

The Cherrapunji Experiment (1829-1834)

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The Khasi and Jaintia Hills came to the notice of the British immediately after the East India Company was granted the Diwani of Bengal in 1765. The early relations between the Khasi-Jaintias on the southern fringe of the hills and British Sylhet was confined to trade in limestone, iron and wax from the hills and cloth and rice from the plains. Relations, however, were not very cordial as the hill men made repeated inroads into Sylhet in the last quarter of the 18th century to safeguard their lands in the foot hills which was being systematically encroached upon at the instigation of the Company's officials. The Company having just occupied Sylhet, and quite unfamiliar with the hills could only act by taking measures to prevent these disturbances. Jaintiapur was visited by a force under Major Edward Ellerker in 1774,¹ and forts and military posts were set up on the frontier. No expedition was sent into the hills. During these early years of control over Sylhet, the British were concerned of the activities of Greek and French traders in Sylhet ; fearing the Greeks planned to establish a colony outside the limits of the company's territories, within the Khasi Hills ;² and that the French acting through M. Dechampigny, who had attempted to establish political relations with the Khasis, might establish a protectorate on the frontier.³ With the intention to put a stop to the conflict between hill and plains people ; and preventing foreign influence across the frontier, a regulation was brought into force in 1790, prohibiting Europeans from visiting Sylhet without a licence and further prohibiting the export of arms and ammunition to the Khasis ; and that no burkandazes or sepoyes be allowed to pass Laour and places north-west of the river Surma.⁴

The British policy of non-intervention with the Khasis in particular and the whole of the north-east frontier in general, which continued into the early years of the 19th century, however, could not continue longer. The decadent administration and internal turmoil in Assam, Manipur and Cachar attracted the Burmese forces, who, having occupied the area assumed a threatening atti-

tude towards the British in Bengal. The Company's frontier was at stake, and when a Burmese force marched through Jaintia Hills towards Cachar in course of the Anglo-Burmese war, the British felt that the route to Assam around the Garo Hills may be cut short with an alternative road through the hills. A survey was accordingly made by David Scott, and the Jaintia Raja, Ram Singh consented to the construction of a road from Jaintiapur in the Sylhet plains to Raha in Nowgong.⁵ Considerable sums of money was spent for the purpose, but the result, at the end of three years the project was discontinued.⁶

Scott had an opportunity to reside in the hills during these parleys, and delighted with the climate brought it to the notice of the Government as offering a very desirable situation for sanatory stations for Europeans.⁷ While the European community in the Upper Provinces had such stations in the recently acquired Simla Hills, the residents of Calcutta could only resort to sea for a change of climate and health, until the idea developed to establish a sanatorium in the Khasi hills. Scott was in the mean time occupied in construction of a road between the Surma and Brahmaputra valleys, in pursuance of which he entered into negotiations with Tiro Singh, Syiem of Nongkhlaw, and Dewan Singh, Syiem of Cherra. Permission was granted by the two Khasi states for the construction of the road which was to provide a free passage for British subjects and small grants of lands in the hills in exchange for lands in the plains.⁸

II

David Scott first planned a settlement at Nongkhlaw where he constructed a house "to eat the Europe air." After only a year's residence there he was stricken by a severe sickness which affected the other Europeans and natives. Nongkhlaw was therefore, ruled out for further developments.⁹ Still in search for a site, Scott settled for Cherrapunji in preference to Mawsmal and Mawmluh. Cherrapunji had two advantages, the more important of which was the extremely convenient distance at which it is situated from the plains, where almost all articles of consumption could be drawn. The second advantage was the abundant supply of materials for building houses. Lime, timber and sandstone could be procured locally.¹⁰ Moreover, the Nongkhlaw massacre and the disturbances elsewhere convinced the British to set up the sanatorium at Cherrapunji where the Syiem had remained, if not neutral, an ally to the British.

An agreement was entered between David Scott and the Cherra Syiem in a durbar on 10 September, 1829, in which the latter voluntarily ceded land to the east of Cherrapunji to the British for the sanatorium in return for an equal area of land in Pandua and Companiganj, with provision for more land should it be required.¹¹ Construction of the sanatorium began at once under the charge of C. A. Fenwick who had worked with Scott in the Garo Hills. The land recently acquired was insufficient. Suba Singh, who had succeeded Dewan Singh readily ceded more of his territory to the South-east, thereby giving more land for the sanatorium.¹²

On the recommendation of Scott a detachment of European troops and convalescents were ordered to proceed to Cherrapunji. They were sent for the double purpose of overawing the recalcitrant Khasis and of ascertaining the effects of the climate upon the constitution of Europeans.¹³ The detachment left Dum Dum in late August 1830 and arrived in early October.¹⁴ "The change was felt immediately, and its beneficial effects manifested by the improvement of the health of the soldiers, who, in a short time recovered their good looks, assuming the robust appearance which is seldom to be found upon the plains."¹⁵ Scott, Captain Broadhurst, in charge of the troops in Cherrapunji and the two Doctors treating the invalids were "much pleased with the place and of opinion that it will answer the intended purpose perfectly."¹⁶ In a short time all the men were out of hospital, except one, which was a very bad case of long standing.¹⁷ The one apprehension Scott had, and which he disclosed to Swinton in a private letter was that, "Captain Broadhurst cannot trust anyone of them without risk of them all getting drunk," as "the Cossya being hale fellows and having no objection to give them a glass of grog in the very penetralia of their houses."¹⁸ The European soldiers in India generally suffered this problem as there was no amusement when off duty.¹⁹ Scott therefore wrote :

*I am more than ever convinced of the immense advantage that the European force would derive from being cantoned in this quarter. If the recruits were at once brought up here they would have no opportunity of acquiring idle dissolute habits.*²⁰

Swinton was as enthusiastic as Scott in the establishment of a European cantonement in the hills, for which cause both friends worked untiringly. William Bentinck's views on these early plans were that they seemed to him 'wild and impracticable, but I have no doubt, that Europeans will be induced to settle in those hills, if further trial confirms the belief entertained of their healthiness.'²¹

As the Cherrapunji experiment was showing signs of success, it was hoped that civilians would also make use of the facilities. Two bungalows had been constructed apart from the quarters for officers and invalids, which Government intended to afford to individuals proceeding to Cherrapunji for the benefit of their health.²² What was however still necessary were the creature requirements. The road from Theriaghat was improved making the movement of essential commodities more easy. Scott realised that the hills provided abundant pasture for cattle and therefore, taking a suggestion from Swinton (who had got the idea from Major R. Benson, Military Secretary to William Bentinck) he requested government to send a herd of cattle from Hissar to improve the local breed. Well aware that such a suggestion would not be financed by Government, he informed that he would bear all the expenses of purchase and movement of the cattle.²³ Government dismissed this plan.²⁴ There was more success in Scott's interest in gardening. An interesting account of the start of new crops appears from a letter from Scott to Major T. C. Watson :

*I am glad to hear that you think there is probability of gardening succeeding after all. My own experience in the hills has certainly been far from favourable. Nothing having succeeded at any season with me, except turnips, beet roots and potatoes Straw berries will evidently answer well and of fruits they are the best work attending to I am now taking up some apple, plum and apricot trees of which I shall be happy to send you a portion.*²⁵

Pine apples and oranges that were locally grown were cheap ; pepper grew wild ; the limes were excellent and honey abundant.²⁶ The discovery of coal further strengthened Cherrapunji's case as a settlement for Europeans.²⁷

The one unhappy incident in early Cherrapunji was the realization that if the soldiers were often drunk, Captain Broadhurst was also attached to the bottle, and had fallen into a state of mind which rendered his continued charge of the post inconvenient. He was removed when he compelled one of his men to swallow urine. Major Thomas Watson, "a much more steady person." who had considerable experience in Sylhet was recommended and eventually appointed as Superintendent in Cherrapunji.²⁸

III

The search for a permanent settlement continued during these years when Cherrapunji was developing. The sanatorium there

had its advantages, but the heavy rainfall made it quite unsuitable for the purpose. In October 1830 Lt. Fisher reported to Scott two locations he thought were ideal for the contonment. One was near the Chillangdeo Hill, close to Nongkrum which had a flat surface of about 4 to 5 square miles ; and the other was the plains about 3 miles south of Nongundee. ²⁹ Both sites had similar advantages though the latter was more easily accessible from Pandua. In forwarding Fisher's report to Government, Scott quite agreed to the suggestions though he preferred Myllichem as a permanent post, and the plains of Nogundee as an experimental, because.....

I conceive that soil and climate of former place would admit of the ultimate production of wheat, vegetables and other supplies, while the proximaty of Nogundee to the low country would render it more convenient so long as it might be necessary to transport all such stores from the plains ; the climate owing to the frequent mists renders it improbable that any agricultural improvements of consequents could be made at the place itself. ³⁰

Sites were visited and details of the feasibility to esatablish posts were despatched to Government, but while the Khasis were still in arms against the British, no decision could be made to move from Cherrapunji. Moreover, the experiment had not been fully tested, and the possibility to remain there was still to be ascertained. ³¹

Scott's death on 20 August, 1831 was certainly an unfortunate circumstance for the infant settlement, as he had taken a keen interest in the development of the hills and more particularly Cherrapunji. His successors Robertson and Jenkins did not have the same interest and concern as he had, and consequently there was little progress to continue what had begun. The advantages here were considerable but the one set back to the continuation of the experiment was the long periods of rain, which proved injurious to the invalids, who were crowded together in buildings that were partially under ground, and the portion that was above the gound had only a single wall for protection, without any varandah. The crowded accommodation and damp therefore tended to create disease than remove it. ³² The convalescent depot was removed in 1834, and with it went the detachment of European troops. ³³ The Court of Directors noted "Though we were prepared by former communi-cations for the abandonment of these establishments we cannot but express our regret that so much expense should have been incurred in the prosecution of an experiment which has so completely failed." ³⁴

If the Cherrapunji experiment had failed, it was only so in connection with the convalescent depot. Cherrapunji was still considered a useful sanatorium as it had by then attracted many settlers from Calcutta and the near by plains as twelve bungalows had been constructed for this purpose.³⁵ A large European population having settled there so soon after its establishment is evident from the petition they gave to Jenkins, to retain an Assistant Surgeon in Cherrapunji for its residents. Without questioning the propriety of Government's decision for the removal of soldiers and invalids, they thought that the failure of the experiments was no satisfactory proof that other members of the community could not benefit by residence.³⁶

Political relations with the Khasi States, strategic considerations to defend the frontier and commercial enterprises that had begun in these hills and that promised good returns meant that Cherrapunji would continue as the centre of British administration in the Khasi Hills. In early 1835, the Khasi Hills Political Agency was established with Colonel Lister taking charge of its administration and the command of the Sylhet Light Infantry which was moved from Sylhet to Cherrapunji.

References

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2. *Ibid*, Vol. II, No. 116.
3. B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer*, Vol II, Sylhet, pp. 52-53.
4. W. S. Seton Karr, *Selections from Calcutta Gazette*, Vol. II, pp.30-31.
5. 'Cherrapunji', *Asiatic Journal*, New Series, Vol. XXI, 1836, p.17.
6. *Ibid*; Rs. 19,982 was sanctioned for the construction of the road. National Archives of India, Foreign Department Political Consultations, 18 April 1829, No. 53; Swinton to Scott, 18, April 1829.
7. *Ibid*.
8. A. White, *Memoir of the late David Scott*, pp. 32-37, Cherrapunji, *Op. cit.*, p. 17.
9. R. B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, P. 255.
10. *Ibid*, pp. 257-258.
11. C. U. Aitchison, *Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sarnads*, Vol. 1, p. 89.
12. *Ibid*, pp.91-92; Agreement dated 19 October 1930.

13. C. H. Phillips, *The Correspondence of Lord William Bentinck*, Vol. 1, p. 500, Bentinck to Ellenborough, 25 August, 1830.
14. 'Cherrapunji', Op. cit, p.18.
15. Ibid.
16. Nottingham University, Bentinck Papers (hereinafter PWJF), PMJF 2781/XXII; Scott to Swinton, 11 October 1830.
17. Scottish Records Office, Dalhousie Muniments, G. D. 45/5/48; Scott to Swinton, 21 October 1830.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid, Swinton to Dalhousie, 10 November 1830. The 9 Earl of Dalhousie was commander in chief between 1829-1832, and father of the Governor General Dalhousie.
20. Ibid, Scott to Swinton, 27 October, 1930
21. C. H. Phillips, Op. cit.
22. PMJF 2971/VI, Swinton to Scott, 29 June, 1830.
23. Ibid, 2820/VI, Scott to Swinton, 6 December 1830.
24. Ibid, Swinton to Scott, 31 December 1830.
25. PMJF 2811/XI, Scott to Watson, 2 June 1831.
26. A detailed account of the crops, livestock, trade and potential of Cherrapunji may be read in 'Cherra Punji', Op. cit, pp. 20-21, and T. C. Watson, 'Cherrapunji, and a Detail of some of the Erection of an Iron and Steel Manufactory on a large and extensive scale', *Asiatic Journal*, New Series, Vol III, 1834, pp. 27-29.
27. PMJF 2851/XXXI, T C Robertson to Swinton, 1 November 1832. Fenwick had first come across "the mineral. Without reporting the discovery of coal but merely that he had come across a valuable mineral, he wanted permission to extract the coal. When Swinton in time found the report of Robertson, he wrote rather humourously to Benson, "I shall give up all thoughts of home, and become a partner with Mr Fenwick in the Cossya Hills. Will you take a share.....I would tell Mr. Fenwick that he must send us a lump of his valuable metal for assay. It will doubtless turn out to be one of iron. Cracroft however thought it not improbable that silver might be found in the Cossya Hills. Time will tell. I shall claim a Baron (Barren) Silver mine. Yours in ecstacy." PMJF 2851/XXX, Swinton to Benson, 9 November 1832.
28. PMJF 2820/III, Swinton to Benson, 1 July 1831, PMJF, 2811/XXXVIII, Scott to Swinton, 25 June, 1831.
29. PMJF 2791/III, Fisher to Scott, 16 October 1830.
30. Ibid, Scott to Swinton, 20 October 1830.

31. **PMJP 2791/II, Swinton to Scott, 5 November 1830.**
32. **A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, 1835, p. 32. Report from Dr. J. W. Fletcher, Asstt. Surgeon, Cherrapunji to A. J. M. Mills, 24 August, 1853.**
33. **West Bengal Archives, Bengal Political Proceedings, 23 Feb. 1835, No. 1; Letter from European Residents in Cherra to Jenkins, 3 November, 1834.**
34. **National Archives of India, Foreign Political Consultations, 17 October 1836, No. 24, Letter from Court of Directors, 17 October, 1836.**
35. **Cherrapunji, Op. cit, pp. 18-19.**
36. **West Bengal Archives, Bengal Political Proceedings, op. cit.**