

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ANGAMI POLICY OF LORD DALHOUSIE

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Lord Dalhousie is known in Indian History for a policy of aggressive territorial expansionism, perpetuated by at least three methods, viz. Doctrine of Lapse, plea of a good government, and the assertion of a right to military conquest, so consciously formulated as to cover the situation persistent in any area that the Governor-General would be pleased to annex to the British Indian Colony. An explicit departure from the core of this policy is, however, noticed in his Minute of 21 February 1851 on the Angami Nagas which directed "the withdrawal of the force which has been sent, and of the post which has been established in advance in that country" and asked for "the establishment of an effective means of defence on the line of our own frontier." Although the historians have been generally inclined to believe that the hazards involved in the military conquest of the Angami Hills had been the chief motivating force behind such a policy, our analysis is in the context of Dalhousie's determined effort to gain as much territorial expansion in India as it was possible and to suggest a legitimate justification of his Angami Naga policy which was in no way different from the policy of his predecessors towards the hill tribes in North East Frontier. Dalhousie had, in fact, gone a step further to ask for withdrawal of the post which was already established in the Angami Hills on the request of an Angami chief.

Relevant Contents

Lord Dalhousie in his Minute of 21 February 1851 outlined "the relations to be maintained with the Angami Nagas" and directed "the withdrawal of the force which has been sent, and of the post

which has been established in advance in that country,² As regards the Angami policy, he stated,

"I dissent entirely from the policy which is recommended of what is called obtaining a control, that is to say, of taking possession of these hills, and of establishing our sovereignty over their savage inhabitants. Our possession could bring no profit to us, and would be as costly to as it would be unproductive. The only advantage which is expected from our having possession of the country by those who advocate the measure, is the termination of the plundering inroads which the tribes now make from the hills on our subjects at the foot of them. But this advantage may more easily, more cheaply, and more justly be obtained by refraining from all seizure of the territory of these Nagas, and by confining ourselves to the establishment of effective means of defence on the line of our own frontier."

Dalhousie was against the occupation of the Naga Hills even temporarily. He found the position of the advanced post, the European officer and the troops to be unsatisfactory. The British Government had nothing to gain from such occupation, it would, on the contrary, add to the expense of administration. The best way to protect the British territory from inroads, according to him, was to establish a line of frontier defence. As he said,³

"I cannot, for a moment, admit that the establishment of such a line of frontier defence is impracticable. Major Jenkins describes the troops who compose the Militia and the Police as active, bold, and hardy. With such materials as these,

there can be no impossibility nor even difficulty, in establishing effective lines of frontier defence, if the plan is formed by officers of capacity, and executed by officers of spirit and judgement. This opinion is not given at random. The peace and security preserved on other portions of the frontier of this Empire, where the extent is greater and the neighbouring tribes far more formidable, corroborate the opinion I have given."

The Governor-General ordered that the Police force should be increased and Major Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam, be asked to submit his scheme of frontier posts. These posts, in his opinion, would be enough to prevent the Angamis from encroaching into the British territory. He was concerned with the 'Empire', and not with the 'savages' beyond. He said,

"Hereafter we should confine ourselves to our own ground; protect it as it can and must be protected; not meddle in the feuds or fights of these savages; encourage trade with them as long as they are peaceful towards us; and rigidly exclude them from all communication either to sell what they have got, or to buy what they want if they should become turbulent or troublesome."

The content of the Minute is indeed very clear: (i) Dalhousie disapproved the policy of occupation of the Naga Hills which was recommended by some of the officers in north-east frontier, and (ii) he wanted to protect the British territory from Naga hostility by establishing a line of frontier defence. In fact, there is nothing exceptional in this policy to deserve our attention, since almost from the

beginning of their contact with the north-east most of the time the British authorities had favoured a policy of avoidance towards the hill tribes. Dalhousie's Minute could be taken as a mere repetition of the good old policy. But the Minute assumes a special significance because of its departure from the well known policy of Dalhousie who had boldly asserted his determination to extend direct British rule over as large an area as it was possible. A reconciliation of these two conflicting positions, namely, (i) Dalhousie's determination to expand the British territory as much as it was possible, and (ii) his decision to withdraw from the Naga Hills, is perhaps possible only by an understanding of (i) the underlying motive behind Dalhousie's expansionist policy, and (ii) prospect of such a policy in the Naga Hills.

Understanding Dalhousie

Dalhousie "was destined to leave a deeper personal impression on the destinies of India than any of his predecessors since Lord Wellesley."⁵ And such an assessment is called upon only when his achievement is judged by the expansion of the British territory in India during his governor-generalship. As Michael Edwardes noted,⁶ "Dalhousie's period as governor-general was one of the most decisive in the history of British India. It was a period of intense activity, and of consolidation, a period full of tremors foreshadowing the earthquake of the Indian Mutiny." To quote A.D. Innes,⁷ "... his predecessors had acted on the general principle of avoiding annexation if it could be avoided; Dalhousie acted on the general principle of annexing if he could do so legitimately." In fact, the aggressive expansionism of this arch imperialist was noticed from the beginning of his career, when "within three months of his arrival Hardinge's policy of experimental forbearance in leaving the Sikhs a partial autonomy had broken down."⁸ The whole of Punjab

was annexed by a proclamation on 29 March 1849 which finally carried the frontiers of British India to their natural limits in the north-west. Only some hill areas in the north-east now remained outside their rule.

The more mundane aspect of Dalhousie's annexationist policy was the promotion of British commerce in India in conformity with the mercantilist character of the British Indian colonial state which aimed at extracting Indian raw materials to feed the growing industries in England and to use India as a market for the British goods. As Bipan Chandra puts it, "the underlying motive of this policy was the expansion of British exports to India." Such a motive naturally developed from the personal background of Dalhousie which claimed strong connections with some leading industrial houses of England.¹⁰ He held the position of the President of the Board of Trade before his appointment as the Governor-General,¹¹ and his endeavours in that capacity for the promotion of trade in India must have been an important reason for his later appointment. His attitude towards the native states, which he wanted to reclaim either through the Doctrine of Lapse or on the plea of maladministration, also developed from his feelings "that British exports to the native states of India were suffering because of the maladministration of these states by their Indian rulers."¹² The annexation of Avadh was influenced by the immense potential of that state as a market for Manchester goods. Similarly, he took away the cotton producing province of Berar from the Nizam to satisfy Britain's growing demand for raw cotton. The Second Anglo-Burmese War, which was the second war (after Sikh war) of Dalhousie's administration, arose out his determination to protect the interests of the British merchants who had settled on the southern coast of Burma. The annexation of Lower Burma (Pegu) was an important step in the promotion of British commerce in South East Asia. As P.E. Roberts puts it,¹³

"The new province extended as far north as Myede fifty miles beyond Prome. Westward it was bounded by the hills of Arakan and eastward roughly by the river Salwen. Independent Burma was now shut off altogether from the sea, and the whole coastline of the Bay of Bengal from Cape Comorin to the Malay Peninsula passed under British control."

Finally, Dalhousie's plan of rapid railway development and a network of four main trunk lines which would link the interior of the country with big ports could have been connected with the question of commerce. It is not altogether impossible that behind his Angami Naga policy also the commercial potential was an important consideration.

The Naga Situation

The relations between the Naga and the British had been hostile ever since they came into contact after the annexations of Assam and Cachar, the first confrontation being in 1833 when a British party from Manipur to Assam tracked through the Angami area. The punitive expeditions despatched from time to time achieved only temporary successes, the Angamis emerging as most formidable and the British taxed dearly. By 1846 there were three outposts in the Naga frontier at Dimapur, Mohundijua¹⁴ and Hssang Hajo entrusted to the Nowgong Militia. In 1847 a military¹⁵ post was established at Samagudting (Chumukudima). The two important Angami villages of Mozemah and Khonomah emerged as strong challengers. In Mozemah two rival chiefs, Jubilee and Niholee, were logged in personal feuds. On request of Jubilee the British erected a stockade in Mozemah in 1849 and posted a police guard there. But the Darogah, a Havildar and several sepoy were killed by Niholee's supporters. The British, however, maintained the post, and Niholee retired to Khonomah

where on the ridge of a hill he built a fort.¹⁶ In December 1849, Lieutenant G.F.F. Vincent, Junior Assistant, Nowgong, led a punitive expedition. Although Vincent occupied an advance post in Khonomah where he remained for the next season, Niholee and his party were unapprehended.¹⁷ In December 1850, a strong force of five hundred men was sent to Khonomah under Major Foquett of Second Assam Light Infantry. Captain Reid of Artillery and Lieutenant Bivar with a well equipped detachment took position in Mozemah. Captain J. Butler, Principal Assistant, Nowgong, also stationed himself at Mozemah to supervise the operations. After a siege of sixteen hours, the troops took possession of the fort on 10 December 1850,¹⁸ and Khonomah passed under the British control.¹⁹ As regards the result of the policy till then, Barpujari writes,

"Punitive expeditions had been sent out, we have seen, one after another, in retaliation of the incursions made by the Angamis on British subjects and the Nagas friendly to the government. So far as the primary objective was concerned, these were on the whole successful. Not only the villages on the border were free for several years from attacks of the Nagas, but several chiefs and clans came in and entered into verbal agreements acknowledging the authority of the British including payment of a nominal tribute."

The issue debated at this stage was the formulation of a policy towards the Nagas. Butler observed, "We have driven the enemy from his stronghold and he must now be sensible of our power, and it is a question to be considered, whether it would not be more advisable not to interfere in the internal affairs of the Nagas" but to maintain posts at Dimapur and Mohungdijua" for the protection of our

frontier."²⁰ Vincent proposed a permanent annexation of the Angami Hills, and suggested the retention of the post of Mozemah.²¹ Jenkins believed that the retention of the post would be attended with greatest good to the government as well as the people.²²

It was in response to these contradictory recommendations that Lord Dalhousie issued his Minute on 21 February 1851 asking the withdrawal of the post and the establishment of a line of frontier defence. It is important to note that the policy enjoined in the Minute remained valid for next fifteen years to be replaced by a forward policy only in 1866 when it was found that the Naga incursions was a definite menace to the tea, oil and coal fields in Assam.²³

A Summing-up

We may now directly approach the point of view that in our opinion emerges from the position taken by Dalhousie in the Minute under discussion. It may be restated here that the East India Company's mercantilist government of India decided all its actions on the basis of the profit it is supposed to earn. Its methods were (i) collection of raw materials for British industries, (ii) marketing of the manufactured goods, and (iii) keeping the cost of administration lower than the revenue. In each of the areas that Dalhousie brought under British rule there were strong possibilities of the fulfilment of these colonial aspirations. On the contrary, in Naga Hills there was no possibility of enough revenue to meet the cost of administration, no such raw materials that the British could be interested, and no immediate prospect of its development as a market of British goods. The advocates of the permanent occupation of the Naga Hills could not back up their recommendation by the possibility of perpetuation of the mundane British interests. It therefore, failed to impress Dalhousie who

unequivocally stated in the Minute, "Our possession could bring no profit to us, and would be as costly to us as it would be unprofitable". The underlying motive of the Angami Naga policy of Lord Dalhousie emerges from this statement of the Governor-General himself.

Notes and References

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