the External Affairs Department and Richardson, the Deputy Secretary, were J.P. Mills, Adviser to the Governor of Assam and R.E. McGuire of the Scheduled Areas Department of the Government of Burma. The Burmese Government official made it clear that his Government was not in favour of administrative amalgamation. It was viewed by the five members that distinct tribes should generally not be divided between two administrations and that boundaries should be drawn as to bring as far as possible the whole of a tribe under that Government which already had included in its territory the major population of a tribe. This meant that the Nagas in the adjacent hills in Burma would be brought within India except some Burmanised groups. Similarly, the Lakhers may be incorporated in Burma to enable them to be united with the majority of the tribe in the Chin hills. As to the future of the hill areas then administered under the Assam Province, Sir Andrew Clow, Reids successor as Governor of Assam, conveyed through his Adviser that he:²⁰

“preferred to envisage a future in which the Tribal Areas and Excluded Areas should be merged into the Province of Assam rather than cut off from it.”

The meeting also ruled out the conversion of the Partially Excluded Areas (the Garo, Khasi, Jaintia and Mikir

Hills) to the status of Tribal Areas but left the question of the status of the Excluded Areas and Tribal Areas for future discussion. The solution to the problem of administrative adjustments, given Burma functioning as a separate province and Sylhet and some adjoining territories being tagged to Bengal was the formation of a province rather on the lines of Baluchistan, the same Official acting as Chief Commissioner for the Brahmaputra

Valley and the Partially Excluded Areas, as Resident for Manipur and the Khasi States and as Agent to the Governor-General for the remainder of the Province.²² It was speculated that the Excluded and Tribal Areas would be brought under the Centre's administration but that it was essential to have a policy keeping in view the importance of the development of these areas away from paternal rule towards a system of Tribal Councils or bodies based on indigenous customs. The members admitted that these areas were not ready for Western democratic institutions and thus the eventual objective might be:²³

"That they should enter a Federal India of the future on the basis of their own institutions, no steam-roller of British Indian practice and procedure having been passed across them."

IV

Since the Centre was hoping that the charge of the Excluded Areas and the Tribal Areas would be given to the External Affairs Department the exact administrative and constitutional position had to be sought before the Indian Constituent Assembly could decide its future. Sir Andrew Clow's private and official correspondence makes it very clear that these areas were for all practical purposes not technically within the empire. He wrote to Sir Charles Pawsey, then the last Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District that "the statutory Naga Hills tribal areas is completely independent and at liberty to negotiate on its own terms -or bid for time".²⁴ He also informed the Indian Constituent Assembly that the Naga Tribal areas and the

Tirap Frontier Tract were both technically and for practical purposes outside British India, for there was no statutory boundary between them and the adjoining districts of the province. He also informed that regarding the Tribal Areas of the Balipara and Sadiya Frontier Tracts and of Tirap Frontier Tract, "it can be held on a very strict interpretation of the law, that the fortuitous absence of an inner statutory boundary make them part of Assam and so of British India."²⁵ But he cautioned, "not only is this interpretation so entirely contrary to the administrative position that the Government of India have always treated the area as 'tribal', but it is also contrary to the position embodied in usage and treaty."²⁶

Sir Andrew Clow wanted the Tribal Areas to be grouped together in a state-like structure to negotiate with the Government of India through their own representation "... it is only by giving the tribes the right to put them forward as their spokesmen that they can be heard. If unsuitable arrangements are imposed from above on tribesmen, who have not been heard, there will be bitter discontent and unrest on this frontier" he cautioned. Clow criticised Reid's administration that there was too much of a tendency to treat the tribals as subjects "for preservation and study rather than as objects of our help and guidance." "He made a criticism of British policy as being too chary of extending our administration and too slow in building up self-government institutions among them."²⁷

Meanwhile J.P. Mills had been at work to compile a small but very useful pamphlet.²⁸ After reviewing the indigenous tribal administrative system, the historical background, the racial and cultural background and other related subjects, he put down his own view of the possible alternatives of the relationship between the hills and the plains of Assam. He ruled out that it was in the best interest of all the hill tribals to be included in Assam. Under the second alternative, the choice appeared to lie between the "two extremes of excluding only some of the present tribal areas and to including only the present partially excluded areas." The third alternative which he espoused was "that

of temporarily extending all the hills from Assam and according to them special treatment designed, on the lines of indirect rule" to develop those indigenous institutions which still then survived, and to fit the tribes for eventual union with the province of Assam.²⁹ Chapter 15 and the remaining chapters of the monograph were devoted to working out how the Hill Districts, Frontier Tracts, Agencies and States in the region could be administered as either a Province or a Union of States; the composition of Council; their powers and functions, finance and indirect rule.

Similarly, at work was Sir Andrew Clow who between March and October 1945 worked on a draft treatise that when published³⁰ was to have much more of clout than the publication of his Adviser. Its significance was not so much the arguments in Chapter V which was devoted to demolish Reid's Crown Colony plan³¹--it was the suggestion he gave for administering the Hill tribes in an independent India. But briefly, his conclusions were that the northern hills (present day Arunachal Pradesh) and part of the Naga tribal areas should be treated as a federal agency. He viewed that for the rest of the Assam hills to be included in the Agency "would be one of the worst solutions". The choice was confined then two possibilities.

- (a) A merger of the hills and plains of Assam in a manner which would conserve tribal rights and would recognize in an effective manner the different needs and outlook of the two areas;
- (b) The constitution of separate provinces for the hills and the plains with some administrative links.

Clow informed the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, soon after the draft was done that of the two possibilities "I have come down after some considerable hesitation in favour of (a)", as the arguments for it appeared to him stronger. Two of the arguments which in particular appealed to him were that it would keep the hill tribes and plains tribes together and that on the long term view there was no future for the Assam hills in separation from the plains. Both the Khasi

states and Manipur could be fitted into any scheme that were devised.³²

The Governor concluded the *Memorandum* with these very befitting words:³³

“Assam is never likely to be as homogeneous as other provinces. The plains peoples are not so divided as those of the hills, but they are far from being a single people such as can be found in many equally large or larger areas in India. But this great collection of peoples, in hills and plains, have been set in a particularly well demarcated corner of the world and their welfare will depend on their proving able to live together. Assam should look to her diversity and to her capacity for toleration, which is greater than that of other provinces, to provide her strength.”

It is a pity that we do not have sufficient time at hand to go into the details of all these plans, beginning with those of Hutton and Parry, down to Reid, Mills and Clow. It will appear apparent to many that some of these schemes were utopian, some very sincerely devised but impracticable and still others put into operation with minor modifications. Sadly much of what was suggested did not take shape, such as the well advanced discussions to demarcate the Indo-Burma border on ethnic lines; or the decision to allow lakhars to join Burma. There was also no referendum or plebiscite given to the hill people to decide their own future. Neither were tribal leaders of the former ‘Unadministered Areas’, brought to the negotiating table. In fact, their future was decided not by themselves but by Delhi and Assam and herein lay the seeds of discontent.

By early 1947, there was no illusion of British permanence in India, and they knew they had so little to say in these matters. Andrew Clow who completed his five year as the last British Governor of Assam on 4 May 1947 put his thoughts down rather pithily:³⁵

“The trouble of course is that we have not the time we would like, and that in the past we tended to

assume that we had much longer. The main thing now is to get the tribal people thinking within the limits of the practical, and my own profound conviction is that they should plump for cooperation and get the best bargain they can."

REFERENCES

1. (I)ndia (O)ffice (L)ibrary and (R)ecords, Reid Collection MSS Eur E/278/11(d).
2. IOLR , L/P&S/12/3115 A. The Note is dated 7 November,1941, See p.16.
3. Memorandum of the Government of Assam to the Indian Statutory Commissioner, Vol. XIV, pp. 111-122.
4. Assam State Archives, Note dated 6 July 1930, Assam Political Proceeding (Reform) A, December, 1930, Nos. 1-3.
5. *Ibid* Note dated 18 Sept. 1935. Assam Political Proceedings A, December 1936. Nos. 1-30.
6. R. Reid, *op.cit.* Note, pp-6-7.
7. *Ibid.* pp. 14-15.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
10. *Ibid.*, p.16.
11. *Ibid.*, p.22.
12. *Ibid.*
13. IOLR, Reid Collection, MSS Eur E/278/4(9),Letter dated 5 January, 1942.
14. IOLR, Amery Collection, MSS Eur F/125/11, Amery to Linglithgow, 24 March, 1942.
15. IOLR, L/P&J/7/6789, Amery to Coupland, 30 July 1943; R.Coupland, the *Future of India*, London, 1943, p.164. Coupland wrote in his third and final volume on India..."the two areas might be united in a single territory, the administration of which would be separated in some way from the Government of India and Burma."
16. IOLR, M/4/2803 'The Scheduled Areas of Burma', a confidential note signed by H.J. Mitchell, 26, November 1942.
17. IOLR, M/4/2803, Minutes of the Meeting on the Commission on Scheduled Areas; 5-11December 1942;M/4/2803, Dorman Smith to Pethick Lawrence, 13 August 1945.
18. ILOR, L/P&J/7/6787, Extract from a private and secret letter from Mr. Amery to Lord Wavell, dated 10 August 1944.
19. Also read H.K. Barpujari "New Light on the Proposed Crown Colony" paper read at the FiftyThird Session of the Indian Historical Records Commission, 4-5 February 1990, pp. 18-21.
20. IOLR, L/P&S/12/3115 a record of the Meeting of 10 March 1945.
21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.* An official in the India Office, London, Initialed a note "If Government decide to implement a proposal to create a new Chief Commissioner's Province... one rather fears that the new proposal may have come to the fire too late to be worked out and brought into effect in time to anticipate other structural arrangement within British India (P.T.P.).
24. Cambridge South Asia Archive, Pawsey Papers, Box 1, No. 5 Clow to Pawsey, 24 April 1947.
25. Draft in *Ibid.*, Box 1.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, Clow to Pawsey, 26 April 1947.
28. J.P. Mills, A Note on the Future Administration and Constitutional Position of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded Areas and Tribal Areas in and on the border of Assam, 1945.
29. *Ibid.*, Chaper 14.
30. Andrew Clow, Memorandum on the Future Government of the Assam Tribal People. Shillong, 1945.
31. Clow also published a small pamphlet, The Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas of Assam, in which he argues against Reid's main thesis and calling for the hills ' union in Assam.
32. Andrew Clow, Memorandum, pp. 31-47; IOLR, L/P&J/7/6787, Clow to Wavell, 23, October 1945.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
34. One more British Officer P.F.Adams published a small tract, Some Notes on a Policy for the Hill Tracts, Shillong (5.8.47.) which is referred in V.V. Rao, A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India, 1874-1974, Delhi, pp. 147-149. Note however, that Rao says Adam published his findings in 1945 whereas the tract mentioned above is dated 5.8.1947.
35. Cambridge South Asia Archive, Pawsey Papers, Clow to Pawsey, 26 April 1947.