



ASSAM

Unification and Roots of Division

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Sir John Strachey's remark in an address to Cambridge undergraduates in 1884 that there "never was an India" of the kind that emerged under the British in the nineteenth century could well have been said of modern Assam. The province they bequeathed to an independent India in 1947 was never before a single political unit and the several states that have since emerged in the hill areas were not only independent of any valley based authority but also of one another. The Ahoms, the predecessors of the British in the Brahmaputra valley where they ruled for about six hundred years and after whom the kingdom and the modern province came to be known, never held the surrounding hills. Nor did the writ of the rulers of pre-colonial Cachar, themselves little in common with the Ahoms, run in the hills about the Barak valley.

The hill tribes however, did not remain as isolated as it is often but erroneously supposed. Apart from the more perceptible results of interaction in the marshlands there is evidence to suggest a continuous and close contact between the hills and the plains. This was a relationship that was later blurred by an overemphasis on the part of the British of the obvious physical and cultural differences. And with their love for the exotic, the British while conceding the connection of the two valleys with the rest of the country historical and cultural were less inclined to consider the hill peoples as part of India. Another distinguished member of the Indian Civil Service and a

Governor of the province, Sir Robert Reid, said of them in the early 'forties:

they are not Indian in any sense of the word, neither in origin, nor in language, nor in appearance, nor in habits, nor in outlook, and it is only by historical accident that they have been tacked to an Indian province.

The historical accident in reality began a century and a half ago when after the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) the East India Company occupied for the security of the Eastern-frontier as the British had declared, the western end of the Brahmaputra valley comprising roughly the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong and Darang, Cachar was brought Under British protection during the war and annexed in 1832. Eastern or Upper Assam corresponding to the district of Sibsagar and parts of Lakhimpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra which was restored to an Ahom prince in 1834, was resumed only four years later. The frontier areas further east occupied by the Khamti, Muttock and Singpho tribes, which began as a political agency, were brought under effective administrative and military control during 1839-43 in the interests of the tea industry. About the same time, the eastern Bhutan *duars* were annexed. The first hill area to come under the Company were the Khasi States, during 1829-33, where a determined resistance by the Khasi to colonial controls were overcome. The adjoining Jaintia Raj was annexed in the following year. The appointment of a British officer in Tura in 1856 led to the creation of the Garo Hills District which was made part of Assam. A similar appointment in the same year in Chumukedima the Samaguting, of British records, led to the formation of Naga Hills District.

These areas together with Goalpara and Sylhet were united in 1874 to become the province of Assam, administered by a Chief Commissioner directly under the Governor-General in Council. The old Commissionership of Assam associated with the names of Scott, Jenkins and Hopkinson consisted to Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur and the hill districts of the Garo, Naga and the Khasi & Jaintia Hills. The

last was a political agency since 1835 and became a district of Assam only in 1854. Assam was one of the less important divisions under Bengal, the Commissioner however, dealing directly with the Government of India on frontier as Agent to the Governor-General. Goalpara was a part of Cooch Behar commissionership and Cachar since its annexation of Dacca, though the North-Cachar Hills were transferred to Assam in 1839 for better defence against the troublesome Angamis. The new province as planned by Lord Mayo was to include the entire northern frontier of Bengal consisting of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar but, It has been suggested, Bengali opposition allowed the transfer of only Goalpara. The Bengali *duar* of Buxa, vital for the defence of Bhutan frontier, was attached to Goalpara and was included in the Eastern Frontier of Assam Command.

It was in south-east Bengal where frontier problems had a more direct impact upon territorial adjustments. The Lushais who were a thorn at the side alike of Chittagong, Sylhet, Cachar and the native states of Manipur and Tipperah or Tripura called for a uniform policy and a single administration to deal with them. This, in the opinion of Government of India, could be provided if all these areas were placed under Assam, already experienced in frontier management. Once again, Bengali sentiments stood in the way of separation of Chittagong and its Hill tracts from the presidency. Only Cachar and Sylhet where tea interests were in favour of association with a name already famous for the quality of its tea became a part of Assam. The proposal for the transfer of Chittagong and the Hill Tracts was revived in the nineties, this time along with the newly annexed Lushai hills. One view was that the Chin Hills and the Arakan Hill Tracts of Burma should be attached to the Lushai Hills and placed under Assam. Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Burma's Chief Commissioner, who successfully opposed the move would have rather liked that:

"Bengal should make over the Chittagong District, the Chittagong Hill Tracts District, and Hill Tipperah to Assam, and that a Commissionership should be formed under Assam embracing these tracts the North and South Lushai Districts and Cachar and Sylhet."

In the event Bengal gave up, only the South Lushai Hills which amalgamated with the Northern Hills already under Assam became the Lushai Hills District in 1898. By then Assam had further grown: the Naga Hills had extended and become settled district in 1881, though not before Naga resistance following the occupation of Kohima three years ago was crushed. Within a decade the Ao Naga territory was incorporated into the district as a sub-division. At the Simla Conference in 1913-14, the McMahon Line delineated the border with Tibet and the entire area became the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) now Arunachal Pradesh and became a part of Assam.

For long Assam did not have its own civil service cadre and officers were 'loaned' from Bengal. They returned to their province in normal course after a five-year posting and Assam seldom was able to retain the services of senior civilians. "Covenanted civilians from Bengal", Assam's Chief Commissioner Sir Joseph Bamfylde Fuller had protested, "offer the Bengal Government an irresistible temptation to plant upon (Assam) its undersirables". The solution of Assam's problems was the expansion of the commission, a point elaborated in a minute by the Government of India's Home Secretary, Sir Herbert Risley, in 1903:

"It (Assam) requires territorial expansion in order to give its officers a wide and interesting field of work. It requires a maritime outlet in order to develop its industries in tea, oil and coal. The paying propositions of the Assam-Bengal Railway are in the south, and the whole if it is to be utilised in the interest of the ought to be under a single administration. Assam moreover will continue to be handicapped, so long as it is dependent for its service upon what it may be fortunate enough to borrow from Bengal. A province that only offer the prize of one Chief Commissionership that is remote in locality and backward in development and organisation will not attract the highest type of civilians to its employ. The Government of India regard it indeed incontestable that, with a service recruited as at present and confined within the present limits, Assam will find extreme difficulty in at-

taining the level of a really efficient administration; and it is for this reason that, in considering the question of changes, they are impressed with the paramount necessity for making them on such a scale as will remove this fundamental source of weakness, and will, if possible, give Assam a service of its own, offering a career that will attract and retain men of ability and mark. No temporary opposition in the transferred towns or areas, no artificial agitation or interested outcry, should in their opinion be permitted to divert the efforts of Government from the main object, viz. creation of Assam into a vigorous and self-contained administration capable of playing the same part on the North-East Frontier that the Central Provinces have done in the centre, and the Punjab formerly did on the North West."

The proposed transfer of Chittagong would possibly have answered, even if partially, Assam's needs. But Lord Curzon's anxiety to reduce Bengal's size led to the inclusion of Dacca and Mymensing also. The Governor-General writing more on the basis of maps than on ground realities thus argued his case in a minute on 1 June 1903:

"Geographically, Dacca and Mymensing are separated by a clear line of division, viz. the main channel of the Brahmaputra (though it is not here called the Brahmaputra) from Bengal. If they are joined to Assam, the latter will possess a definite and intelligible western boundary, whereas if the Chittagong division goes to Assam, and Dacca and Mymensing are left with Bengal, the two latter divisions will constitute a projection from the main body of Bengal obtruding itself into the heart of Assam, from which they will be separated by no ties of origin, language, region, or administration. Not only would the transfer enable Assam to obtain an independent service, but that service will possess three separate commissionerships, which would be its prized appointments. There would be: (1) the Brahmaputra Valley or Assam proper; (2) Dacca to which would be added Sylhet and Cachar, and (3) Chittagong."

The inclusion of the districts of Pabna, Bogra, Rangpur as well as Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda and Cooch Behar went beyond Curzon's original scheme. As a single charge under a Lieutenant Governor, it was of the greatest benefit to the tea industry. Significantly, it was in their interests that the new province was named Eastern Bengal and Assam by the Secretary of State instead of 'North-Eastern Provinces' as proposed by the Government of India: "important commercial interests representing the tea industry would complain, 'India was told, if the name of Assams, now so widely known in world market as the chief source of Indian tea, was to disappear from the list of Indian provinces.'" To security concerns and administrative demands as factors in territorial organisation were other issues to be soon added.

The vast and diverse frontier brought under varying degrees of control and organised as district territorial units constitutionally within Assam were never administratively integrated. Rather Acts and Regulations and such measures as those in the northern frontier following the Expedition of 1912 though marking no diminution of provincial territory, emphasised differences between the hills and the plains. It was this that the constitutional reforms after the First world was brought into sharper focus and perpetuated. Assam were never administratively integrated. Rather Acts and Regulations and such measures as those in the northern frontier following the Expedition of 1912 though marking no diminution of provincial territory, emphasised differences between the hills and the plains. It was this that the constitutional reforms after the First World War brought into sharper focus and perpetuated.

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms introduced albeit in a very limited form 'responsible' governments in the provinces based on an extended franchise and direct elections. But representation in the legislature was not territorial but based on religion and caste differentiation. Nevertheless they provided an opportunity and marked the beginning of mass involvement in Indian politics. The exclusion of hill districts and backward tracts from the reform scheme ensured their effective insulation from political developments in the rest of the country. Years later, the British could thus boast that "Gandhi cuts

no ice with the hill people" and that his stock in these parts was not as high as in the provinces.

It was no coincidence that the Naga Clubs demand before the Simon Commission in 1928 for exclusion the constitutional reforms should also be the view of the Assam Government. In their memorandum to the Commission, Assam had stated:

"The backward tracts should be excluded from the province of Assam in the new Constitution. These areas have nothing in common with the rest of the Province. There is no sympathy on either side and the union is an artificial one resented by both partiesthe Government of Assam is convinced that in the interests, both of the backward tracts and the rest of the Province, the present artificial union should be ended."

"The hills are an unprofitable possession," added the Naga Hills" John Hutton in a separate note. And "whatever solution to the problem is ultimately adopted, the administration of the hills should be entirely separated from that of the plains, with an entirely separated budget consisting of the receipts the 'backward tracts' plus an annual grant to cover the difference between receipts and expenditures. "The Superintendent of the Lushai Hills N. E. Parry's scheme at the same time for a separate North Eastern Frontier Hills province to comprise as many of the backward tracts in Assam and Burma as could be conveniently included in it and its later development as the Coupland plan or Crown Colony scheme is now well documented.

Neither, however was the Assam Government nor its frontier officers singular in their advocacy of separation of hill districts from the plains. One member of the legislature from the Brahmaputra Valley, cited in Assam's *Memoranda* and later to be approvingly quoted by the leaders of the hill state movement, said on the floor of the House: "In our scheme it is submitted that the hill districts, with the exception of British portion of the Khasi Hills may be administered by his Excellency the Governor as Agent for the Government of India, and the whole expenditure also may be borne by the Government of

India". The remark of a member from Sylhet in the debate was even more emphatic:

"If I read the signs and portents of the time correctly, I feel most sure that the hill districts will be separated sooner or later and I hope within about five or six year."

An Assamese Swarajist concurred; "Before long Assam Valley will have to see its own way to disjoin itself from the hill districts."

The British succeeded in excluding the Naga, Lushai and the North Cachar Hills and the Balipara and Sadiya Frontier Tracts from the Assam Legislature. As regards the other hill districts, J.J.M. Nichols-Roy says:

"I wrote strongly against that exclusion. I was able to convince the Assam Governor Sir Lawrie Hammond to make the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills and the Mikir Hills to be partially excluded areas".

Nichols-Roy's writings provide the tribal perception of the future of the hill areas in independent India. His *Hill Districts of Assam, Their Future in the New Constitution* submitted to the Cabinet Mission argued for greater autonomy for the tribal areas within Assam. But as he records in his *Memorandum of Personal Views supporting the Demand for a Separate Hill State*, disillusionment set in against the Assamese leadership during the debates in the Constituent Assembly and over the question of powers of the District Council and Shillongs future. By the time of the State Re-organisation (1954) the idea of a separate state was firmly entrenched in Garo and Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

The Memorandum submitted by the Highlander's Union to the States Reorganisation Commission in April 1954 envisaged a 'frontier Hill State' comprising the former excluded and partially excluded areas. But developments elsewhere had already eroded the unity move. The case of the Naga Hills and its elevation to a Union Territory finally to statehood is well known. By now the Government of India too appears to have

come round to the hill leaders' way of thinking on the feasibility of small states. The fiction of NEFA as constitutional part of Assam, got undermined when the matter was placed in the hand of the External Affairs Ministry who decided to go away with it. The conclusion seems inevitable that in the tortuous process of reorganisation of Assam, the Government of Independent India proved to be the true successors of the British.