



The North East Frontier of India

Alexander Mackenzie

Prefatory Introduction B K Roy Burman



A Mittal Publication

Alexander Mackenzie, the author of the present volume, was more a seasoned administrator than a historian. The book has its genesis in his Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal which made a general survey of the political relations of the then British Government of India with the hill tribes of Assam, Cachar and Chittagong which proved extremely useful to the local administrators as well as to the Foreign Department of the then British Indian Government.

He later developed this document into a memorable book after a close scrutiny of piles of the Government files, proceedings and records, coupled with his own notes which he had been diligently preparing and compiling. He finally published, in a book form, his painstaking research in 1884 under the title *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* as till then Assam and the entire North-East formed part of Bengal. From all accounts it is a unique work and its reprint under the title *The North East Frontier of India*, is most timely. The Prefatory Introduction written by Prof. B.K. Roy Burman, an anthropologist of world renown and an undisputed authority on North-East of India, adds to its importance and usefulness. In Prof. Roy Burman's own words : "Mackenzie was a chronicler of events which were relevant from the point of view of colonial administration of the time. As one goes through the book, one feels that he has done the job competently. He has provided materials which no historian or even no ethno-historian interested in the region can afford to ignore".

The matter in the volume, which is no doubt of great historical value, has been organised into three parts. Part I deals

(continued on flap II)

(continued from flap I)

with Sub-Himalayan region from Bhutan to the Siang District of present day Arunachal Pradesh. In Part II & III there is a graphic account of the dealings of the then British Government of India with the tribes of the south of the Brahmaputra and Surmah Valleys and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The conclusions and observations drawn by the author are of absorbing interest.

No doubt the present volume is an imperishable chronicle of the period under study.

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SIR ALEXANDER MACKENZIE (1842-1902) was Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. He joined Indian Civil Service in 1862; was Under-Secretary to Local Government, Bengal in 1866; Home Secretary to Government of India in 1882; helped to shape Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885; became C.S.I. in 1886 and Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces (1887-90), and of Burma (1890-95) and became K.C.S.I. in 1891. He suppressed hill tribe raids and restored order in 1892. As Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal (1895-98) he did a sanitary survey of Calcutta, enlarged powers of Bengal municipalities, co-operated with Assam in Lushai expedition of 1895-96; expedited land settlement operations in Bihar and Orissa, dealt efficiently with the famine and the plague of 1896-97. He published *History of the Relations of Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* in 1884 (the present book). After his retirement he became Chairman of the India Development Company. He died on Nov. 10, 1902.

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Prefatory Introduction by
PROF. B.K. ROY BURMAN



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Prefatory Introduction to the New Edition

Prof. B. K. Roy Burmah

MITTAL PUBLICATIONS has done a yeoman service to the students of tribal history of India and also to the students of 19th century colonial history by bringing out Alexander Mackenzie's "The North-East Frontier of India." It was originally published in 1884 under the title "History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal." About four decades ago, when we were students this was a rare piece, and when we located one in the library, we certainly used to cast covetous eyes. A friend had discovered a copy in an old book shop on the footpath of College Street in Calcutta and I cannot say that I was too happy that it was he and not I, who did it.

Recently I was having a discussion with a leading tribal intellectual about this book. He remarked in disdain that what Mackenzie had recorded was a colonial administrator's view of events. It is however important to know whether this represented the personal perceptions of an administrator or the perceptions of the colonial administration. At the same time, for a holistic approach to the period, one has to know the context of the perceptions. This involves questions of philosophy of history; of social meaning and explanation of events.

In his review of explanation of social action, Skinner¹ referred to Wittgenstein, according to whom forms of activities studied in social sciences are characteristically those "of which we can sensibly say that they have a meaning." Dilthey wants a different focus. As he would have it, the special feature of human studies is the concern "with a world which has a meaning for the actors involved." The phenomenologists concentrate on the act itself and not on the environment of the act. For them the aim of the social sciences must be to gain insight into the meaning

which social acts have for those who act. Weber also draws attention to the fact that the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his social behaviour.

Whatever may be the orientation, one has to examine facts of diverse levels. The philosopher of history Barnard Braudel² speaks of social mathematics which is made up of at least three languages: that of necessary "facts" (a given fact and its consequences) which is the domain of traditional mathematics, the language of "conditioned fact," which is the domain of calculation of probabilities and finally the language of "conditioned fact," – neither determined nor contingent, but behaving under certain constraints tied to the rules of a game. The last one opens the way to qualitative mathematics and one can say that "political history is not bound to events, nor is it forced to be." History in the words of another philosopher of the discipline, Collingwood,³ is perceived "as a succession of becoming".

In a nation, which has to traverse a long road to decolonisation and which is vulnerable to the combined onslaught of neo-colonialism and internal colonialism the social historians have to examine the events documented by sources close to the colonial administration, with conscious intellectual tuning more or less on the lines indicated. As a part of the intellectual tuning some of the contextual matters will be briefly discussed here.

At the outset, a question was posed as to whether the chronicles recorded in this book represent the perceptions of Mackenzie as an individual administrator or whether these represent the dominant perceptions of the colonial administration. The answer to this question has been provided by Mackenzie himself in his preface. In 1869, at the request of the Lieutenant Governor Sir William Gray, he had prepared a "Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal." But as it soon had gone out of print, at the repeated and pressing demand of the Foreign Office, he supplemented and expanded his original memorandum, for official purposes and produced this volume. Obviously what Mackenzie reproduced and expanded, reflected the perception of the colonial administration, otherwise they would not have repeatedly pressed him to take up the task.

From the titles of the two publications, it however appears that there was a significant shift of focus from the one to the other. The primary focus in the title of the first report was on

the North East Frontier as a territorial unit; the primary focus in case of the second one was on the relations of the administration with the hill tribes. Even if the contents of the two publications were similar, the social meanings of the two messages they conveyed were not the same. In the first case, the territorial unit of North East Frontier, was the subject of interest, hill tribes living in the territory comprised an important constraint in pursuing the objectives of the British in respect of the region. In the second case, the tribes were projected as the objects of primary interest, the territorial dimension was ancillary to the primary interest.

One wonders whether this shift of focus was deliberate or not. As one compares the organisation of materials in the present volume with the writings of the scholars who have approached the history of the region, primarily with focus on its geopolitical aspect, one finds that Mackenzie has successfully projected the rationale of "white-man's burden" in Asia; correspondingly the story of relentless pursuit of colonial goal has by and large been diffused. This does not mean that Mackenzie was dishonest as a chronicler of events. He seems to have recorded events with meticulous care, in terms of a framework which is meaningful for a self-righteous colonial administration. Such an approach meets the requirement of Dilthey's historiography; at the same time, it casts a shadow over the adequacy of phenomenological approach to history. It also raises questions about the place of ethno-history for an in-depth understanding of a historical situation. The problem of ethno-history as it emerges from Mackenzie's treatment of the materials will be discussed in due course. First, a rapid appraisal will be made of Mackenzie's treatment of the materials.

The report on the history of relations of the Government with the hill tribes of the North-East has been organised in three parts. Part 1 deals with the Sub-Himalayan region starting from Bhutan to the present day Siang district of Arunachal. In this part Kingdoms and tribal communities have been discussed in different chapters. Part 2, covers the tribal communities of the Eastern Hills, starting from present day Tirap district of Arunachal to Manipur and then passes over to Mikir Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. The third part covers present day Mizoram, Tripura State and Chittagang Hill Tracts

of Bangladesh. Though Lohit district of present day Arunachal has been included in Part I, for drawing general conclusions, the population of this area have been treated separately from the other ethnic-formations, which have been covered in this part. To a certain extent Lohit district has been treated as a transitional zone between the Sub-Himalayan region and the Eastern Hills.

It is significant that Mackenzie has given his conclusions and general observations in two stages. Towards the end of Part 2, before covering the ethnic-groups of Lohit district (in chapters IX, X and XI), in chapter VIII he has made a general review of the policy on Sub-Himalayan border and discussed the Inner Line Regulation. Again in the last chapter of part III (chapter XXIII) he has included a sub-chapter "Review of policy in continuation of chapter VIII." It is obvious that self-perception of Mackenzie was that of a simple chronicler of events. He placed himself in the role of a sophisticated interpreter of events, projecting the unfolding drama of shattered hopes, mainting r zones and non-stop operation of "iron fists in velvet gloves" as a "succession of becoming".

In the general review of policy in the sub-Himalayan region, Mackenzie makes out the following points:

(1) For those tribes who had long established claims upon the plains, the policy of the government has been one of fair and equitable dealing. It has been impressed upon them that the strong arm of British power is forever interposed between them and the ryots they once oppressed. (2) As a mark of British policy, whole communities of border bandits have been settled down into peaceful tillers of the soil. (3) Tribes like Akas and Duphlas who had remained turbulent for a long time could generally be trusted to behave properly so long as their posa is paid and they are not unduly interfered with, by the forest Regulations. (4) In case of the fierce tribes, the punishment for any outrage has usually been summary and severe, but the aim as a whole is conciliatory.

Thus what emerges is a picture of a civilizing mission carried out by the whiteman in this part of the world. But the anti-climax to the main thrust of the projection also comes out towards the end of the same chapter (p. 55). According to him while the policy of permanent occupation, and direct manage-

ment had been successfully carried out in Naga, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia and Chittagang Hill Tracts, annexation of Abor Hills in the same way was not possible as it "would only bring us into contact with tribes still wilder and less known, nor should we find a resting place for the foot of annexation till we planted it on the plateau of High Asia; perhaps not even them." While adventurism was eschewed, coming down from the high pedestal, Mackenzie advocated a policy of consolidation since "there was a pressing necessity of bringing under more stringent control the commercial relations of our subjects with the frontier tribes living on the borders of our jurisdiction. In Luckimpre specially the operations of speculators in caoutchoue had led to serious complications, not only interfering with the revenue derived by government from the India — rubber forests in the plains beyond the line of our settled mehals, but threatening disturbances with the wild tribes beyond. The spread of tea-gardens outside our fiscal limits had already involved the government in many difficult questions with the hillmen, and on the whole the government came to the conclusion that it was necessary to take special powers and lay down special rules. Accordingly a regulation was drawn up by the Lieutenant-Governor and approved by the Governor-General-in-Council, to give effect to this policy. The Regulation gives power to the Lieutenant-Governor to prescribe a line, to be called "the inner line" in each and every district affected beyond which no British subject of certain classes or foreign resident can pass without a license. The pass or license, when given may be subject to such conditions as may appear necessary. And rules are laid down regarding trade, the possession of land beyond the line, and other matters, which give the executive government, an effective control. The regulation also provides for the preservation of elephants and authorises the government to lay down rules for their capture.

In continuation of this review Mackenzie writes in the chapter on final conclusion: "Fate seems determined to prove that there shall be no rest for the English in India till they stand forth as governors or advisors of each tribe and people in the land" (p. 369). Mackenzie had however the honesty to admit that sometimes the Englishmen gave more than a helping hand to "fate". While stating that the policy of the Government to the tribes in its North-East frontier has been throughout in its main

feature, a policy of conciliation, and not a policy of repression or devastation, he is careful to observe that the actions of the local authorities may not always have been in full accordance with this (p. 373). Again in his words "It must be confessed that the Bengal Government had not in 1869, fully realized the limitations placed upon the system of direct management. "It was only in 1870 and 1871 that the Supreme Government declared in unmistakable terms its desire to assert no positive jurisdiction over communities not actually within the limits of our settled districts." But even before the echo of the declaration died out, deviations started taking place in Garo Hills, Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, Manipur. There were other compulsions of the situation. For instance, there were multiple interactions of administrative concern at the local level, commercial and industrial interests of capital and strategic interest of the empire of the macro-level. An analytical appraisal of these provides an insight into the historical situation, with reference to which the readers will have to construe their own meanings of the narrations of Mackenzie and also discover the areas of gap of knowledge, which will have to be made up through systematic research.

From a rapid survey of the historical literature relating to North East India in the 19th century and of the major trends in political economy and ideologies during the same period, the broad contours of the relevant macro-historical situation can be delineated as follows:

1. In his presidential address delivered at the sixth session of North East India Historical Association, H. L. Gupta pointed out that the modern history of North East India, roughly dates from the advent of British traders and the decline of its monarchical Kingdoms. The neighbouring Burma took advantage of the weak monarchies, divided ruling houses, self-centred ambitious, unscrupulous and faction-ridden nobility, internecine struggles for power and incessant tribal insurrections in the region and dislodged the ruling dynasties of Manipur and Assam and posed serious threat to Cachar and Bengal. The Burmese expansion in North East India caused considerable misgivings and alarm in the British minds. Being an expansionist power itself, the British got an opportunity and excuse in 1824 for imperial aggrandisement and colonial expansion eastward, where prospects of tea cultivation, a highly coveted and very lucrative article of

international commerce, existed and if necessary, pressure could be exerted on China from the vantage point on its frontier to grant favourable terms to the British traders in their overseas trade with Canton. The result was a prolonged military confrontation with the Burmese in North East India region, expulsion of the Burmese from Assam and Manipur, annexation of Assam by the British and expansion of their empire upto the strategic borders of Tibet, China and Burma.

All other Kingdoms of North East India accepted British protection and suzerainty. The British economic penetration into North East India which had commenced in the seventeenth sixties, increased since the days Warren Hastings and Cornwallis, multiplied since 1826 and became general after the dissolution of the East India Company.

2. In the same waves length of perception, but highlighting a specific context, Chaube⁵ points out that after the East India Company lost its monopoly of Indian trade in 1813, greater trading contact with China became a necessity. Search for additional trade with Assam was in pursuit of this need.

3. Guha⁶ draws attention to a contingent fact within great Britain itself. By 1833, industrial capital gained ascendancy over mercantile capital there and this gave a clear direction towards colonisation in Assam. By 1871 more than three lakh acres of wasteland in Assam were settled with the planters at fee – simple or nominal rate. At the same time, the burden of land revenue on the ordinary farmers was progressively increased to encourage their transfer from subsistence farming to plantation jobs. But to maximise surplus, labour and paid at below market rate. It was through such devices that the major portion of investment in tea was obtained from undistributed surplus and ploughed back dividends of the older companies in the field. There was hardly any multiplier effect on the economy of North-East India. It was the normal policy to purchase and bulk of the garden's requirements of stores in the United Kingdom was ship them to India. While the secondary sector of economy failed to come up, large scale immigration of labour took place in connection with tea-plantation and long before 1871, Assam became a deficit area in foodgrains.

From the picture of stagnation and deprivation in the wake of the colonisation policy pursued by the British that emerges from

the presentation of Guha, it is easy to perceive that a context East had come into existence in which the traditional ethnic processes and the age-old inter-ethnic relations would be liable to disruption in multiple manners.

4. Barpujari⁷ provided another dimension to the historical back-drop. As observed by him, the Himalayan Frontier in the North had remained dead. When Russophobia dominated British foreign policy, under the then effete and weak Chinese monarchy, the autonomous Tibet provided excellent 'buffer' beyond the rampart of the Himalaya. While highlighting Russophobia as an inhibiting factor in British expansionist aims in the 19th century, Keetan⁸ has referred to French threat as an additional factor in North-East India.

5. Relation of the British with Bhutan was guided by another consideration. It began in 1772 because of a desire to establish commercial relations with Tibet and its neighbouring countries. And as the researches of Santiswarup Gupta⁹ suggest, the actual steps that the British took from time to time were largely related to the growth of Russian influence in Central Asia. It corrects the impression erected by the earlier writers that the problem posed by Bhutan and its neighbours to the British government in India on the North East Frontier in the 19th century was essentially a law and order problem.

6. In the annexation of Cachar Bhattacharya¹⁰ finds a combination of strategic and mercantile interests. He quotes as follows Felix Carey, who was in the service of the King of Cachar in 1817: "Since the Burmans have become a formidable nation, the principal part of the trade in ivory, wax, lac, silk, cotton, mules, horse, copper, tin, lead, zinc, silver, gold, sapphire and rubies has been completely drained by that country and exported through that channel to Bengal and other parts of India, whereas a free trade opened through Kachar, in the course of a few years, the greatest part, if not the whole of this immense traffic rate, would be imported immediately into Bengal. Certainly then it must follow that these important articles of commerce, might be procured at a much cheaper rate, than what we must now get them from the Burmans who dispose of these articles to our merchants from their different sea ports, at a very enormous profit." Obviously it was commercial interest to bypass trade through the ports, then under the control of Burma, which

was the critical fact for determining the approach to various questions in that area. Other subsidiary facts included the raja's assuming monopoly right over external trade and the insistence of the company that the British must enjoy the privilege of supplying opium to the people of Cachar.

7. One common cause negatively orienting the attitude of the tribals towards the British rule also deserves mention here. The hillmen supplemented their poor economy by hunting, fishing, rubber-tapping and elephant catching in the land at the foot of the hills. But during the British rule this land was affected by the expansion of tea plantation and the creation of reserved forests. British claims on such lands became the most formidable source of tribal outrages.¹¹ It is reported that even now some persons belonging to Jaintia tribe refrain from eating potato because it was introduced in the area during the British regime.¹²

8. While tribal feelings were outraged by the encroachments on the so-called wastelands, they became intensely suspicious of the British intentions when some tribal areas, even away from their lands were annexed. As pointed out by Bhuiya,¹³ complete subjugation of any of the tribes and annexation of their territories to the Ahom Kingdom were never envisaged by the rulers. The tribals were thus conditioned to a particular understanding of historical relations and their violent reactions, as depicted by Mackenzie, can to a considerable extent be understood with reference to the same.

9. Opportunist shifts in British policy in respect of the local lower elites was another fact of the situation.¹⁴ After the third and final Moamaria rebellion, Matak Rajya was established in the present Dibrugarh district with its capital at Bengmara (present Tinsukia town). By an agreement made in 1805, the Ahom government recognised the autonomy of the Matak Kingdom headed by Matibar, with his title to 'Barsenapati', on condition of his paying an annual tribute. During the annexation of Assam, David Scott, the Agent to the Governor-General, suggested to utilise the territories of the Matak and the Khamptis as political screens between the Burmese and the newly acquired possession of the Company. Accordingly Barsenapati was placed in a 'semi-independent possession of the Matak Country' and Scott entered into an agreement with him

on 13th May 1826.

But after the British position was fully consolidated in Assam and the political danger from Burma had considerably receded, the existence of the Matak Kingdom as a buffer state was no longer required. At the same time the Matak area had attracted the attention of the British officials as the best tea-growing area of Upper Assam. The local British authority therefore, wanted to revise the liberal conditions of the agreement extended to the Barsenapati. The political agent made a proposal to the Barsenapati to commute the services of the contingent he supplied to the British government for an amount of Rs. 10,000. While this would have increased the burden of tax on the subjects, the British made an alluring offer of conferring the title of raja on him with an assurance of safe succession to his heirs. But unlike many other Indian rulers who became prey to such temptation, the Barsenapati emphatically turned down the proposal. The British, however, managed to take over the area, shortly after his death.

10. Contradictory British policies in the transformation of the internal social relations within the tribal and non-tribal communities constitute another conditioning factor of the history in the region. For quite some time in the nineteenth century the British policy was to consolidate the control over the tribals in the borders of Burma and Cachar through the King of Manipur. At that stage, the British officials advanced the theory that the King was the owner of all lands within his jurisdiction, but when there was a shift of policy towards direct management of the tribal areas, the theory also underwent a corresponding reversal. Similarly in Tripura British influence can be traced in the assertion of the King as being the superior landlord of all lands within this political jurisdiction. Feudal rights were promoted by the British which were responsible for much of the subsequent upheavals. In fact the seeds of confusion sown by the British at the time continued to yield their bitter harvests even after independence of the country.¹⁵ But when seen in isolation, without reference to their overall economic and political goal, some actions of the British seem rather progressive in content. In a recent publication an Assamese scholar has described the British administration as revolutionary in character.¹⁶ "The claim of right of the nobility to get back their hereditary

privileges was terminated by a principle of common welfare and justice." "Giving priority to the improvement of the general condition of the people, Jenkins suggested, it could be done by the operation of the land survey by ascertaining and fixing every man's possession and defining the demand of the government upon each individual." "The common people who were not involved in the resentments of the nobility for deprivation of rights and privileges but had to suffer from a miserable life due to political turmoil, devastation caused by famine and economic oppression, were naturally satisfied with the change of administration". After saying all these the scholar however admits that "a newly adopted measure of the European Government to impose tax on all kinds of lands including the wastelands and those so far considered as tax-free, created dissatisfaction among some people". Such an appraisal of the situation, entirely drawing upon colonial sources fails to take note of the fact that what was given to the people by the right hand was taken away by the left hand. Mention has been made earlier of leasing out land to tea-gardens and of reservation of forests. Besides, dispute between the hillmen and the government regarding the possession of the land at the foot of the hills north of the Brahmaputra was a chronic problem. All evidences indicate that the tribals enjoyed an effective power in this tract before the British annexed Assam. It does not require much imagination to consider that all people would not have accepted the altruistic claims on behalf of the British administration, as advanced by Mackenzie and Jenkins and as accepted unwittingly even by some Indian scholars.

To point out the limitation of Mackenzie's chronicle is not to undermine its importance. This certainly remains one of the most important sources of the history of the region in the nineteenth century. But one has to make use of the materials with an awareness of the context.

Though Mackenzie has discussed the various events with reference to wider policy formulations at various levels, the policies he has discussed are generally administrative and political management policies. Occasionally economic management policies at the operational level have been touched upon. But in the absence of an analytical appraisal of the issues of political economy, what Mackenzie has presented is a

succession of events and not the flow of historical progression. In a way Mackenzie has presented a constellation of micro-histories; each complete within its narrow focus and incomplete in a wider societal meaning. It is not geographical range that makes a history micro or macro. It is the scale of universalism that gives qualitative stamp to the treatment of any historical material.

As the general tenor of Mackenzie's treatment of materials is in terms of relations of specific tribes or ethnic formations with the British, one might think that the present volume contains a series of ethno-histories. Mackenzie has certainly provided rich material for ethno-histories, but it cannot be called ethno-histories even in the limited sense of the term. In fact there is no general agreement about the scope and method of ethno-history.

Cohn¹⁷ considers ethno-history as the historical study of any non-European peoples utilizing documentary, oral and archaeological sources and the conceptual framework and insight of cultural and social anthropology. These studies attempt to reconstruct the history of indigenous peoples before and after European contact. Cohn differentiates ethno-historians from colonial historians. As he puts it, an ethno-historian usually has firsthand experience and knowledge of indigenous society and of how it functioned or functions. He thinks in systemic, functional terms, rather than only in terms of accidents and particulars. He uses general knowledge of social and cultural organization and constructs his units in terms of such concepts as 'segmentary lineage-based society', 'peasant society,' 'patrimonial society.' Besides he tries to perceive historical events from the position of the aborigines rather than that of European administrators. He is more interested in the impact of the colonial policy and practice than in the genesis of these policies in the metropolitan society.

Trigger¹⁸ however suggests that significant social and ideological implications are inherent in the distinction between history and ethno-history. Basing on Nancy Lurie, he suggests that ethno-history in the sense of a self-conscious study of change among native people or even a critical awareness of the problems involved in using historical date for ethnographic purposes is a recent development. At first ethno-historical.

research was carried out almost exclusively by ethnologists. Some argued that ethno-historians had to remain practising ethnographers. Others tended to treat written sources as they would use a native informant. But later scholars with training primarily in history entered the field. It is however not enough simply to have a respectable knowledge of historical and anthropological data and methodology. Ethno-historians must master the art of using these two approaches in an integrated fashion. They are also expected to ensure that interpretations are tested against a sufficiently comprehensive corpus of data and that evidences that do not support the interpretation are taken into account no less than those that do.

Thus according to Trigger it is not a particular type of data or a particular vantage point of observation that marks ethno-history from conventional history. Reflecting on the various perspectives, it appears that ethno-history is the total history centering an ethnic-formation. While it discusses the nature of responses, both in overt behaviour and in structural arrangements, to the challenges and contradictions from without and within, it also examines the nature of the challenges and contradictions in their temporo-spatial locus: It is, however, not clear, whether Trigger and other ethno-historians would like to perceive the scope and method of ethno-history in the manner it is presented here. In any case, any ethno-history is a chip of world history, illustrated in the history of an ethnic-formation or a community. There can be ethno-history not only of the non-Europeans but also of local communities in Europe or America or anywhere in the world. Notwithstanding the difference suggested by Cohn between colonial historians and ethno-historians, such difference would not be of much significance unless the influences bearing from outside are also fully analysed and taken into consideration.

Mackenzie was not however an ethno-historian even in the sense in which Cohn has used the term. He was a chronicler of events which were relevant from the point of view of colonial administration of the time. As one goes through the book, one feels that he has done the job competently. He has provided materials which no historian or even no ethno-historian interested in the region can afford to ignore.

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P R E F A C E .

FROM 1866 to 1873 I had immediate charge of the Political correspondence of the Bengal Government. In 1869, at the request of the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir William Grey, I wrote for office purposes, and as I could snatch the time from other more pressing work, a "Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal." Since Pemberton's Report in 1835, no general survey had been taken of the political relations of the Government with the hill tribes of Assam, Cachar and Chittagong; and my 'Memorandum' proved to be extremely useful, both to the local officers and to the Foreign Department of the Government of India. It was, however, at best, a mere Sketch; and was wanting in those precise references to the original records which are essential for many official purposes. Accordingly, in 1871, I began a fresh and detailed examination of all the records from 1780 up to date, both of the Bengal Secretariat and of the Foreign Department, which bore in any way upon the political history of the North-East Frontier. I made full notes and references as I went along, and in 1873 I saw my way, as I thought, to preparing, when I could find leisure or get leave, a work, which, while treating exhaustively of all the frontier tribes in that quarter, in respect of their relations to the Government, their manners, customs, and ethnological affinities, would at the same time serve as a permanent hand-book for the Government and its local officers. But the close of 1873 brought us face to face with the Famine, and in the vortex of "special duty" arising out of that, all personal plans sank out of view. In 1874 my sight gave way under the pressure of compiling Famine Narratives; and my leave, when it came, was spent in



absolute severance from pen, ink, and type in every form. Since my return to India in the end of 1875, I have been unremittingly engaged in duties far too arduous to warrant any dream of authorship. Meantime my Memorandum has gone out of print, and the Foreign Department has repeatedly suggested that a fresh and revised edition of it was very desirable. Hitherto I have evaded compliance with all hints of the kind, hoping against hope for leisure to compile a work in which the public as well as the offices of Government might take some interest. But the pressure has of late become more severe; and finding that, if the Foreign Office could get nothing better, they meant to re-print the old Memorandum, I volunteered to supplement and expand this, for official purposes only, by such of my notes, so long lying by me, as could in this way be utilised. The task of working these in has been much heavier than I anticipated, and when the Press had got fairly started the labour was doubled by a request that I would bring down the Narrative, as best I could, to the present time, or at any rate to the year 1882. This involved an examination of the Bengal Government monthly Proceeding volumes for about six years, for which I had no notes, and of the Assam Proceedings for nine years, besides the reading of numerous heavy files kindly supplied by the Foreign Department. Under the circumstances, I have felt justified in borrowing freely for these later years from the text of the Annual Administration Reports; but every paragraph has been verified, and much additional matter introduced. The whole has been prepared and carried through the Press in little over five weeks—side by side with the full ordinary work of the Home Department. I mention these facts, not by way of boast, but because I wish emphatically to disclaim any literary

pretensions for a volume produced under such conditions. It is meant to be useful to Government and its officers, nothing more. For any inferences or comments not avowedly quoted from the records I alone am responsible.

I have reproduced in a series of Appendixes various papers which seemed to me likely to be useful for reference, but were too voluminous to be incorporated in the text. I have also ventured to reprint some articles on Frontier topics which I wrote in 1870—72 for the *Pioneer* and *Observer*, not because they are of any special merit in themselves, but because some of them throw a certain amount of contemporaneous side-light on questions discussed in the preceding pages, while some of them give sketches of the work and personality of our Frontier officers, with many of whom I have had the pleasure of an intimate acquaintance. To the task of reclaiming the Nagas and Garos of the North-east Frontier my friends Gregory, Butler, and Williamson sacrificed their lives. My friend Edgar has to thank the Lushais for his well earned honours. Of the Chittagong Hill men my friend Lewin, in his happy retirement, has many a curious tale to tell: and my distinguished school-mate, Johnstone, has confirmed his Keonjhur reputation by the hold he has won over the tribes of Manipur. Notices of these men and their work will be found in the articles.

From the lips or pens of them and many others—Dalton, Hopkinson, Agnew, Haughton, Graham, and Power—to say nothing of the untiring officers of the Survey, for whom no peak is inaccessible, no jungle impenetrable, and no tribe too rude to be faced, I had stores of gathered material which cannot now be used. I had, indeed, hoped at one time to have had the aid of some of them in putting the

wild story of this frontier into complete and fitting dress. As it is, any frontier officer who cares to undertake the task is welcome to appropriate anything in the following pages that may suit his purpose.

It only remains to explain that the references to 'Judicial', 'Revenue' and 'Political' Proceedings, and to the earlier 'Consultations' are to the records of the Bengal Government, save where it is specifically stated that the records belong to the Government of India. The 'Secret Proceedings' are those of the Foreign Department of the Supreme Government. The 'Assam Proceedings' are those reported by that Administration to the Foreign Office of the Government of India.

I have to thank Lieutenant-Colonel Deprée, the Surveyor General, for the map attached. I would also express my indebtedness to the Superintendent of the Home Office Press for the skill and patience with which he and his staff have deciphered what was unavoidably at times the roughest of all rough 'copy'.

26th January 1884.

A. M.

P. S.—A brief notice of recent events among the Akas (who are treated of in Chapter IV) will be found in the concluding Chapter. It was necessary to print off the book by instalments, which made it impossible to write up to date any of the earlier Chapters.

(2.) The Cachar officials will, at the present time, read with interest and profit Mr. Edgar's valuable Reports in the Appendix, and especially his views on the Kookie Levy and the importance of keeping a strict eye on Kookies settled in Cachar. (See pages 441—443).

(3.) The reader must overlook occasional variations in the spelling of proper names. Every local officer has his own way, sometimes several ways. It has not been possible to reduce all to any uniform spelling.

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HISTORY
OF THE RELATIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT
WITH THE HILL TRIBES
OF THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER OF BENGAL.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

THE north-east frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense it embraces the whole of the hill ranges north, east, and south of the Assam Valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges. I propose to trace, with such fulness of detail as the materials warrant, the political relations of the Indian Government with the tribes inhabiting these hills. In doing this it will be convenient to proceed in regular order, first traversing from west to east the sub-Himalayan ranges north of the Brahmaputra, then turning westward along the course of the ranges that bound the Assam Valley on the south, and, finally, exploring the highlands interposed between Cachar and Chittagong, and the hills that separate the maritime District of Chittagong from the Empire of Ava.

Before attempting to record the dealings of the Government with the numerous savage races of this portion of its dominions, it may be well very briefly to refer to the events which led up to the occupation of Assam by the British, and to give some general idea of the state of that Province when we first entered it. This will tend to make clear the manner in which we were originally brought into contact with the hill tribes, and will serve to explain some facts and anomalies that might otherwise prove stumbling blocks to the student of frontier policy.

Into the dim history of the Hindu kingdom of Kamrup, the most notable precursor of the later Governments of Assam, there is no need to enter. Nor is it necessary to suggest any curious disquisitions on the origin and progress of that amorphous empire of Pong* whose victorious Generals are said to have extended the power of the Shans from Sadiya to the Monass. It is enough for us to know that in the eighth century after Christ, the Brahmaputra Valley was invaded by a vigorous and warlike race of Burmese Shans, which had by the commencement of the thirteenth century wrested the whole country from its Hindu rulers and arrogated to its own dynasty and people the title of 'Ahom,†—the unequalled'—destined in the softened form 'Asam' to become the modern name of the province.

The Moamariah Dissenters and their struggles with the Native Government of Assam.

With the consolidation of their rule the fate of all eastern conquering tribes overtook the Shans. In the sleepy hollow of Assam, they lost the qualities which had won them power and prestige, while by adopting the language, customs, and religion of their Hindu subjects, they speedily sank into the position of a mere ruling caste, and ceased to present the characteristics of an alien‡ race. It was indeed owing chiefly to intestine troubles brought about by their fanatical Brahmanism, and their bigoted persecution of the Moamariah dissenters that the British were first led to take cognizance of Assam affairs.

The Moamariahs§ were a tribe of proselytes to Hinduism as preached by the Sudra sectarians, Sankni and Madhit, who denied the supremacy of the Brahmans and rejected the worship of Siva. For long years they were treated with tolerance, and so gathered numbers and strength, until they occupied nearly the whole tract of Upper Assam known as Muttuck in Luckimpore, while they had also many adherents in other parts of the province, especially about Jorhâth. The oppressions of the later Ahom Kings drove them at last into rebellion, and about 1770 A. D., led on by their high priest, they attacked, captured, and succeeded in holding for nearly six months Gowhatty, the capital of the kingdom, taking possession also of the person of the reigning prince. Expelled at length by stratagem, their leaders slain and their bands at the same time broken and dispersed, the Moamariahs were for fourteen years but little heard of. In 1774, when Gourinath Sing was reigning Raja, they again rose in arms, and after a severe struggle, attended by

* See Pemberton's Reports on the Eastern Frontier of British India, Section 5.

† Assam is commonly supposed to be derived from "A-sam-a," the 'peerless,' 'unequalled;' and Ahom is said to be equivalent to Asam. The point is, however, open to doubt.

‡ Dalton's Ethnology of Bengal.

§ For a fuller notice of this sect, see Chapter XI. below.

many vicissitudes, succeeded in driving the Raja and his party from the seat of his Government.

In 1788, Gourinath made a desperate effort to retrieve his fortunes, but apparently to little purpose. Beaten back from Gowhatty, after days of fruitless fighting, he applied to Mr. Raush who farmed the salt revenues at the British frontier station of Goalpara, begging him to procure the assistance of the British Government. The farmer, probably on his own responsibility, sent over a body of burkundazes, or locally enlisted fighting men, but these were, as the histories tell us, cut off to a man by the Moamariahs in the first encounter. Nor had an expedition despatched in aid of Gourinath by the State of Manipur any better success; 1,500 men out of a force of 4,500 which crossed the hills from Manipur being slain by the rebels.

Assam was now given over to confusion and misery. All the

British intervention.

turbulent ruffianism of the great bazars of Bengal flocked thither.

Large bodies of disbanded sepoy and bands of fighting fanatics from Hindustan pillaged the villages and laid waste the fields. The Raja once more, therefore, appealed to the British, demanding that they should at least aid in expelling the lawless robbers who had come over from Bengal. Lord Cornwallis, admitting the obligation, ordered a detachment of sepoy, under Captain Welsh, to enter Assam. This force completely routed the Moamariahs and other rebellious Chiefs in the cold season of 1792-93, and succeeded in recovering possession of Gowhatty. Enquiries then instituted made it manifest that much of the discontent prevalent in the province had its origin in the tyranny and mismanagement of Raja Gourinath and his advisers. Accordingly with the sanction of the Supreme Government, Captain Welsh, in communication with the principal nobles and officers of the kingdom, took steps to put affairs on a sounder basis; and, as a necessary guarantee for the maintenance of order in the future, arrangements were made for the retention in the province of a brigade of British troops, the revenues of Lower Assam being pledged for their maintenance. Unfortunately for the country, before these projects could be fully matured, Captain Welsh was recalled to Bengal by Sir John Shore, whose cautious policy of non-interference and retrenchment was opposed to such an enterprise as had been sanctioned by the more imperial spirit of Cornwallis. In July

Withdrawal of British troops, 1794.

1794, Assam was deliberately relegated to anarchy and civil war.*

The miseries of the country reached their climax in the reign of Raja Chunder Kant, which commenced in 1809. The principal ministers of State, who had themselves seated Chunder Kant on the throne, headed a rebellion against him of the most formidable character, and contended in arms with varying

Distracted state of Assam—Burmese intervention.

* The probable effect of the withdrawal of our troops was clearly pointed out by Captain Welsh. See an interesting report by him in the Appendix, with notes by Mr. Scott, afterwards the first Commissioner of Assam.

fortunes for the possession of the capital and the control of the revenues. Failing to obtain aid from the British, who continued to hold aloof from Assam affairs, the Raja's party had recourse to the Burmese, and Chunder Kant was twice indebted to that power for material assistance. Purunder Sing, a prince of the royal house, the most able among the various pretenders who sought to get possession of the throne, was driven out by the Burmese in 1816 and took refuge in British territory. The Burmese proved, however, to be but dangerous allies. The price demanded by them for their aid was more than Chunder Kant was willing or able to pay, and he soon became anxious to get rid of them. A futile attempt to shake them off resulted in the expulsion of Chunder Kant himself, and the elevation, by the Burmese, of a new Raja in the person of Jogeshwar Sing.

There were thus at this time (1821) in British territory two scions of Assamese royalty, Chunder Kant and Purunder, each busily engaged in organising means for the invasion of Assam. Chunder Kant had left behind him in the province many faithful adherents on whose efforts he chiefly relied; while Purunder sought to get together a mercenary army from the hill passes of Bhutan and Bijni. Chunder Kant was the first to make an aggressive effort, and was for a time successful; but fresh reinforcements from Ava again turned the scale in favour of the Burmese, and the unfortunate prince became once more an exile. The Burmese General followed up his success on this occasion by sending an insolent message to the British Officer commanding at Goalpara, warning him that if protection was afforded to Raja Chunder Kant, the Burmese troops would invade the Company's territories and arrest the fugitive wherever he might be found. This demonstration was answered on the part of the Indian Government by the despatch to the frontier of troops from Dacca, and by a distinct intimation that any advance of the Burmese would be at their certain peril.

Meanwhile, events at another part of the North-East Frontier were rapidly hurrying the British Government into collision with the ignorant and overbearing Court of Ava. The Raj of Cachar which lay directly in the way of any force invading Eastern Bengal from Burma, had some time previously placed itself under British protection. In the face of repeated warnings and expostulations the Burmese, who then held the valley of Manipur, persisted in advancing upon Cachar and threatening Jaintia (a bordering dependency of Bengal); and no resource was at length left to the Indian Government save to declare war. To re-conquer Assam from the Burmese was a natural and necessary part of the consequent operations.

In less than a year from the commencement of hostilities, the British troops had driven the Burmese from the valley of the Brahmaputra; and on the 24th February 1826, when the operations of the campaign elsewhere had been brought to a close, the King of Burma, by the treaty of Yandaboo, renounced all claim upon, and covenanted to abstain from all future interference with, the principality of Assam

and its dependencies, and the contiguous petty States of Cachar and Jaintia.*

While the military conquest of Assam was thus being effected by our troops, the direction of all civil matters in connection with the province was entrusted to Mr. David Scott† as Governor General's Agent on the North-East Frontier. Subsequently, as regarded Upper Assam alone, the Officer in command of the troops was associated with Mr. Scott in a Commission for general administration. When the conquest was complete, Upper Assam was formally placed under Captain Neufville in subordination to Mr. Scott. Captain Neufville also held military charge of the Assam Light Infantry, a corps organised for the purpose of holding the outposts of the valley looking towards Burma.

Very little change was made at first in the Native mode of administration. In fact, it was long debated whether the British Government should retain Assam in its own hands, or restore it altogether to its Native rulers. The Government in Calcutta was strongly averse to taking absolute possession of the province; and had any of the Native royal house shown real capacity or ability to govern with acceptance to the people, there can be no doubt, from the tenor of the Secret Consultations in the Foreign Office, that he would have been forthwith installed as Raja. The Assamese princes were, however, mere worthless debauchees, and the security of our eastern districts made it necessary to retain strong military control of this part of the frontier. But, having provided for this, the Government was anxious to hand over to Native management all that part of the valley which was not required for military purposes or for the maintenance of the British troops. Accordingly in 1832, after much deliberation, Upper Assam, with the exception of the tract about Sadiya and Muttuck, was made over to Purunder Sing, who was believed to be morally and otherwise the most eligible representative of the royal stock. Purunder Sing was placed in the position of a protected prince, guaranteed against invasion, and entrusted with uncontrolled civil power, on condition of his paying

Purunder Sing and his Government of Upper Assam, 1832-33.

* Aitchison's Treaties, Vol. I., p. 213.

† Mr. Scott died in August 1831, and was succeeded by Mr. T. C. Robertson, and he again by Captain F. Jenkins in January 1834.

The name and fame of David Scott are still green on the North-East Frontier. He was one of those remarkable men who have from time to time been the ornament of our Indian services. Had the scene of his life's labours been in North-West or Central India, where the great problem of Empire was then being worked out, instead of amid the obscure jungles of Assam, he would occupy a place in history by the side of Malcolm, Elphinstone, and Metcalfe. As it is, his writings lie buried amid the dust of official record-rooms, and though his name is known to most of our Frontier Officers, his work in its extent and power is still but little understood. The most interesting and personally instructive part of my task in preparing the present volume has been the perusal of Scott's admirable Reports and Letters. My only regret is that I have not been able to afford time to collect or tabulate these for a volume of official "Selections".

a tribute of Rs. 50,000 annually to the Government. The experiment did not succeed. Purunder Sing's administration proved a failure, both financially and generally, and in October 1838 his territories were placed under the direct management of British officers, and Assam as a whole became a Non-Regulation Province of the Indian Empire.

The foregoing is a brief sketch of the mode in which the Government obtained possession of Assam. It is necessary for the purposes of this narrative to add some few facts as to the state of the country and the revenue system in force there at the time of the British occupation.

In Assam not only the soil but the dwellers thereon were treated as being the property of the State. All the free population was divided, according to caste or calling, into *khels*, or clans, numbering from 1,000 to 5,000 able-bodied men in each. The *khels* were sub-divided into *ghôts* of three or four *paiks*, or freemen, each, and one *paik* of each *ghôt* was bound to render personal service throughout the year to the Raja or to any officer of State to whom he might for that purpose be assigned. The Raja on his part allowed to each *paik* in the *ghôt* two *poorahs* of rice-land, the land of the *paik* absent on service being cultivated for him by the rest of the *ghôt*. This allotment was known as *goamutti* or 'body land.' The *paik* also received a piece of land for garden and homestead (*bári*) free of assessment; in acknowledgment of which he paid one rupee annually either as house-tax or poll-tax or hearth-tax, as the custom of the district might determine. If a *paik* cultivated any rice-land in excess of his two *poorahs*, he paid the State one rupee annually for each *poorah* so tilled. Artizans and other non-cultivating classes paid a higher rate of poll-tax. The aboriginal and other wild tribes occupying the low jungly hills within the province paid a hoe-tax on their cotton cultivation. The salaries of all Government officers, favourites, and retainers, and the maintenance of the numerous religious institutions of Assam, were provided for by assignments of *paiks* along with their *goamutti* lands to the persons to be benefited. The estates of the Native gentry were universally formed in this way, and were supplemented by the *khels*, or lands, which they had themselves reclaimed from waste by slave labor, and which were held by them rent-free and as hereditary in their families.

The British Government commuted all the *paik* service for an annual cash payment to the State of Rs. 3 per man, and released the slaves—measures which, however wise and proper in the abstract, had the effect of reducing the Native gentry to poverty, and left no class, either in fact or theory, intermediate between the cultivator of the soil and the supreme authority. The mode and amount of assessment of the cultivators, now no longer called *paiks* but *ryots*, have undergone many changes since that time; but the idea of personal service due to the State by the subject has never revived, and the practice of cash payments to and by Government has always been thoroughly established.

Nothing could have been more wretched than the state of Assam when the valley was first occupied by our troops. Thirty thousand Assamese had been carried off as slaves by the Burmese. Many thousands had lost their lives, and large tracts of country been laid desolate by the wars, famines, and pestilences, which for nearly half a century had afflicted the province. The remnant of the people had almost given up cultivation, supporting themselves chiefly on jungle roots and plants. The nobility and priestly families had retired to Goalpara or other refuges in British territory, often after losing all their property; and with them had gone crowds of dependents glad to escape from the miseries of their native land.

Such was Assam as we found it, and such the revenue system that prevailed there. The old records give much curious information in regard to both, which it would be interesting to set out at length; but I have confined myself to a summary of salient facts as detailed in the ordinary histories, this being sufficient for my present purpose. So much as has been stated it was desirable to bring into prominence, that there might be a clear understanding of the circumstances under which a frontier policy first became necessary for us in the north-east. These will be made more apparent as we deal with the history of each tribe. But I may here remark, by way of general preface, that we found the Assam Valley surrounded north, east, and south by numerous

The Frontier Tribes.

savage and warlike tribes whom the decaying authority of the Assam dynasty had failed of late years to control, and whom the disturbed condition of the province had incited to encroachment. Many of them advanced claims to rights more or less definite over lands lying in the plains; others claimed tributary payments from the villages below their hills, or the services of *paiks* said to have been assigned them by the Assam authorities. It mattered of course little to us whether these claims had their basis in primæval rights from which the Shan invaders had partially ousted the hillmen, or whether they were merely the definite expression of a barbarian cupidity. Certain it was that such claims existed, and that they had been, to some extent and in some places, formally recognised by our predecessors. The engagements under which the Native Governments lay were transferred to us with the peculiar revenue system above described; and it was one of our earliest tasks to endeavour to reconcile such arrangements, where we could discover them, with the requirements of enlightened policy. But it was not always easy to discover them, for the tribes asserting them knew nothing of our intentions, and seldom in the earlier years of our administration referred their claims directly for acknowledgment or compromise. When we did arrive in any case at a definite understanding as to the rights of any tribe, we were ready, as a rule, to treat them fairly and liberally; and, on the whole, we have no reason in this respect to be ashamed of the general bearings of our policy upon the North-East Frontier. But we are met to this day by difficulties arising from

the indefinite nature of the connexion subsisting between the Assam sovereigns and their savage neighbours. These difficulties, as they arise, have not been lessened by the fact that here, as elsewhere in British India, the Government has had an active policy forced upon it uniformly against its will; and while anxious in the extreme to leave the tribes alone, if they would but consent to be let alone, it has been compelled from time to time by the mere force of events to take up questions it would have gladly overlooked, and to govern actively where it would have been content to be at peace. A strong, systematising, aggressive despotism would have found a policy and enforced it long years before the British Indian Administration could be brought to confess that a definite policy on this frontier was either necessary or desirable.
