

Lushai Expedition and Haricharan Sarma

A Native Bengalee in Cachar

Sujit K. Ghosh.

The middle of the 19th Century witnessed the growth of some immigrant Kuki Vallages. In March 1831, a body of Kukis consisting of 250 families came down to Cachar and were settled by Thomas Fisher, the First Superintendent of Cachar, in the hill areas of Cachar. In next few years, several Kuki families were settled in Cachar plains with the help of Haricharan Sarma, a native Bengalee, who was influential in local administration.

Haricharan Sarma

Haricharan was born in April 1826 at Gangpar-Dhumkar area of Hailakandi town in the district of Cachar. The year witnessed the signing of Treaty of Yandabo which finally checked the Burmese aggressions and the restoration of Govindachandra Narayan, the last Dimasa Raja of Cachar, through the intervention of the British Government.

Haricharan was a little boy of hardly five years when the last Dimasa Raja met with death at the hands of assassins and Cachar entered into the arena of colonial administration. He thus experienced in his life the transition from the old to a new epoch in the history of Cachar. In 1848 he started his career as a *Gomstha* (clerk) of a *Khedda* (elephant catching) lessee on a salary of Rs. 8 per month and free board and lodging. He also started Salt manufacturing but this business failed and he lost all his savings.

He, however, learnt Dimasa and the Kuki dialects. We next find him in the year 1852 practising as a *Muktear* at Silchar. In 1853 he got an appointment for 9 months as *Mohurer* under the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar on a salary

of Rs. 4 per month. His devotion to his duties brought him to the notice of Captain Barnes, Superintendent of Cachar. This led to his appointment as a *Mohurer* at Ganjong in the North Cachar Hills on a salary of Rs. 20 per month⁴.

In 1856 Cachar entered into the tea map of India when the Ghungoor Tea Garden was started in the same year. Davidson was appointed as the Manager and Sarma as a Head clerk. Soon after, he was deputed to Manipur for the Collection of tea seed. The Company was so pleased with the success of his mission that on his return it raised his pay to Rs. 50 as a mark of appreciation of his valuable services. He also encouraged the authorities to recruit the Kukis and the native Bengalees as tea garden labourers⁵. For his close acquaintance with the royal family of Manipur and the Dimasas, Nagas, Lushais and other hill tribes and his knowledge in all those languages, his services as a peace-maker between the British Government and the hill tribes were specially valuable to the government⁶. When the Lushai Expedition was sanctioned in 1870 the Government required the services of a man well acquainted with the country and the manners and customs of the Lushais⁷.

He knew the ins and outs, the activities and declivities, and the ravines of the Lushailand. The principal cause of the Lushai raids was a movement of Hill tribes from the interim towards Cachar. Before the Lushai Expedition 1870-71, Lt.Col. Lister, Officer Commanding, Sylhet Light Infantry, was directed by the authorities in 1849 to proceed and chastise the Lushais and they were well disposed and inclined towards the English for a short period. Lister's expedition had cast a deep impact in establishing trade and commercial relationship between the Lushais and the inhabitants of Hailakandi and Saraspur, the two most Southern Parganas of Cachar. Lt.

Col. Lister had established some outposts along the southern frontier because he realised the possibility of another Lushai Expedition. Accordingly stockades were erected at Quzidar, Sonabarighat, Saiydpur, Jaffarband where Sylhet Light Infantry was posted.

In 1869, the Lushais set fire to Loharband tea garden in Cachar and attacked another tea garden situated within a short distance of Silchar. To punish the Lushais an expedition was fitted out against them in the same year under the command of General Nuthal. The Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, Edgar, was the civil authority accompanying the expedition and Haricharan was placed under him to look after the transport arrangements. The expedition had, however, to return to Silchar without achieving its objects as the heavy rainfall in the Lushai Hills prevented further advance.

The failure of this expedition made the Lushais bold in their attacks on British territory. In the cold season of 1869, Edgar with 2 regiments of soldiers and accompanied by Haricharan left for the Lushai Hills. Haricharan's main object of this tour was two-fold, viz. to explore the approaches to hills, and to try and induce the Lushais not to invade British territory. Haricharan's knowledge of Lushai language and customs proved to be of great use to the mission in pacifying the Lushais¹⁰. The levy they induced to frequent periodical fairs within the British boundary. Two paths were opened one from Manierkhal to Bong Kong and the other from the Duarband as far as the Rang. As a reward for Haricharan's valuable services he received from the government a grant in perpetuity of 470 acres of freehold land, an elephant and also the thanks of the Bengal Government¹¹.

In 1871 a group of Lushais attacked Ainarkhal tea garden and carried away 25 men as prisoners. These attacks continued and it was considered necessary to send a regular expedition against

them. In 1871 General Bouchier with 8000 soldiers left for the Lushailand. Haricharan was again incharge of the commissariat arrangements. On 12 December, 1871 the army reached Tipaimukh. There were now skirmishes on all sides with the Lushais. To his Commissariat duties Haricharan added those of a soldier and always went about fully armed cheering the sepoys and sometimes exchanging shots with the enemy. Even in the midst of so much danger Haricharan rigidly observed the rules of caste and would not drink a drop of water without proper ablutions. On the 26th there was continued fighting between the English and Lushais. A shot fired by the Lushais knocked off Edgar's helmet. Haricharan fired in the direction from which the shot came, and killed a Lushai².

After repeated reverses a message was sent by them to the British camp enquiring about the terms of peace. It was necessary therefore to despatch a messenger to the Lushai camp who could explain to the Lushais the terms on which the British Government was disposed to grant peace, which succeeded in signing a treaty with the chief³.

.In November 1872 the title of Rai Bahadur was conferred on Haricharan as a personal distinction, He also received the thanks of the Government of India. In 1873 he was appointed a special Extra Assistant Commissioner and posted to Lushai hills as its Political Agent and in⁴ this capacity he worked till 1885, when he retired.

In 1881-82 a famine broke out in the Lushai Hills. This great famine of 1882, caused by the depredation of rats, prompted the Lushai chiefs depute envoys to Cachar to obtain supplies. The impact of the famine was so great that the clans gave up their age-old feuds and made a truce to cope with the situation. As a result, several Lushai families migrated to Cachar and showed their anxiety to earn bread by namual labour or by begging. Haricharan Sarma immediately took

the charge of the relief operations and laboured hard to open up the Lushailand. His tour immensely helped the Lushais and saved them from this havoc and made them more amenable to the British authority¹⁵. Under his supervision they were employed for cutting bamboo and timbers, and for clearing the jungles in tea gardens. He witnessed the horror of the famine on the spot. The grim picture of the famine moved his heart and his reports moved the Government of India and an immediate sanction of Rs. 50,000 was made for relief work. After the famine was over, the hillmen resumed the cultivation of their *Jhum* fields, but more than a thousand immigrants settled themselves in Cachar whose descendants are still to be found in favious *Punjis*¹⁶.

Notes & References

1. Cachar Records (hereafter C.R.), No 170 of 1852; During the year 1851 a census of the population of the district was taken. Kuki houses and Barees were 1, 264 and its population was 6, 320.
2. U.C. Guha and Aswini Kumar Sarma, **Bangabir Haricharan Sarma**, Dacca, 1325 B.S., pp. 14-17.
3. C.R. No 176 of 1853, a letter from G. Verner to F. Skipurth, Superintendent of Police in Cachar, 11 July, 1853.
4. C.R. No 202 of 1853 a letter from G. Verner to Capt. Mc Cullock, Political Agent, Manipur, 2 August, 1853; J.B. Bhattacharjee, **Cachar under the British Rule in North East India**, New Delhi, 1977.
5. General Report of the District of Cachar containing an account of the Civil, Criminal and Revenue Administration. (G.Verner, Superintendent of Cachar, 30 June, 1853.)
6. C.r. No of 1853, a letter from G. Verner to A.G.M. Mills, Sudder Judge and Special commissioner, 11 August, 1853; **The Bengalee**, Wednesday, May, 7, 1913.

7. F.P.P. 10 August, 1874; U.C.Guha, n. 3.
8. C.R. No 282 of 1853 a letter from G. Verner to Secretary to the Government of India, Fort William, 6 December, 1853
9. F.P.P., 16 September 1870; **Silchar**, 11 August, 1913.
10. U.C. Guha, n.3.
11. **Ibid**, **The Bengalee**, Wednesday, May 7, 1913
12. **Ibid**
13. U.C. Guha n.3
14. Bhattacharjee, n.5.
15. S.K. Ghosh, **A Socio-Cultural Study of Cachar**, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, G.U., 1977, p.79.
16. Bhattacharjee, n.5.