

The Crown Colony-Protectorate for North-East India : The Tribal Response

D. R. Syiemlieh

I

Over the past few years much interest has been generated among academic circles in the region in the British plans between 1928-1946 to retain a part of North-east India and north-west Burma into first a separate hill province and later a British Crown Colony-Protectorate.¹ Many of these researches made attempts to trace the developments of the plan from its inception to its collapse. Some authors sought to see in the plan the British imperialistic designs to remain in the region after independence was given to India. The British reason for such a scheme was that it was the best that could be done for the hill tribes who would have come within the Protectorate Colony, had it taken shape. Still others emphasised on the problem of defence of the north-east frontier and linked the plan with imperial defence in the last years of the British Raj. Other historians and political scientists have used their understanding of this development to place the emergence and crystalization of hill politics as stemming from the encouragement given in the formulations of and the philosophy behind the plan. Finally, a recent public address put the idea that, had the plan matured into reality, it would have resulted in another partition, alongside the birth of Pakistan.

II

One aspect of this problem has not received sufficient treatment. It is, if some British administrators believed that the hills contiguous to each other should have an amalgamated administration why did they not consult the tribals who could have benefitted from this 'paternal care' ? What was the tribal response to the plan ? How did it influence the tribals into thinking of their future in the political and constitutional arrangement immediately before and after the independence of India ? One may also ask why none of the discussions, proceedings of meetings, exchange of confidential notes on the subject had any reference to what the local population's response would be to their possible continuation under British rule given Indian independence. Apparently the designers of the plan simply assumed that the tribes of the hills of north east India would willingly accept the plan. Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam (1937-1942) who had

aroused interest in this special attention for tribal administration had this to say :²

It is up to us to see that they are given under our protection period of respite within which they will develop on their own lines and without outside influence, but if the present opportunity to give them that chance is let slip, the danger is that it will never occur.

Reid believed that the British Government had a responsibility for the future of these tribes. "a set of very loyal, primitive people who are habituated to look to us for protection and who will get it from no other source."³

When the plan was first mooted to have a single and distinct administration for the hill districts of Assam, there was but one representative from the Backward Tracts in the Assam Legislative Council. None of the three men who filled this position between 1921-1937 knew anything of the detailed needs of the area they represented, their attendance in the Council was irregular and they did not appear ever to have spoken.⁴ Moreover, political consciousness among the hill people was in its infancy. This position improved to some extent after 1937. Each Partially Excluded Area sent their own elected representative to the new Assembly. The Excluded Areas continued as before to have one nominated member in the Assam Legislature. Political activity was taking its roots for there was much to discuss. Among the tribals, only the Reverend J. J. M. Nichols-Roy could have had some knowledge of what was transpiring in the British mind. He was for some time a minister in the Assam Government and the most vocal tribal leader. His reaction to the plan will be taken up presently. Other than him no tribal could have even discussed the scheme in official circles. It would be left to them to react to rumours afloat that the British hoped to continue their role over the hill people.

All the notes, correspondence and meetings beginning with Rebert Reid's⁵ suggestion in 1942 for a hill province in north-east India, later the amalgamation of the hill areas of north-east India and the hills across the watershed in Burma in one administration, linked with the Crown Colony - Protectorate were written in confidence and discussed in camera. Only Reginald Coupland gave some public notice to this scheme after L. S. Amery, the Secretary of State for India and Burma, provided the Oxford Professor a copy of Reid's Note. Coupland then changed Reid's confidential paper into a proposal that quite wrongly was attributed as his original idea.⁷

Through 1944-1945 the Burma administration "flirted with the Reid idea of a separate Agency for the Burma - Assam frontier."⁸ By August 1945 the proposition for a separate administrative unit was dropped by Burma to prepare for other plans with the return of British administration to Rangoon.⁹ In India, though the Crown Colony somehow continued to draw the attention of the last of the British administrators. Even Lord Wavell was credited with taking to London a plan for a province to be solely ruled by Britain.¹⁰ By the middle of 1946, however, this plan and others

on the anvil to give special arrangements to India's tribes were wound up." The British had come to realise rather late, that sincere as their attempts were to provide special arrangement for the hill people, it was ill-timed and conceived too late to take shape.

III

We may now discuss the tribal response to the Crown Colony plans. Reverend J. J. M. Nichols Roy's remarks on the proposal for forming a North Eastern Frontier Province was categorical. In his memorandum to the British Cabinet mission he wrote that for sometime rumours were floating "all over India" that the British Government wanted to form a new British protectorate with the hills of Assam. He was of the opinion that, "The people of these hills who are educated and who had some experience of this political rule are greatly against such a rule." He did not think the Protectorate would be economically viable. "When the whole of India will get independence," he told the Mission, "the hill people of Assam should also get their own share of independence and they should be connected with the Province of Assam."¹² His friend, the Reverend L. Gathphoh who represented the Jaintia Hills thought differently. He hoped his hills would come into the Colony - Protectorate. Gathphoh is said to have had to disappear for some time because of his support for the plan.¹³ That two Khasi-Jaintia leaders should take such opposing stands was reflective of Khasi politics in the fluid situation of 1946-1947.

Three Garos, Emonsing M. Jangma, Ganram R. Marak and Singdon K. Sangma had only one purpose for their memorandum to the British Parliamentary Delegation. Speaking on behalf of the Garo people they showed their concern "to hear the rumours that there is a plan of some British officials in Assam to exclude our district from Assam and India and put it within an Excluded area which may be called the North Eastern British Protectorate." They presumed that the Protectorate would be non-Regulated and administered by political officials. "We oppose this plan", they wrote. "It is undesirable that we should be included in that kind of protectorate." They concluded their one page letter that it was the desire of the Garos to be with Assam and India.¹⁴

There are two views of Naga response to the Crown Colony. A. Zaphu Phizo was of the opinion that the "best brains of the Nagas were whole heartedly with the British in the scheme", for that was part of their spontaneous loyalty.¹⁵ In the very same source, however, he contradicts himself. He wrote, "Naga leaders stood against the scheme of Colony because it would go against the interest of other Eastern people We had to fight against the scheme for a long time."¹⁶ A recent research without any ambiguity states that when the plans were made known to the Nagas, "they opposed it vehemently since they had no affection for any kind of British imperialism and colonialism in their land."¹⁷ The Mizos too saw no future in continuing under British rule. The Mizo Union turned down the proposal and favoured autonomous

status for their hills within the province of Assam.¹⁸ The new Mizo leaders had another reason to reject the Crown Colony. They feared that their continuation under foreign rule would help to perpetuate chieftainship which they desperately wanted to be done with.¹⁹

IV

While the tribes were considering their future in and out of India, two of the last British administrators put forward suggestions for the future of the hills in an independent India. Andrew Clow, the last British Governor of Assam prepared in 1945 a *Memorandum on the Future of the Government of Assam Tribal People*. Put briefly his convictions were for linking the hills with the rest of Assam but subject to some separate provisions in respect to both legislative and executive functions, and a separate hill province sharing some of the administrative machinery including a common Governor and capital with Assam. Clow personally favoured the first alternative as he saw no future of the hill tribes in segregation from the plains. He was critical of the approach of anthropologists whose attitude was essentially negative — one of preserving and isolating the tribes.²⁰ His subordinate officers felt that the hills would require a period of probation before they could be incorporated into the province.²¹ The Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District, Sir Charles Pawsey saw a need for the hill tribes to be given some say in their future administration — that they should be allowed to run their own hills in their own way ; that they should be given security of land tenure, they must be protected from the rapacity of money lenders and that they must have their freedom that they enjoyed under the British. He echoed the fears expressed earlier by Reid that with independence the hill tribes would have much to fear of their future. He said it would be 'immoral' for the British to hand the Nagas over "to the tender mercies of the Assamese".²² Pawsey had no ideal plan for the hills but he would agree with some form of interim government, with a steady building up of tribal councils to take the place of British Officers. The Deputy Commissioner's hope was to see the Nagas and other tribes cooperating with the Assamese in a regime acceptable to both. The British were definitely going and wrote the Governor to Pawsey, "the Naga idea of a ten years interim Government, if it means government by the British is a chimera". His last thoughts on the problem were :²³

The main thing now is to get the tribal people thinking within the limits of the practical, and my own profound conviction is that they should plump for cooperation and get the best bargain they can.

Sadly there was little cooperation between the new Assam leaders and those of the hills. The plainsmen continued to suspect the British even after their withdrawal. Their outbursts to make amends in history to detribalise the hill people was a sorry start to relations in independent India. The hill leaders generally

but for some Naga, Mizo and Khasi individuals were for a future in India. They were however not given a chance to bargain. Something was done by the new central authority to preserve the culture and traditions of the tribes through the Sixth Schedule. I cannot but quote from Barpujari's own conclusion to sum up this paper. He wrote, "the Kaleidescopic changes in North-Eastern India in the wake of India's independence bear ample testimony to the fact that erstwhile tribal experts clearly visualized the complexities of the problem of the tribesmen and some of their comments and observations were indeed prophetic." ²⁴ Had our Indian leaders, more particularly the Assamese taken advice and continued without break the British policy towards the hills the events in the recent past and the break with Assam might not have occurred.

Notes & References

1. Some of the more important writings on this scheme may be read in V. V. Rao, *A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India*, pp. 149-152 ; S. K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North East India*, pp. 69-71 ; Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, "North Eastern Province and its Viability", *Proceedings of the NEIHA*, Pasighat Session, 1986, pp. 201-211 ; D. R. Syiemlieh "The Crown Colony for North East India 1928-1947", *Proceedings of the NEIHA*, Dibrugarh Session 1981, pp. 172-178 ; D. R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya ; Policy and Pattern*, pp. 165-67 H.K. Barpujari, "New Light on the Proposed Crown Colony for North East India" paper read at the Indian Historical Records Commission, Fifty Third Session, Guwahati 1990, pp. 10-24 (mimeographed) ; P.L. Mehra, *The Mc Mohan Line and After*, pp. 459-460 ; Asoso Yonuo, *The Rising Nagas ; A Historical and Political Study*, pp. 139-141 ; and J. B. Bhattacharjee, *World War II and India ; A Fifty Years' Perspective*, Presidential Address, Modern India Section, Indian History Congress, December 1989-January 1990, Gorakhpur, pp. 32-33.
- 2] R. Reid, 'Assam', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol. XCII, April, 1944, p. 247.
3. *Ibid.*
4. (I)ndia (O)ffice (L)ibrary and (R)ecords. R. Reid Collection. MSS Eur E/278/4(c) Note on the Excluded Areas of Assam, pp. 2-3.
5. IOLR, L/PrS/12/3115(A) *A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded and Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam*, pp 5-8.
6. R. Coupland, *The future of India*, p. 164.
7. For details of how this was done see D. R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya : Policy and Pattern*.
8. IOLR, M/4/2803 ; Dorman Smith to Pethick Lawrence, 13 August 1945.
9. *Ibid.*

10. N. Mansergh (Ed.) *The Transfer of Power*, Vol. V, No. 397. Andrew Clow to John Colville, 19 April 1945.
11. D. R. Syiemlieh. *Op. cit.* ; V. V. Rao, *op. cit.*, p. 15? informs that Winston Churchill approved the plan but it was vetoed by the Labour Government.
12. J. J. M. Nichols Roy. *Hill Districts of Assam : Their Future in the New Constitution of India*, Memorandum submitted to the British Cabinet Mission. p. 5 , V. V. Rao. *op. cit.* p. 341. makes reference to this document. However I find much difference in the actual wording of the memorandum and what Rao has incorporated in his book.
13. *U Salonsar*, Vol. 1. No. 26, 31 December 1980, p. 3 ; P. M. Passah's "Monograph on Meghalaya" (Typescript), p. 32. Passah had many meetings with the late Rev. Gathphoh on the basis of which this information is taken.
14. IOLR, L/P S/21/3115(A), Memorandum of the People of the Garo Hills, Assam, India, to the Chairman British Parliamentary Delegation, 25 February 1945.
15. A. Z. Phizo to C. Rajagopalachari, 22 November 1948. in V. K. Nuh, *Nagaland Church and Politics*, p. 90.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
17. Asoso Yonuo, *The Rising Nagas*, p. 141.
18. V. V. Rao, *Op. cit.*, p. 319.
19. S. K. Chaube, *Op. cit.*, p. 161.
20. IOLR, L/Pc J/7/6787, Andrew Clow to Wavell, 23 October 1945. This was a synopsis of the *Memorandum*.
21. N. Mansergh (ed), *Op. cit.*, Vol. VII, Bourne (Acting Governor of Assam) to Wavell, 6 June 1946.
22. (C) ambridge (S)outh (A)sia (A)rchive, Pawsey Papers. Box 1, No. 5. Clow to Pawsey, 26 April, 1947.
23. *Ibid.*
24. H. K. Barpujari, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.