



**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

SEVENTH SESSION

PASIGHAT : 1986

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PREFACE

It gives us great joy to find that the Association has been growing in strength over the years as the premier research organisation in North East India. Our strategies of grass-root research, inter-disciplinary approach, and group orientation for an objective understanding of the nature of socio-economic developments and social formations at different points of time have started to yield the cherished results. The membership of the organisation has been steadily increasing. Our more than three hundred members today are the researchers from the Surveys and research departments and the teachers in the Universities, Colleges and Schools spread over all the seven States in the North-East, besides a few from outside the region. Our members are not from History but also almost all the Social Sciences and Humanities streams, and this is because of our faith in the study of history as a science for socio-economic development. Our annual sessions are major academic gatherings in the region, attended on an average by hundred and fifty delegates from all over the region. A large number of research papers are presented and discussed in the annual session each one of which is a substantial addition to the existing literature. Our proceedings volumes are acclaimed as major references on North East India. We get requests for copies of current as well as back volumes from all over the country and even abroad.

We have also been able to create some enthusiasm about research in the history of the region. The researches in the history of North East India are going on in all the Universities in the region. A large number of M. Phil. and Ph. D. candidates are working in regional history. There are on-going individual research projects by teachers and professional researchers. The seminars are occasionally organised in various institutions. A fair number of research publications have come out in recent years and many more must be in the pipe lines. The under-graduate and post-graduate level courses in the history of North East India are offered in the Universities in the region. Some of the State departments are planning to introduce the study of the history of the concerned State in the schools, and some of our members are cooperating with the SCERTs in preparing the text books. The emerging important functions of this Association are to coordinate the on-going researches, to design a perspective for research, to develop appropriate tools and methodologies, and

to create literature in the history of the region so that it may be possible to prepare a Comprehensive History of North East India in the next few years.

The present volume is the Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat on November 11-13, 1986. Professor J. B. Ganguly, Director, Calcutta University Post-graduate Centre, Agartala presided over the Session which was inaugurated by Shri Khapriso Krong, Minister of Education, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Shri B. K. Kakoty, Principal, and Dr. S. Dutta, Head, Department of History, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat did us great honour as Chairman of the Reception Committee and Local Secretary of the Session respectively. Besides its high academic contents, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the session for warmth of the reception extended by the organisers and the colourful entertainment programme. Our thanks are due to the authorities of the Jawaharlal Nehru Colleges Pasighat and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. Milton S. Sangma, Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh and Mr. Abhijit Choudhury for the help in editing and publishing this volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research and the North Eastern Council for financial assistance.

Shillong

The 25 September 1987.

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

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North Eastern Province and its Viability

Bimal J. Dev & Dilip K. Lahiri

The feasibility of the formation of a separate hill province named North Eastern Frontier Province consisting of most of the hill tribes of Assam and Burma and parts of Chittagong Hill Tracts was mooted at a time¹ when the British Imperialism was at its Zenith in India. At that time the British Indian officials had not yet realised the inevitability of their exit from India. The uppermost consideration in their mind was to ensure this consolidation as a means of frontier insurance with China². There seemed to have been the official apprehension about the possible Chinese assertion as to the validity of the Simla Conference which drew the McMahon Line on the map. Subsequently the idea was sought to be given a definite shape by Robert Reid during his tenure as Governor of Assam and it caught the imagination of some Burmese officials too³. At this stage too the question of leaving Indians to their fate had not become a *fait accompli*. It is therefore wrong to approach this proposal with the nomenclature 'crown colony' for India itself was then a Crown Colony, the most precious jewel of the British empire.

Alternative proposal

Robert Reid himself was not insistent on the proposal, as he spoke the necessity of an alternative proposal should his scheme proved to be unacceptable to the Government. In his opinion a workable alternative arrangement would be the formation of a province of the Assam valley only and in placing the hills under that without any of the existing safeguards⁴. The rationale of this approach was based on the 'old Assamese friendly methods of dealing with the hill men'. Another justification of this alternative was that the Assam valley then contained a substratum of Mongolian population similar to that of hills. Reid even went to the extent of making a gesture of offering to restore the old Ahom Kingdom as a State with the condition that the new State would be deprived of none of the democratic institutions Assam then enjoyed.

As already stated that the primary force behind the proposal to constitute such a province was to facilitate the proper treatment of the question of frontier defence between longitudes 92° and 97°. In Reid's opinion, "China at present may be a negligible quantity but should she ever recover from her internal disorders

the question of Chinese frontier is likely to become very much more important and the advantages of having under one administration both frontier and its bases from Ninety second and Ninetyseventh degree of longitudes would be considerable”⁵. It may be noted that the greater part of the tracts in the proposed province lay along the frontiers of China and Tibet. The British Indian officials had anticipated the emergence of a strong China and the extension of its dominance over Tibet. This possibility made them somewhat hysteric with the idea that the whole frontier should be under the unified control of His Majesty’s Government.

Territorial Frame

The tribal areas of Burma formed a horseshoe round Burma stretching from the Arakan Hills Tracts on the West to Karenni on the East. The tribal areas in Burma consisted of :

Federated Shan States	Square miles	Population
i. Sixteen Northern States	21,400	636,107
ii. Thirty Southern States	36,416	870,230
iii. Three Karenni States	4,519	58,761
Wa States (approximately)	2,600	90,000
Chin Hills area (approximately)	10,377	171,237
Arakan Hill Tracts area (approximately)	3,543	21,418
Naga Hills District		
Somra Tract	847	8,500
Naga Hills (Newly administered area)	3,500	50,000
Hsawngsup State	567	8 000
Singaling Hkamti State	981	2,000
Kachin Hill Tracts		
Myitkyina District	19,762	81,443
Bhama District	2,961	54,662
Grand Total	107,473	2,052,258

This was indeed a colossal area compared to the area of Burma and its total population of 233, 492 square miles and 14,667,146 respectively. On the other hand the tribal areas of Assam consisted of :—

Excluded Areas

- The North East Frontier Tracts (Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur)
- The Naga Hills District
- The Lushai Hills District

Partially Excluded Areas

- The Garo Hills District
- The Mikir Hills District
- The British portion of Khasi & Jaintia Hills District other than the Shillong Municipality and Cantonment.

Beyond the administered areas there were unadministered areas over which the British had only the most shadowy control. In addition, the proposed scheme had also included the State of Manipur. The area of the proposed Province thus contained :

Administered hill tracts of Assam ..	28,211	sq. miles
Unadministered territory ..	28,460	sq. miles
Khasi States ...	3,694	sq. miles
Manipur ...	8,620	sq. miles

The population of the above areas was estimated to be around 2,500,000.

Affinity of tribal people

It is thus clear that the proposed Tribal province was to be triangular with its base on the frontier and its apex on the Bay of Bengal "replacing an irregular frontier on which a narrow strip of Assam overlaps and intrusion from Burma". It was admitted that the provincial area would contain diverse elements but they all had one similarity in that the people concerned had nothing in common with the advanced communities in plains. Admittedly the people inhabiting the areas on the Indo-Burma Frontier had so much in common with those on the Burma side that the then existing boundary between the two countries was conceived to be entirely 'artificial'⁶. Their languages were exactly the same in some cases as those on the Burma side and there was constant communication which ran across from Hukawang Valley into the Naga Hills on the Assam side. The tribal areas of Burma particularly the Chin, Naga and Kachin hills had nothing in common with Burma proper. There were thus no affinities racial, historical, cultural or linguistic between the tribesmen and the Burmese of the plains. In their racial type and culture as well as in their geographical position the people of the hills no more belonged to Burma than Burma belonged to India. Significantly, the British Secretary

of State, L. S. Amery, declared in the British Parliament on 3rd March 1941 of Burma under separation from India, "That separation was the natural consequence of the introduction of self-government, for in her racial type and her culture as well in her geographical position Burma belongs not to India but to the easternmost of the great southward projection of the main bulk of Asia the Indo-Chinese peninsula."⁷ In this connection one can refer to the 'conclusions' of Memorandum 86 placed by J. H. Hutton before sub-committee D of the Joint -Committee : 'The tribal areas have interests which conflict with those of the people inhabiting the normally administered plains area and that the introduction of provincial self-government raises the necessity for some form of protection for these areas until they are in a position to stand on their own feet either as an integral part of the province in which they are found or as independent units of the federated whole'.⁸

Linguistic Chaos

The Chin, Lushai-Kuki, Naga, Kachin Shan, Palaung and Karen races were distributed between Assam, Burma, China French Indo-China and Siam. All had cultural affinities of varying degrees with each other and to a much less degree with the Burmese and Chinese. As already stated all differed widely from the Indian cultures to the West. The whole of the Assam and Burma tribal areas however suffered from linguistic chaos. Most tribes spoke mutually unintelligible languages. Very often phratries of the same tribe spoke different languages and not infrequently among Naga tribes village communities were linguistic entities. In the Eastern Burma Hills, Shan was to some extent the *lingua franca*, to the north the Jinghpaw dialect of the Kachin language group served this purpose even to the Naga area bordering Singkaling Hkamti. In the western hills the four Chin dialects of Siyin, Laizo, Haka and Chinbok were used in their respective areas while Manipuri was the '*lingua franca*' of the Somra tract. Burmese was not spoken by the hill people anywhere except on the fringes of the foothills and some of the Myelat States of the Federated Shan States.

In the Kachin Hills knowledge of the Chinghpaw dialect could get one around most of the tracts. But there were large tribal tracts, such as the Lashi and Maru tracts, where the local dialect was the only one that was understood. The Shan States had Shan as the medium of speech ; in the Karenni State it was the Karen language. In the Assam side a form of colloquial Assamese was gradually becoming the *Lingua franca* only in some parts.

Advantages of amalgamation

The advantages of the formation of such a province were :

- (i) To facilitate the political advancement on corporate tribal lines and promote a coordinated social development of the tribal groups in their own way. This arrangement was intended to nullify the effect of separation of Burma from India and the subsequent creation of an artificial frontier permanently divorcing portions of tribes which "naturally should have comprised a single Province". It was presumed that incorporated into a single province there would be opportunities of advance not dissimilar to North West Frontier Province.
- (ii) To ensure the possible consolidation of an incredibly polyglot area into a uniform unit with ultimately a common language (English) for official purposes as it was expected to be more fruitful from the administrative angle.
- (iii) To explore the possibility of obtaining and maintaining a proper provincial cadre recruited for the province as a whole.
- (iv) To facilitate reorganisation of territorial boundaries to coincide with racial boundaries.
- (v) To ensure protection of tribesman from discriminatory exploitation of labour and natural resources and from immigration.
- (vi) To promote coordination of lines of communication within the area of the proposed agency and explore the possibilities of coordinated industrial development.

With the Chin, Naga and Kachin tribes brought closer together, the future development was expected to be better planned towards self-governing tribal communities with inter-locking interests, the wealthier lending support to the poorer; all of them contributing towards an administration evolved from within their own institutions but guided from without by officers of the Government.

The whole of the tribal area between Assam and Burma was seamed with rivers most of which ran North and South and some of which were trade arteries. All the tribes inhabiting the Burma half of the Assam mountain range and most of the tribes inhabiting the Assam half were dependent on an economy in which salt, cotton and iron were practically the only outside commodities required. In the eastern half of Burma the economic balance between hills and plains was maintained largely by the exchange of opium and grain. The flow of trade was small because the agricultural tribal groups were almost self-supporting. The trade that existed tended to run between the hills and their conti-

guous plains areas. The federated Shan States alone had anything approaching a large export trade.

Against this background it was strongly advocated that the homogenous nature of the economies of the tribal areas of Burma and Assam and the fact of their self-sufficient background, though at a low level, justified their administration as a whole under a separate Agency which would ultimately imply a narrowing of the cultural gap between the hill peoples of the area concerned.

Moreover, the development in the hills towards self-governing institutions could hardly proceed apace with those in the plains. The hills of Burma were a very long way behind in progress ; it was impossible to visualise except perhaps in the Shan States, their proper representation in a Burmese ministerial Government. Hence it was contended that "it would be disastrous to attempt by a stroke of the pen to join them up directly with a ministerial Burma"⁹. The natural capital of this province was to be Imphal in the Manipur State which had some communication link with the Assam-Bengal Railway on the West and needed only permanent bridges and a widening of the track to give adequate communications with the Chindwin on the East.

Simla Conference

To thrash out the proposal as many as 15 secret meetings of the Committee on Scheduled Areas were held at Simla in December 1942. One of the members C.W. North of the British Foreign Service submitted the proposal that the concerned areas of Burma and Assam could be combined profitably into a North Eastern Frontier Agency administered by a Crown Agent and separate from political control of a possible self-governing India and Burma to act as "an Imperial Frontier Insurance"¹⁰. The communication difficulty was likely to be less in the future owing :

(a) to the probability of a road communication between Imphal and Lashio ; (b) the probability of improved air communications between Lashio, Chittagong and North Eastern Arakan ; (c) the probability of a motor road between Lashio and North Eastern Assam through the Hukawng valley, and (d) the probability of improved communications between North Eastern areas and Putao. Financial contribution by way of frontier insurance could be expected from India and Burma and the remainder of the expenditure from the Imperial Government. Small excluded Areas of Assam were to be sacrificed in order to obtain geographical homo-

geneity for the proposed Agency. The economic relations of the Agency was proposed to be controlled by treaty with India and Burma.

Abandonment of the proposal

However the disadvantages were considered to be immense. First of all, there was the extreme unlikelihood of the Governments of either Assam and Burma accepting partition of their territory. The proposal entailed partition from Burma and Assam of the areas on which they depended for preservation of climate and water. Secondly, the proposed Agency was to be very cumbersome from a geographical point of view and it was the near unanimous opinion that geographical obstacles would virtually render it impossible. The majority of the members of the committee were of the opinion that economic advancement in the hill areas would greatly increase the demand for contact with centre of the Government. Thirdly, the language difficulty already formidable would be accentuated. In the fourth place, it was strongly felt that with co-ordinated and synchronous development of the tribal areas, the need for aligning tribal and territorial boundaries would disappear. Over and above, it was considered unlikely that the Governments of Burma and Assam would agree to contribute towards the administration of an Agency altogether outside their influence purely on the ground of Imperial defence. The committee therefore came to the conclusion that the idea of amalgamating the Tribal Areas of Assam and Burma should be dropped.

Above all it was decided that the principles of indirect rule must remain the basis of the whole administration. It was held that the success of any policy of administering the tribal areas of Burma and Assam depended on maintaining the policy of indirect rule. In their view, "the history of the African Colonies and our own miserable efforts at direct rule in the hills of Burma are a sufficient rebuttal to any argument that indirect rule is not the only form of administration that can be adopted." This proposal to constitute a tribal province subsequently never received serious attention of the Government of India and the Cripps proposal changed the entire direction of the discussion. Some of the officials after their retirement continued to champion its formation in the British press but no responsible official at White Hall did ever show any eagerness to follow the suit. In fact, when in 1946 J. P. Mills displayed his nostalgia in this direction he was promptly reminded of the 'impracticability of the proposal, geographically and politically.

Notes & References

1. Dr. J. H. Hutton who was for many years the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills recorded his first note on the subject on 17 March 1928 (see pages III-22 of the Assam Government's Memoranda prepared for the Indian Statutory Commission). At this stage he was for "the gradual creation of self-governing communities semi-independent in nature..... for whose external relations alone the Government of the province would ultimately be responsible". Later in his second note recorded on 6 July 1930 (Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political (Reform) A ; December 1930, Nos. 1-3) he elaborated the idea of a separate province consisting of the tribal areas of Assam and Burma. Dr. Hutton made a third note on the subject on 18 September 1935 (Pol. A, December 1936, Nos. 1-30).
2. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political (Reforms) A; December 1930 Nos, 1-30
3. Confidential Note on the *Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam* by Sir Robert Reid, 1941.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Reid even favoured inclusion of Sikkim in the proposed Agency/Province : "Firstly ; this State is essentially Mongolian and non-Indian and, second, the political officer there is the channel of communication between the central Government and the Government of Bhutan and Tibet, both of which countries have long frontiers with Assam. It is obviously advantageous that the Political Officer in Sikkim should be in constant touch with and under control of the head of the Agency along the frontier of which questions with Bhutan and Tibet are constantly arising."
6. Confidential Leaflet on *Scheduled Areas of Burma* prepared by R. E. Mac Guire, Simla, December 1942.
7. Debates of the House of Commons, 3rd March 1941.
8. See pages 2367-74 of Vol. II 'Minutes of Evidence'.
9. Confidential leaflet on '*Scheduled Areas of Burma*', n. 6.
10. C. W. North had developed his theory of Indirect Rule after studying Chapter IX of '*An African Survey*' by Lord Hailey.
11. See Lord Hailey's *An African Survey* and Miss. Margery Perham's book on *Nigeria* in which Lord Lugard's introduction of the Principles of Indirect Rule receives the fullest justification.