

SIR HENRY COTTON AND THE ABOR EXPEDITION

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This paper seeks to discuss the concern genuinely expressed for the tribal people of north-east India by a British civilian who had spent a few years of his administrative career in that part of India. The civilian was Sir Henry Cotton. His identification with the nationalist movement launched by the Indian National Congress is well known. His interest in Indian affairs did not cease even after his retirement and in the British Parliament he strongly criticised many of the measures the British Government in London as well as in India had adopted to curb the nationalist movement. Cotton's sympathy for the tribes of north-east India was demonstrated earlier when he was the Chief Commissioner of Assam. In February 1900, the Commissioner, Naga Hills had undertaken a protracted tour without sanction among the Naga tribes beyond the Dikhu which was considered as "beyond the area of our political control". In his enthusiasm he reached Yachumi - an unfriendly Naga village - and 'fired upon the villagers at close quarters, killing several and afterwards burning the village which is said to contain 400 or 500 houses'. In a sharply worded letter Cotton disapproved the action and made his displeasure known to the Commissioner, Naga Hills for Yachumi misdeeds. He continued to take an active interest in tribal affairs even after his retirement. How strong was his reaction to the punitive expedition sent in October 1911 against the Abors living on the banks of Dihong by the Government of India is evident from an article he had written in the Amrita Bazar Patrika.¹ In the Westminster Gazetteer too he had written on the subject to draw public attention to the ill-treatment meted out to the Abors.

Already the Abors had been indicted for having extorted by threats payments from the employees of

two saw mills companies engaged in procuring timber beyond the "inner line" and the two saw mills companies wanted the government "to adopt at once ... a series of measures amounting to the introduction ... of direct administration and to require the tribesmen to receive in their villages political or other officers of Government who had dealings with them."⁴ Possibly keeping this in mind the Government of India, in a letter to the Secretary of State, made strong pleas urging the necessity of formulating a new policy in reversal of the old policy of non-interference and 'proposed to give effect to this new departure in policy by sending the Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, with a strong escort, to the chief Abor villages beyond the outer line, with instruction to inform the tribesmen of the orders and intentions of Government, and to make arrangements for establishing the new regime'. The Secretary of State, after some hesitation, gave his approval to the proposed tour of the Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, to the villages beyond the "outer line", if it could be made without risk of conflict with the tribes.³ But the proposed tour was abandoned in 1908 "possibly because the Lieutenant Governor was not satisfied that the tour can be made with safety, or considered that the final sanction of Her Majesty's Government will not be procured in time to admit of arrangements being made for the tour this cold weather."⁴

Moreover the Abors had been accused of making the lives of the Miris, a tribe dwelling below them on the borders of the British territory, miserable. They claimed the Miris as their feudatory vassals or slaves, demanded and actually extorted the tribute which before the advent of the British in that region, was theirs by might, if not by right. The result was that the harmless and peace-loving Miris had to pay double taxes for years - to the British and the Abors. But even this did not deter the Abors from lifting cattle of the Miris or carrying off members

of their tribe and extorting ransom.⁵ Constant complaints had been made to the British Government, but the plundering habits of the Abors could not be checked. The Government was, in fact, looking helplessly on the oppression the Miris had been suffering. The Government was possibly looking out for an opportunity to swoop down upon their predatory raids. The murder of Noel Williamson provided the desired opportunity. When the expedition was sent the Government of India instructed Major General Bower, commanding the expeditionary force, to severely punish the Abors for the murder of Williamson and his party, but he was asked that advantage should be taken of the expedition to explore as much of the country as possible, to obtain knowledge requisite for the determination of a suitable boundary between India and China in the locality at a later period and to enter into friendly relations with the hill tribes, i.e., the Miris and the Mishmis. From the point of view of the Government of India the expedition aimed at covering wide imperial interests.⁶

Noel Williamson was Assistant Political Officer of the Government of India at Sadiya on the Assam frontier. He entered the Abor territory, much beyond the "outer line", and was murdered by the Abors along with his companion Dr. Gregorson in March 1911. Nobody knew the actual reasons of his entering the territory, nor was the tour undertaken with the knowledge of the Government of India. Williamson had already undertaken a tour up the Lohit river to Wallong in the Mishmi country and obtained further information as to the proceedings of the Chinese in the vicinity which had caused the Local Government to reiterate their proposal that the Mishmi should be brought definitely under the control of the British Government without further delay. This was followed by their⁷ tour in the Abor country where he was murdered.

The rules relating to the tours beyond the area of British political control had been already laid down and the sanction of the Local Government was necessary in all cases, and when such tours were likely to involve complications with the tribesmen which might render a punitive expedition necessary, they were not sanctioned without previous approval of the Government of India. The Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam pointed out that Williamson had "acted contrary to the standing orders when he crossed the 'outer line' and penetrated into the Abor country". No permission was given to any of the officers to cross the 'outer line' and he was constrained "to admit that in crossing the outer line without permission, Mr. Williamson committed a breach of well-known standing orders". He further admitted that "it was the fault of a zealous officer, anxious to obtain information which he believed to be valuable, and willing to run a certain amount of risk in getting it". The letter of the Government of India further pointed out that the sanction of the Local Government in all such cases of tour "beyond the area of political control" was necessary and where "such tours are likely to involve complications with the tribesmen which may render a punitive expedition necessary, the tour is not to be sanctioned without the previous approval of the Government of India." Noel Williamson did not seem to have received sanction either from the Local Government or from the Government of India. The question was raised in the House of Commons by William Byles and Montagu, Under Secretary of State for India, replied that the circumstances in which Williamson entered the Abor territory were unknown to the Government at that time, but from letters written after he had started and received after his death it appeared that his object was to see if he could obtain 'political information'. His expedition was undertaken without reference to the higher authorities. He had visited the country before, and he had been invited by the headmen to return and

visit the¹⁰ village in which he was eventually murdered.

Sir Henry Cotton wrote in the Amrita Bazar Patrika that "peremptory orders" were issued by Government eleven years ago prohibiting the tour of political officers beyond the area of their own political control." Cotton further observed that on 11 April 1900, while he was Chief Commissioner of Assam, he had sent to the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills the contents of the rules and instructed him to follow them strictly. He did not 'look with favour' the Naga Commissioner's protracted tour over a tract of country where the British possess and claim no political control and where there is obvious risk of your coming into conflict with the savage tribes who inhabit it.¹¹ Curzon approvingly wrote on 18 May 1900 that "the rule ... will apply to projected tours beyond the area of political control throughout the Assam frontier, and not on the frontier of Naga Hills only".¹² Cotton as Chief Commissioner had circulated copies of the rules to all officers concerned including Williamson's 'immediate predecessor "with an injunction that they should be strictly attended to and, further, that whenever any frontier officer was making over charge of his duties he should without fail bring them to the notice of his successor". In his opinion "there can have been no excuse for transgressing these orders except on the impossible assumption that they have at some later date been reversed by Government."¹³

Cotton also raised a question. Montagu said in the House of Commons that Williamson had previously visited the Abor country. Cotton pointed out that the Under Secretary had not stated whether on that occasion he¹⁴ had received the sanction of the Government or not.

Cotton further put another question. According to the Under Secretary of State Williamson had

visited the country in March 1911 on the invitation of the headmen to return. He wanted to know whether the April visit was really undertaken with or without the good will of the Abors. But statements made in the press in India revealed that the Abors had warned him that he would be killed if he returned. In the face of this warning, Cotton observed, Williamson and his party should have taken an armed escort. But no such escort was taken at all. Cotton pointed out that keeping this in mind and not knowing what would happen, his companion had made his will before starting and he had greatly impressed upon his friends the danger involved in the journey.¹⁵ Thus, according to Cotton, vital facts remained shrouded in mystery.

Cotton was not inclined to believe that the object of the mission was geographical and its purpose was the exploration of the course of the Dihong river. The absence of surveyors and escort confirmed him. Cotton again wanted to know "what is the 'political information'" referred to by the Under Secretary of State, "Williamson is said to have been trying to obtain without letting the Government know of his intention?" The Under Secretary of State had not stated the kind of 'political information' Williamson was searching out. This induced Cotton to observe that "it may mean nothing at all, or at all events nothing more than general information about the country".¹⁶ He also pointed out that some Anglo-Indian newspapers had indulged in emphasising about the movements of China in her bid "to establish some political foothold at a place called Rima" which was quite a far-off place from the Abor country. Many British officers had already visited the place. Williamson had also made a most successful tour within 42 miles of Rima and the Eastern Bengal and Assam Government observed that he, after his return from Rima, reported that the Chinese might attempt "to impose their authority over the Mishmis".¹⁷ This might have induced him to

undertake that fateful trip. But Cotton ruled out the presence of 'Chinese emissaries in the Abor country'. Even the Government of India had no information about the Chinese negotiations with the Mishmis. Even admitting that Williamson might have had some idea in the back of his mind of counter-acting Chinese influence, it was almost inconceivable that he should have undertaken the tour without letting the Government of India or the Local Government know of it.

Cotton expressed both his anguish and surprise that to punish the Abors for the reasons stated above the Government of India had to send a punitive expedition at such a huge cost and the Secretary of State approved it. He did not rule out the necessity of launching military operations against the Abors for thwarting their depredations and protecting British subjects within 'our border'. But the despatch of the punitive expedition to avenge the death of Williamson and his party seemed reprehensible to him. To him,

"He was an intruder, without permission of superior authority, into a country inhabited by savage folk who had on indisputable evidence warned him to advance no further ... And we have sent a small army into their territory to avenge his death and apparently to undertake further operations of which no man can foresee the end. I am reminded of the iniquitous raid into Tibet only seven years ago with its bloody memories."¹⁸

Cotton was joined by another person who was equally critical of the policy of the Government of India. He was Frederick Mackarness. He had also written in the Westminster Gazette on the Abor expedition and raised another relevant question. He observed that according to the evidence of the two coolies, who had managed to escape, three or four villages

had taken part in the murder of Williamson and his party. If that were true, he asked, "Why should the whole tribe be made to suffer, unless it has been ascertained that they were parties to the attack?" Mackarness deplored the action of the Government of India which resorted to the "crude and medieval form of remedy - punitive expedition - in which innocent and guilty alike are swept away by quick firing guns."¹⁹ In his opinion such expedition as this should not have been taken "except upon the clearest evidence that the tribe alleged to have been offended is really responsible and that satisfaction can be obtained in no other way." Cotton finally charged the Government of India for not publishing any paper on the Abor expedition thereby preventing 'public opinion to exercise any influence'. In his opinion the Government of India had acted harshly in its treatment of the Abors and he asked whether the sanction of the Parliament was obtained for the employment of Indian army beyond the frontier.

Notes & References

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3. Foreign External A, June 1908, No. 38.
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6. Foreign External A, December 1908, No.17.
7. Foreign Department Secret E, October 1911, No.104.
8. Foreign External A, May 1900, Nos. 152/153.
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10. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 December 1911.

11. Foreign External A, May 1900, No. 152.
12. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 7 December 1911.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Foreign Secret E, 12 August 1911, No. 65.
18. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 7 December 1911.
19. Reproduced in Amrita Bazar Patrika, 16 October 1911.
20. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 7 December 1911.