

Management of Lime Stone Quarries in the Khasi Hills till the beginning of 1879

Rita Dorothy Dkhar

In the process of consolidation of British administration over the Khasi Hills, it became necessary to formulate a policy for the management of the numerous lime quarries which were on the southern slopes of these hills. Political control has a tendency to become effective when backed by a well filled treasury. Originally, though it was implicit that realisation of revenue should not be resorted to, yet in its slow and gradual penetration, British policy and motive sought to derive a handsome revenue from these hills. It is evident that rents and royalties realised from the lime quarries of this region constituted one of the major sources of British revenue.¹ This explains the deep interest of the government in undertaking the task of managing the lime quarries in the Khasi Hills.

The Anglo-Khasi war of 1829 which set the move for British penetration of the hills, resulted in the conclusion of treaty agreements between the Khasi chiefs and the British local authorities. By 1858-59, sanads were replaced for the old treaties where terms determining the relation between them were laid down. It should be noted that while imposing agreements and sanads on the Khasi chiefs the government appropriated to itself the right to exploit the mineral resources of these hills. The arrangement with respect to the lime quarries granted the British the right of exclusive manager and joint proprietor of most of the quarries.² Of a few others, the Syiems were the sole proprietors. As exclusive manager, the government received a half share of the rents realised from them ; the other half went to the chiefs or Syiems.³ On the contrary, in the Jaintia Hills, political developments gradually secured for the government the advantageous opportunity of becoming subsequently, the exclusive receiver of the rents and royalties derived from them.⁴

In the initial stage of management, the government undertook the policy of putting up the leases to public auction and the quarries usually fell to the hands of the highest bidder. This policy continued till 1878. Leases were habitually put up to auction and with the exception of the quarry of Sinjura at Dwara Nongtyrnem (let

to Mr. Sarkies), the leases of the others were one and all bought up by Messrs Inglis and Company.⁵ Undoubtedly, the object of this firm in purchasing the leases was to secure the monopoly of the trade and, thereby, to command the market. The majority the quarries were kept unworked for the entire period of the lease but were purchased by the firm with a view to preventing other competitors from doing so. The table below will show the amount of annual rent the firm sacrificed for altogether fourteen unworked quarries for the purpose of retaining its monopoly.

TABLE - A ⁶

1. Choon Cherra and Co.	- annual rent	Rs. 14,510
2. Roopnath	- „	Rs. 1,516
3. Nongthalong	- „	Rs. 1,016
4. Lamapoooshee	- „	Rs. 815
5. Moorali Cherra	- „	Rs. 206
6. Pathari Cherra	- „	Rs. 6,025
7. Ramsemdem Reske	- „	Rs. 2,010
8. Nokaria Cherra	- „	Rs. 500
9. Bor Sirmmai Cherra	- „	Rs. 405
10. Monai Cherra	- „	Rs. 3,250
11. Dholai Cherra	- „	Rs. 12,010
12. Umjemdem Cherra	- „	Rs. 780
13. Bhowal Cherra	- „	Rs. 2,420
14. Ka Long-Long Cherra	- „	Rs. 850
Total :		Rs. 46,313

However, a serious challenge to the monopolistic position arose in the second half of the nineteenth century. This challenge came from two quarters. The introduction of large quantities of kunkur, stone and chalk lime brought cheaply to Calcutta by railway trains from Jabalpur, and khunti and also by sea from Singapore and as ballast for ships from England, France and Port Elizabeth (Africa) caused a great reduction for the demand of Sylhet lime, resulting in the firm's partial loss of control of the Calcutta market.⁷

The other challenge came from the government. The British local authority having speculated the injurious effect of the firm's monopoly on the public and the government, thought it expedient to entertain a new policy for the management of the lime quarries. The old system being no longer favourable, Colonel Keatinge, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam made the proposal "to dispose

of the quarries, not at auction but at certain fixed prices and to impose a royalty on the out turn of Rs. 50 per one thousand maunds, taking care that such terms are enforced as will prohibit the quarries again all falling into the hands of one firm or interest."⁸ Although government agreed to the necessity of breaking up the monopoly, yet it pointed out that "there was no sufficient data for anything like an accurate estimate of the financial effects of Colonel Keatinge's scheme"⁹ and, therefore, considered another alternative for doing so. The new scheme the government contemplated upon, was the reservation of some of the quarries for the working of them by government agency.¹⁰ With regard to the leases of the remaining quarries, government opted for the continuance of the old policy of putting them up to auction but subject to the limitation that "no bidder shall hold more than a certain number and that any quarry which is not worked during a certain period shall be resumed."¹¹

The closing months of the year 1878 saw the beginning of the implementation of the government's new scheme and, with this, the management of the lime quarries entered a new phase. Steps were immediately taken for the furtherance of government's plan. It was felt that publications of advertisements for the sale of a group of eighteen quarries (fourteen of which are mentioned in Table A), on the conditions recommended by government should soon be made as the extended period of the lease of these quarries granted to Messrs Inglis and Company was to terminate on the 30th September, 1878.¹² Subsequently, the advertisement for the sale fixed for first January, 1879 was caused to be published in three successive issues of the Assam Gazette for October, November and December, 1878¹³ and in some of the leading newspapers, namely, Pioneer, Englishman, Exchange Gazette and Hindu Patriot.¹⁴ Such extensive publications, undoubtedly reveal British motive of sending invitations to outsiders other than Messrs Inglis and Company to bid for the quarries. Hence, it is not surprising that about Rs. 500 was spent for the publication of the lime quarry sale notices.¹⁵ This amount was, however, met from the budget grant under the head 'Contingencies, 4, Land Revenue.'¹⁶

The auction sale was not held on the date notified but took place three days later on 4th January, 1879, at the Cutcherry of the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet.¹⁷ Sylhet, the entrepot of the Khasi Hills and plains trade, was probably selected as site for auction for the explicit reason of the abundance of traders there both indigenous and foreigner. It is surprising that at this officially held auction, out of the eighteen quarries advertised for sale, only

five were actually sold ; some of the remaining leases had no bids at all and the offers of a few others were so inadequate that there was an outright refusal for them by the bidders.¹⁸ An important outcome of this sale was an enormous loss of revenue on the part of the government. The actual loss of revenue is estimated at Rs. 25,598.¹⁹

Prior to the auction sale, the department of public works, on instructions from Sir Steuart Bayley, the Chief Commissioner of Assam from 1878 to 1881, selected Super Poonjee (Sohbar) Quarry for government reservation.²⁰ It was likely that government's operations in working the reserved quarry was solely limited for the purpose of government with a view to exercise as little interference as possible with private trade. It was, therefore, thought expedient to supply therefrom the whole demand of the Governments of Bengal and Assam and to leave the public to be supplied by private trade.²¹ Super Poonjee Quarry was, however, excluded from the list of quarries advertised for sale when the choice for government reservation fell on it.²² With the selection of the government quarry and with the auction sale held at Sylhet on 4th January, 1879, the implementation of the new policy for the management of the lime quarries can be set to have begun.

References

1. W. W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II, reprint Delhi 1975, p. 205.
2. Assam Secretariat Records, Revenue Proceedings A (hereafter A. S. R., R. P. A.) January, 1879, No. 26, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Dt. 21 October, 1878.
3. Ibid.
4. A.S.R., R.P. A, January, 1879, No. 25, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue to offg. C. C. of Assam, Dt. 7 September, 1878.
5. Ibid.
6. A. S. R., R. P. A., September, 1878, No. 19, application from Messrs H. Inglis and Co. of Chhatak and Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner, K. & J Hills, Dt. 5 September, 1878
7. Ibid.
8. A. S. R., R. P. A., January, 1879, No. 26, Secretary to the C. C. of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Revenue Department, Dt. 21 October, 1878.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. A. S. R., R. P. A., September 1878, No. 19, Application of Messrs H. Inglis and Company of Chhatak and Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner, K & J Hills, Dt. 5 September, 1878.
13. A.S.R.,R. P.A., September, 1878, No. 27 Offg Extra Assistant Commissioner to the C. C. of Assam, Dt. 23 October, 1878.
14. A. S. R., R. P. A., April 1879, No. 1, Deputy Commissioner, K & J Hills to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Dt. .8 March, 1879.
15. Ibid.
16. A. S. R., R. P. A., April 1879, No. 3, Assistant Secretary to the C. C. of Assam to the Deputy Commissioners, E & J Hills, Dt. 2 April. 1879.
17. A. S. R., R. P. A., March 1878, No. 3, Deputy Commissioner, K & J Hills, to Secretary of C. C. of Assam, dated 21 January, 1878.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. A. S. P., R. P. A., January 1879, Petition dated 26 December 1878 from the Sirdars of Super Poonjee.
21. A. S. P., R. P. A., January 1879, No. 26, Secretary to the C. C. of Assam to Secretary to Government of India, Revenue Department, 21 October, 1878.
22. A. S. R., R. P. A., January 1879, No. 28, Assisntant Secretary to the C. C. of Assam to Deputy Commissioner K & J Hills, dated 29 October 1878.