

# Abor Rebellion 1911-12, A Post Mortem of the Murder of Noel Williamson

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On 30th March 1911 Dr. Gregorson, a tea garden Doctor from Tinsukia who was accompanying Mr. Noel Williamson, Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, <sup>1</sup> on a tour in the Abor country was murdered at Pangi and on 31st March 1911, Mr. Williamson was murdered at Komsing, 44 followers belonging to their party were massacred at the same time.<sup>2</sup> The whole episode caused a furore in the total hierarchy of the British Administration i.e. from the Deputy Commissioner Lakhimpur to that of the Secretary of State for India, and British Parliament as well. In a sudden breakthrough of events a punitive expedition, was ordered by Lord Crewe, the Secretary of State for India in his telegram dated 24th July 1911,<sup>3</sup> To the Viceroy of India. Major General, H. Bower, commanded the expedition which rocked the Abor hills and at the same time opened the "Terra Incognita"<sup>4</sup> in the lights of modern world. The dogged policy of non-intervention gave the way for a policy of active intervention. Lord Minto, the then Viceroy of India took this occasion a turning point in the policy towards the North Eastern Hills. Ground was prepared for the Simla Tripartite talks of 1913-1914 and ultimately the Mc. Mahon Line was drawn. With that the once impregnable North Eastern hill tracts got its frontier and then moved towards the birth of a new state like Arunachal Pradesh of today.

In the farthest North Eastern corner of India amidst dense Jungle, the murder of a British Officer in those days was not an uncommon affair. Moreover the officer was murdered in a place (Komsing) which was located far beyond the Outer line<sup>5</sup> and thus safely outside the jurisdiction of British authority in India. The precedents to the murder were practically silent movements. As such it hardly caused any suspicion. But in contrast, when the aftermath of the episode stands for review it turns the contours of the event from a mere "Massacre" to a "Great Rebellion".

In history, events are great by their causes and consequences. Here, consequences are certainly of great historic importance. But the causes and the factors are still veiled under darkness.

Hardly any effort has been made so far towards unravelling the mass base of the tribes 'discontentment against the penetration of the British rule in that side of the frontier. The economic-social and political dismemberment of the tribe, caused by the interventionist policy of the British rulers in India has also not been touched from a historical angle. In addition practically no attempt has been made to study the personality of the tribes e.g. their spirit, love for freedom etc. by the study of their's socio-political and cultural institutions. As a result the episode has been given the worst place in history.

To the British historians like, George Dunbar, F. Von. Haimendorf, Sir Robert Reid etc, the episode was an act of barbarism committed by a savage tribe. The Abor tribe.<sup>6</sup> was not spared with any uncivilized terms of the civilized world. They have often been branded as, barbarous, savage, uncivilized, uncultured etc. Regarding the causes of the episode, Mr. A. W. A. Bentinck. Assistant Political officer of the Abor Expedition 1911-12 summed up the event as an offshot of the "conflict of cultures". Since there was no souring precedent to the massacre the causes have often been pinpointed to the misinterpretation of a sealed letter sent by Noel Williamson from his advance camp to the Deputy Commissioner, Dibrugarh through a Miri on 26th March 1911. But behind this high drama was the mass discontentment of the tribe which had reached practically a stage of no return by 1911. The wrong interpretation of the letter, given by the carrier to the tribes at Rotung was just the prelude to their uprising. After the massacre, the way the Abors defended themselves in the face of a punitive expedition also speaks very high of their bravery and gallantry. A peep in to the past history in the right perspective can bring this in to light.

The Abor tribes occupy an extensive range of mountainous country, along the southern exposure of great himalayan chain extending from the 94th to the 97th degree of east longitude and bordering on Tibet and China.<sup>7</sup> They are divided into a number of sub-tribes and again each sub-tribe is further subdivided to and less number of class. Today their population is the highest among the tribes of Arunachal numbering to a lakh approximately. However near the plains of Assam in the south bank of Brahmaputra they inhabit the lofty ranges behind the miris and Duphlas in the concentrated pockets between river Dibang and Dihong.<sup>8</sup> The hill Miris who inhabits the plains of Assam in the Lakkimporé district and the adjacent hills, close to the Abors are often con-

sidered as subordinates to the Abors Assam under the Ahom rulers had from time to time maintained a good relationship with the Abors. In the observation of William Robinson, they were always looked upon as allies of the Assam Government. During the troubled days of Mcamaria rebellion the Abors actively assisted the Bura Gohain in repelling the Moamarias. Very little is heard about their savagery depredations against the Ahom rulers of the plains of Assam. No doubt, at times there were struggles for supremacy in between the Abors and the Ahoms and either parties had been victorious or vanquished. But it is an accepted fact that the Abors were tough to deal with in a war and so they were recognised by the Ahoms as their ally.

The Abors are later migrants to their habitat and compared to the miris they retained much of their pristine savagery and hard-  
lihood." They are divided into an endless number of clans and each clan or village forms a democratic republic by itself, and is governed by the laws enacted by all the inhabitants in a formal meeting. Every male member of the village has an equal vote. Intra-village disputes and rivalry were settled in the kebang. Punishment was severe in case of the violation of the kebang's decision and discipline. It is strange to note that the Abors were very particular about their democratic values very much like the vedic Aryans in their sabha and samitis. Like the Grisons of Alps in Europe, no doubt a trend is always visible among the Abors to establish the supremacy of a few, either by virtue of their superior worth, hereditary esteem or real ability, but the extreme jealousy of the people and their vigilant watchfulness to preserve their democratic rights, render it very difficult to win over these influential men.<sup>10</sup> It is thus surprising to observe in these people all those different shades of extreme rudeness and civilized observance of laws enacted and allowed by them for the good of the community. The discipline, democratic values and the love for freedom, inherent among the Abors has rendered them to be a tough section among the hill tribes of Arunachal. In spite of the ruggedness of their terrain, which has narrowed their means of subsistence and limited their intercourse to their immediate neighbours, they are a hospitable and a social race with frequent feasts and gatherings and very nice disposition to their strangers. It is surprising that they have maintained this tradition till today, even amidst the changes of last two centuries and more.

The Abors had no claims of pose.<sup>11</sup> However, but they claimed an absolute sovereignty over the plains adjacent to their hills and

an inalienable right to all the fish and gold found in the Dihang river. The Miris on their part had also acknowledged the supremacy of the Abors over them. In the troubled years of Ahom rule i.e. from later half of eighteenth century and onwards agriculture had become a precarious economic pursuit. Hence inspite of the hardship of their servitude to the Abors the Miris pursued the profitable business of fishing and collecting gold from the sands of Dihang river. The Assamese government also anxious to conciliate the Abors, had long since relieved these Miris of all revenue charges acknowledging thereby the subjection of that tribe to the Abors.<sup>12</sup>

The Abor economy during those days was very very precarious. The absence of any large valley and plateau in those hills had rendered the life of the Abors almost nomadic. In the precipitous hill slopes Jhum cultivation was practiced with very heavy hard labour. Agricultural tools were primitive and confined to dao, hoe and spade etc. Ploughing and other techniques of agriculture were basically lacking in those precipitous slopes. Severe land Slides and heavy rain washing away the top soil, were addition constraints to a settled cultivation anywhere in the hills. Agricultural products as a matter of fact was very low when compared to the hard labour put in to the paddy fields. Besides Jhumming, Wild buffalos (Mithun) Pigs, goats and chickens were tamed and domesticated primarily for obtaining meat. Hunting in the jungle was another side of their vigorous economic activity. Brisk trade was carried with the plains of Assam. Items of Abor trade chiefly consists of Manjet, Ivory and weollens in exchange they used to gather salt, grains, clothes, dao, tools and other household goods from the plains which were not available in the hills. In the cropping session the forced labour of the Miris were heavily relied upon in order to cater to the pressing need of more labour. Thus the plains of Assam and specifically the forced labour and the exactions from the Miris were serving as the economic life line for the survival of the Abor tribes in the lofty hill ranges. Any meddling in to the existing state of co-existence and economic interdependences was likely to cause severe economic deprivation for the tribes. So the Abors resisted unitedly whenever asked to do so, otherwise they were very peaceful and quite well disposed even to foreigners. Lieutenant Mac Gregor was the first British officer who ever appeared in this side of the frontier in 1788. In his opinion the Abors are "men of excellent understanding and pleasant manners."<sup>13</sup> Captain Bedford who encountered the Abors in 1826 in course of clearing the rebels in the Brahmaputra

valley found the Abors very difficult to deal with and distinctly trueulent (a clear recognition of their valour and militarism). With the conclusion of Anglo-Burmese war in 1826 the English East India company stepped in to the boot of the Ahom rulers of Assam. While dealing with the internal administration of Assam the British first came in contact with the Abors in 1830, when a group of Bor-Abors demanded before the British authorities to expedite the return of a village of Miris to their original hill tracts. With the beginning of a stable political order in Assam. the Miris thought it better to settle in the plains under the administrative jurisdiction of the British in Assam. But their migration from the hills caused sever financial loss to the Abors. So the Abors demandde their return and the British authority realising the tone of the problem induced the Miris to return back io their original home. Even Abores were allowed to come down to the plains for permanent settlement within the British jurisdiction. In the Govt. correspondence of 1830's the Abors are described as "the best disposed of hill tribes, though the most powerful and never known to commit an act of unprovoked revage or outrage on the villages of the plains."

British officers managing the frontier affairs tried to take advantage of the situation by putting the Abors as a counterpoise against the khampties, signghos and Mishimis, who were not well disposed to the British administration in the plains. This formula worked well in 1840, when the Abors assisted the British in liquidating the khampti-Mishmi alliance. Consequently some Abors were allowed to stay in the plains even with the relaxation of paying taxes to the local administration. However they were committed to the observation of criminal jurisdiction of the administration.

The peaceful co-existance existed so far, didnot continue for a long time. The restoration of law and order and the beginning of commercial, enterpries in Assam under the auspices of the English East India company was bound to reverberate in the distant hills of the North eastern frontier. The Miris, who preferred to stay in the foothills under constant servitude of the Abors in the troubled days of Ahom rule now displayed their interest to settle in the plains of Assam under British jurisdiction. In the plain they not only felt secured, but also had the advantage of earning a better livelihood in a commercially fast growing and enterprising Assam. Thus the growing prosperity of Assam resulted in the migration of the Miris and their settlement in to the plains of Assam. Along with the miris the "Beeahs" (traditionally gold washers and fish

catchers in Dibang, Dihong and its tributaris) also accepted the British Suzerainty. Emboldened by the British support they freely pursued their traditional profession in the hills and at the some time defied the earlier practice of acknowledging Abors' supriority and giving them conciliatory offerings from time to time. In addition, the claims of the Abors on all the lands down to the bank of the Brahmaputra between the Dibang on the east and Dikari on the west which was recognised since the time of the Ahom ruler, Pratap Singha also suffered because of the economic interest of the British there in.<sup>15</sup> The foothills were rich with valuable timbers, rubber, lac etc. and the low lying lands were also identified as fertile areas for the commercial cultivation of opium and tea. As such the British were bent upon exploiting the resource potential of the area without any regard to the Abor claims.

The effects of these developments disastrously fell upon the Abors. The desertion of the Miris resulteed in an acuts shortage of the labour force in the hills causing severe hardship in the cropping season and in carrying on the trade in the hills. The British interest in the foothills and low lying plain lands and the Beeah's defiance to pay their share to the Abors resulted in a severe economic loss to the tribes. , threatening their basic survival. Moreover the Abors, by their cultural background were more freedom loving and desperadoes in comparison to other neighbouring tribes. The loss of their sovereignty over the Miris and the Beeahas and the restrictions imposed upon their free movement on the plains, which was once their own land, was taken up by the Abors as something inimical to their ago and pride. As such, these matters were hotly debated in the village kebangs. Since the cause of suffering was common to all the Abor clans and groups, they started forging themselves under a common umbrella in order to fight for their rights, economic and political as well. The base for a mass movement was thus prepared.

In the intial phase of reaction the Abors struck on their individual targets. In 1848 a body of cachari gold washers were taken as captive for their defiance and non-pyment of dues to the Abors. Captain Vetch who went to the hills to seek the release of the captives was attacked in his camp for his policy of duble talk <sup>16</sup>. In January 1858 the Beeah settlement of Sangjan only six miles from Dibrugarh was massecred by the Kebang clan of Bor Meyong Abors.<sup>17</sup> Again in 1862 the Meyong Abors once again cut up another Beeah settlement. in the south bank of Brahmaputra, located some 15 miles away from Dibrugarh. It is important to note here that throughout these raids not a single Englishman,

nor any of their subjects were touched except the Beeahs who were Abor subjects earlier. But the British administration reacted very sharply, carrying fire and sword to the hills in 1848, 1858, and 1859. In 1861 negotiations were opened with the tribes. Consequently the Meyong Abors and the Meybo Abors signed separate agreements with the Deputy Commissioner Lakhimpur in 1862 and 1863, by which not only their land rights and right to collect dues was recognised but also local administration promised to open market and better communication to their hills in exchange of their good behaviour and a token annual tribute. This brought a temporary lull to the strained Anglo-Abor relationship. 1860's however marked a major thrust of British interventionist policy in to the Abor hills. A number of advance military guard posts were constructed at the foothills, in order to check and keep a vigilant eye on the activities of the Abors in the plains as well as in the hills. Exploitation of the forest resources continued unabated and the local administration remained apathetic to its promise of opening markets and better road communication up to the hills. The anger of the tribes which had not yet died down, resumed once again and this time against the British administration. For their misery, suffering and losses the Abors hold the British squarely responsible.

As a mark of protest they refused to accept the annual presents from the Deputy Commissioner Lakhimpur. They insisted on the removal of military guard posts from their frontier and opposed the advance of Trigonometrical survey party in to the hills.<sup>18</sup> By 1877 all the payment made to the tribes and all the dues collected by them were substituted for cash payment of *posa*. Military guard post was further advanced to Nizamghat and Jack Francis Needham was appointed Assistant political officer and posted at Sadiya to look specifically in to the tribal affairs. In 1884, when Needham visited the Abor hills, The Abors represented strongly about their long-standing grievances, but to no avail. So they took resort to arms and in 1882, 1887 and 1889 they attacked their individual Miri targets in the plains. when the British reacted by withholding the payment of *posa* and blockading the frontier, the Abors became more outrageous. In 1893 several police parties were attacked, sepoys were ambushed and guns looted. In retaliation the British launched a massive expedition under the command of Cap R. M. Maxwell. 500 soldiers and 711 guns were employed to force the tribes to surrender. A number of villages on the way (Bomjur, Dambuk, Silluk, membu, padu

etc) were burnt but Damroh, the main target of the campaign remained unpunished. On the other hand the base camp at Bordak was burnt and the guards cut in to pieces by the Abors. This forced a humiliating retreat on the part of the campaigners. Further tribal raids continued unabated in 1898 and 1899 but a general blockade compelled them to submit to the British authorities in 1900 A. D.

Noel Williamson, who succeeded Needham in 1905 as the A.P.O. Sadiya was a daredevil in the inaccessible hills with a passionate desire to bring the hills under the clutch of British imperialism. As such after taking over the charge he undertook to tour the hills extensively and frequently. In 1907-08 he toured the Mishmi hills as far as Rima<sup>29</sup>. This was followed by his tour to Rang-pang-Naga country in 1908 and to Abour hills as far as Kebang in 1909, and again the Mishmi hills in 1909-10 and 1911. The objective of these tours were to gather intimate knowledge of the tribal land, explore the possibility of a trade route to eastern Tibet through the hills and to ascertain the extent of Chinese influences in the hills so as to enable them extend the outer line as far as possible. The Abors looked upon these extensive tours with suspicion. During the tours they were not only subjected to such humiliations as working like coolies but also were to assist in raising local supply for the entire party without any benefit to their end. Besides, a common sense of insecurity and humiliation also haunted them. To a primitive people with their distinctly indigenous culture, institutions, and values, the activities of the British amounted to an infringement in to their freedom and the cultural and value system in toto. Economic deprivation, which threatened their basic survival, added fire to that. The result was explosive, leading to the murder of Williamson and his party in March 1911.

It is very important to note that, in the entire operation against the British, no single clan, or group of tribes were involved. The entire Abors group of tribes who were affected in the process of the British colonisation of hills, were party to the murder. It thus becomes obvious that the resistance movement had a mass base engineered by a common cause. The goal of the movement was also one for all, i.e. the end of British domination in their territory. The gallantry with which the Abors fought from their stockaded position against a massive organised force in 1912 speaks very high of their valour and martial virtues. It would be worthless to connect this episode with the greater freedom movement of India, in the absence of any direct evidence to that effect, but it

would be certainly an injustice, if we donot recognise it as a part and parcel of that great edifice of the freedom movement against British imperialism.

### Note m References

1. Sadiya, located in the upper bank of Lohit and in between Lohit and Debang. to the east of Brahmaputra, was the old administrative headquarters since the Ahom times. After the British takeover of Assam. Needham was appointed as the first Assistant political Officer at Sadiya in 1882.
2. Sir Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier areas bordering on Assam*. Delhi, 1942, 1983, p-218.
3. Ibid, p. 225.
4. The present Arunachal Pradesh was a hidden land till it was explored by the British for the outer world. Major General H. Bower coined this hidden land as Tarra Inconginitta during h's Abor compaign.
5. Outer line was that line which lay beyond the Inner line. While the British administrated up to the Inner line, drawn along the foot hills, they just ruled politically up to outer line. Outer line was flexible and subject to change from time to time.
6. "Abor" the very name literally mean an "Unfriendly one" in Assamese. In fact this is the Assamese name for the tribes who inhabits the Lofty mountain ranges to the south of Mc. Mahon line and North of Brahmaputra valley in between 94th to 97th degree of east longitude. Presently they are known as Adis and constitute the major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.
7. William Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Assam*, Delhi, 1975, also 1941, p. 359.
8. The Tsangpo river of Tibet cuts in to Arunachal as Siang and in the plains of Assam is known as mighty Brahmaputra.
9. A. Mackenzia' *History of the relations of the government with the hill tribes of the North east Frontier of Bengal*, Cal. 1884, p. 35.
10. William Robinson, op. cit. p. 359.

11. Posa was the practice of collecting forcible exactions from the lowlying villages, of the plains, adjacent to the hills, by the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh since the Ahom days. British commuted this claim of posa in to money payment.
12. A. Mackenzie, op. cit., p-33.
13. George Dunbar, *Frontiers*, Delhi, p. 102.
14. Bengal political proceedings, 7th May 1830, 47-48, quoted in A. Mackenzie, p-35.
15. H. Boruah, *Ahom Buranji*, p-40.
16. A. Mackenzie, op. cit., p-36.
17. Judicial proceedings (Bengal) 19 Aug. 1858, No. 61-62, quoted in M. L. Bose, *British Policy in NEFA*, p. 68.
18. A. Mackenzie, op. cit., p-42.
19. Foreign proceedings (Assam) Jan. 1901. Nos. 37-40, quoted in M.L. Bose, op. cit., p-72.
20. Rima was then the last Tibetan out post in the Mishmi Hill frontier.