

## ANGAMI RAIDS INTO BRITISH TERRITORY VIS-A-VIS BOGEY OF BURMA

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At the time of the British conquest of Assam in 1826, its boundaries were wholly undefined. Beyond the plains of Sibsagar and Nowgong were hills inhabited by Mikirs and various tribes of Nagas who were completely independent. Further south among others, the Zeliangrong tribes and Kacharis lived in the hills of North Cachar; while east of the Surma Valley lay the State of Manipur. Between Manipur and Nowgong was situated the Angami territory and the Angamis were until 1866, the most daring raiders of the villages of Cachar and its adjoining areas.

Ever since the Treaty of Yandabo (February 1826), the authorities of the British East India Company were haunted by the fear of a fresh invasion by the Burmese. At a time when the bogey of Burma was continuing, from the beginning of 1835, a new danger appeared to the British from the inroads of the Angamis into North Cachar and Nowgong. In fact, these Nagas from earlier times had been a constant source of trouble to the villages of Mikirs, Kacharis and other tribes of Nagas.

Government at first depended on the Raja of Manipur and the Kachari Chief Tularam Senapati to protect its subjects from Naga depredations. But the authority of these rulers over the tribe in question being very local, they could do little more than "protecting their own territory by reprisals as sanguinary at the Naga raids."<sup>2</sup> Despite the strong appeals from the local officials, the Government of Bengal could not take bold measures against the Angamis in view of the worsening political situation in the frontier and acute financial stringency faced by the Government at that time.

However, in the early part of 1837, the situation in North Cachar became so much alarming that the Government decided to send an expedition into the hills. Accordingly, orders were issued and Lt. Lyons of the Sylhet Light Infantry was selected for duty and preparations were made for his departure. At this stage, the plan had been countermanded due to the threatening attitude of Aya and the urgent need to defend the Manipur frontier.<sup>3</sup>

This vacillation on the part of the Government subjected the people of North Cachar to untold miseries. The local authorities which could not neglect the question of defence of so vital a frontier recommended to the Government to bring North Cachar under the Commissioner of Assam. Accordingly, the hill areas of North Cachar were transferred to the district of Nowgong and arrangement for coercing the Angamis was placed under the Commissioner of Assam, Captain Jenkins, who was also the Agent to the Governor-General in the North East Frontier.<sup>4</sup> In fact, from now onwards began a series of expeditions, some exploratory, some punitive while some others conciliatory against the powerful Angamis.

About 1839 Mr. Grange Sub-Assistant Commissioner of Nowgong "started the system of tours in force, or 'promenades', as they came to be called beyond the administrative frontier". Till 1851 no less than ten such expeditions were led into the hills to protect the British territory from the marauding raids of the Angamis, but with very little success.<sup>5</sup> In 1846-47, a post was established in the Angami hills at Samaguting (Chumukedima) under the charge of a native Sazwal (Daroga) Bhogchand by name. Along with it a bazar and<sup>6</sup> a school were opened for benefitting the tribesmen.

Raiding ceased for a while and the Nagas began to resort to Nowgong for trade. But this comfortable prospect did not last long. Bhogchand involved

himself in the internal feuds of two parties in the village of Mozema. The conflicting parties soon combined against the highhandedness of the Sazwal who was pierced with spears and his party routed. In December 1849, a force was sent to avenge the murder of the British Officer on duty, but it had to come back due to enemy's pressure. Uneasiness was spreading and Manipur was said to be encouraging the Nagas with men and materials.

A strong force equipped with mountain guns and mortars was thrown into the hills. On December 10, 1850, the troops left Mozema to assault Khonoma one of the "strongest forts ever seen in Assam."<sup>8</sup> The fort was captured, the friendly Nagas were settled in their own villages and the hostiles were compelled to retire into the intricacies of the hills.

Notwithstanding this temporary success, being "utterly sick of Naga affairs", the Government decided to abstain "entirely and unreservedly" from all concerns of the Nagas. Lord Dalhousie emphatically pronounced: "Our possession could bring no profit to us, and would be as costly to us as it would be unproductive". So troops were ordered to be withdrawn from the hills and the Governor-General expressed his entire dissent on the policy of control which some of the local officials advocated, but decided to rely for the protection of the frontier on a chain of outposts.<sup>10</sup>

The withdrawal of the troops was followed by some other defensive measures. On the suggestion of Major Vetch (Officiating Agent) two or more of the boldest men in each village was armed with muskets and ammunition.<sup>11</sup> On Lieutenant Bivar's suggestion (Sub-Assistant Commissioner, Nowgong) Angami youths were recruited to the Local Militia.<sup>12</sup> Besides these, the wandering Kukis were settled in lands to the east of Langting to act as a buffer against their aggressive neighbour - the Angamis.<sup>13</sup>

The defensive measures had the effect of only "temporising with the evils," and before long one raid followed another in quick succession. In fact, between 1852 and 1862, twenty four raids were committed by the Angamis. Despite such a situation, the policy on the frontier for 15 years remained the same as was laid down by Lord Dalhousie in his Minute of 1850. However, in January 1853 to protect its own possession, the Government stationed a British officer at Asalu and in the last part of the same year <sup>14</sup> Tularam's territory was annexed to North Cachar.

In the meanwhile, the situation in the Manipur frontier became extremely disquieting due to the threatening attitude of the Burmese Government. The gradual expansion of the British power in the plains of Assam and its growing influence in the surrounding hills made the Burmese king extremely jealous. Both King Tharrawady (1837-1845) and his successor Pagan Min (1845-1853) had been trying to undo the terms of the Treaty of Yandaboo. <sup>15</sup> For the preservation of British prestige Lord Dalhousie declared war against the Burmese in 1852.

This Second Anglo-Burmese War was brief and the result was the conquest of Pegu by the British. In 1853 Mindon ascended the throne by overthrowing his brother Pagan Min. As the new king could not reconcile with the loss of the province of Pegu, the relation of the Court of Ava with the British remained far from satisfactory. <sup>16</sup>

During the period of the War (March to December) the local authorities in Assam were apprehensive of a Burmese invasion through the Patkai or Naga Hills. Constant vigilance, therefore, was kept on the movement and behaviour of the hill tribes of the North East Frontier in general and the Nagas in particular. The sudden appearance in March 1852 of an armed party of 200 strangers in the Naga Hills

"Wearing strange dresses and having their hair gathered into a knot on the top of their foreheads, eating anything" coming from eastern direction made the local officials uneasy.<sup>17</sup>

Mr. I.W. Masters, Sub-Assistant Commissioner stationed at Golaghat reported that the aforesaid party came from the Burmese frontier and "were anxious to reach the Dyung but being opposed, attacked and plundered some of the villages. Three or four Abor villages then united and attacked them, killed some and got their muskets, the invading party then retired to the eastward from where they came."<sup>18</sup>

The motive of the party could not be ascertained, but Masters concluded that its only object was to reconnoitre the country and examine other passes farther east. Failing to understand what their designs might have been Major Jenkins observed:

"So small a party could never have intended to enter our country in that direction unassisted by others and if it was really their wish to get to the Dyung, I should be inclined to suppose that they have been called in by the Angamee Nagas and expected to have been joined by them."<sup>19</sup>

Major Jenkins was perhaps right in believing that the party was in collusion with the Angami Nagas. It was very likely that after the destruction of their village, the warriors of Khonoma had been trying to regain their former ascendancy in the Angami hills with the help of the Manipuris and the Burmese.<sup>20</sup> Whatever, might have been the causes of this intrusion, the local authorities as well as the Government of India were so much alarmed that the civil and military administration had been alerted against a possible show down with Burma.

Immediately on receipt of the report from Mr. Masters, Major Jenkins directed Captain Holroyd, Principal Assistant of Sibsagar to obtain more information about the aforesaid party. While approving the measures taken by Major Hannay, Senior Officer in-charge of the Regiments for strengthening Guards at Sibsagar and the calling in of a detachment from his Regiment to Golaghat,<sup>21</sup> he was instructed to place a small Guard at Jorhat.

The Agent himself proposed to move two companies of the Second Assam Light Infantry at the close of the rainy season. Major Vetch, Officiating Political Agent of Upper Assam was also asked to visit Upper Assam to acquaint himself with the actual state of affairs with Burma and to have personal consultations with the different officers in<sup>22</sup> command of the troops and in charge of the Divisions.

The Governor-General in Council approved the measures already taken by the local authorities in Upper Assam, and suggested that a steamer and a flat be kept ready in the Brahmaputra to facilitate movement and concentration of troops on any threatened point. Accordingly, the Superintendent of Marine was ordered to retain a steamer and a flat on the Brahmaputra above Dacca by a second steamer during the whole season. By cancelling the General order granting leave of absence to the Sepoys and sparing men from all detachments of the Local Corps, a strong<sup>23</sup> force was kept in readiness for any emergency.

Major Vetch's tour of Upper Assam was approved by the Governor-General-in-Council. He was also allowed to visit the frontier areas again towards the close of the rains for gaining a knowledge of affairs connected with Burma.<sup>24</sup> Before long, the haunting nightmare seemed to be over. Hearing a sigh of relief Jenkins in one of his reports to the Government was pleased to observe:

"Everything is quiet on the frontier of Assam. I have full confidence in Hannay and the Officers in Upper Assam and the means at their disposal to meet any inroad attempted by mere bands of plunderers and I do<sup>25</sup> not expect any more serious invasions."

After the receipt of Major Vetch's report on his last visit to the frontier and from similar ones from other frontier officers of Assam and Manipur, the Governor-General-in-Council became convinced that there was no possibility of Burmese attack being made from these quarters and even if made, the frontier force would be quite sufficient to repel it.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding, the Commander-in-Chief proposed to strengthen the frontier force by raising another corps of Infantry as soon as possible. At the same time, the Government of India made it clear that it had no proposal to "make any demonstration towards Ava from the side of Assam",<sup>27</sup> but to restrict itself to defensive measures only.

Between 1854 and 1865, the Government of India seemed to have no policy at all with regard to the Angami Nagas. Till 1866 when an officer was again stationed at Samaguting "we calmly submitted to insults inflicted on us, and allowed our villages to be cut up with impunity". During the whole of this time "while we were losing ground the Munnipoories were gaining it."<sup>28</sup>

The situation indeed became so humiliating, that a change in policy was called for. Sir Cecil Beadon, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal agreed with the view of the Commissioner of Assam that "Our relations with the Nagas could not possibly be on a worst footing than they are now. The non-interference policy is excellent in theory, but the Government will probably be inclined to think that it must be abandoned."<sup>29</sup>

In 1865, the Government of India sanctioned the establishment of a central station at Samaguting, the officer in-charge of which was desired to "do his best by tact and good management, supported by a moderate display of force, to bring that portion of the hill tract adjacent to the plains into order." The main object of the Government having been to protect the lowlands from the incursions of the Angami Nagas, he was desired "instead of exerting himself to extend his rule into the interior he will refrain from such a course."<sup>30</sup>

The new arrangement came into force in 1866 with the assumption of office by Lt. John Gregory as Deputy Commissioner with headquarters at Samaguting. The establishment of civil administration in the hills had the desired effect of stopping raids into British territories, but it dismally failed to repress internal feuds in the Angami villages and raids on Manipuri subjects.

Notwithstanding, the Supreme Government was hesitant to bring under its control all the areas inhabited by Nagas as expenditure involved in administering these areas would be enormous and that the hills would be incapable of contributing anything towards the cost of administration.<sup>31</sup>

Evidently, the Government was not yet prepared to adopt a "forward policy" which would involve itself in financial obligations and responsibilities of a serious nature at a time when it was passing through a period of economic crisis and strained relations with Burma in the north-east and Afghanistan in the North-West Frontier.<sup>32</sup>

Once, however, a footing was obtained further territorial expansion by a colonial power like the British with imperial ambitions was bound to follow. Even Sir George Campbell, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal (1871-4) admitted that as "Assam is becoming

a British colony and large interests are involved," it was "undesirable and indeed impossible to leave this strip of Naga territory absolutely independent."<sup>33</sup>

In fact, it was the bright prospect of the tea industry, valuable minerals, wild rubber and other product of the Naga Hills that encouraged the foreign rulers to embark upon a policy of bringing vast areas<sup>34</sup> inhabited by the Nagas under the British flag. The annexation of Lower Burma in 1852 and finally Upper Burma in 1886 accelerated the demands of the advocates of the "forward school" to go ahead with their schemes<sup>35</sup> of territorial expansion over the whole Naga country.

#### Notes & References

1. **Foreign Political Proceedings**, 1839, Feb.6, No.60.
2. **Ibid.** **Bengal Judicial Proceedings**, 1836, Feb.16, No.20.
3. **Foreign Political Proceedings**, 1838, Nov. 21, No.104.
4. **Ibid.**
5. Gait, E.A., **A History of Assam**, 1926, p.314.
6. **Foreign Political Proceedings**, 1847, April 24, No.37.
7. **Ibid.**, 1851, June 13, No.110.
8. **Ibid.**, 1851, March 21, No.245. Butler, J., **Travels in Assam**, 1855, p. 199.
9. **Foreign Political Proceedings**, 1855, Jan. 19, Nos.128-31.
10. **Ibid.**
11. **Bengal Judicial Proceedings**, April 26, No.214.
12. **Ibid.**, 1855, Sept. 27, No.399. **Foreign Political Proceedings** 1855, Oct. 26, Nos. 25, 27.
13. **Ibid.**, 1856, Sept. 18, No.265. **Ibid.**, 1866, April, No.139.

14. In January 1853, Lieutenant Bivar, Junior Assistant, Nowgong, was permanently posted at Asalu in North Cachar to keep pace amongst the Nagas and the Kukis, to prevent them and other tribes from making aggressions on each other and to protect them from the attacks of the Angamis.

In December 1853, Tularam's territory was annexed to North Cachar by a proclamation issued by Bivar.

15. Banerjee, A.C., **History of India**, 1972, pp. 606-7. Majumdar, R.C.; Roychoudhury, H.C.; Datta, K.K.; **An Advanced History of India**, 1963, pp. 733-4.
16. The loss of Lower Burma was a "Source of Irritation" to King Mindon. But he followed a very cautious policy and refrained from giving any offence to the Government of India (vide Banerjee, A.C., **History of India**, 1972, pp. 606-7).
17. **Bengal Judicial Proceedings**, 1852, May 6, No.91.
18. **Ibid.**
19. **Ibid.**
20. Barpujari, H.K., **Problem of the Hill Tribes of N.E. Frontier**, Vol. II, 1976, p. 31. **Foreign Political Proceedings**, 1851, June 13, No.110.
21. **Bengal Judicial Proceedings** 1852, May 6, No. 93-5.
22. **Ibid.**
23. Assam Secretariat Records 1852, Vol. 34 (Letters received from Government) No. 790, March 26, 1852 and No. 1342, May 7, 1852.
24. **Bengal Judicial Proceedings**, 1852, May 20, No.96.
25. Assam Secretariat Records, 1852, Vol. No.18 (Letter issued to Government) No. 46, dated April 5, 1852.
26. **Ibid.**, No. 3242, dated Sept. 15, 1852.
27. **Ibid.**
28. **Foreign Political Proceedings**, 1878, May, K.W. No.2.

In 1854, a Manipuri force invaded the Angami Hills and on threatening to come again, the tribes sought British protection.

- But the Government declined to move in the matter, the "tribes were not under our protection and we had no right to interfere with Munnipore".
29. **Bengal Judicial Proceedings** 1862, Sept. 10, No.227.
  30. **Ibid.**, September 1871 (Vol. 186), No.25.
  31. Horam, M., **Naga Polity**, 1975, p.13.
  32. Barpujari, H.K., **Problem of the Hill Tribes N.E. Frontier**, Vol. III, 1981, pp. 23-4.
  33. Barpujari, S.K., See "Naga Attitude Towards Land and Land revenue", published in **Land Relations in N.E. India**, Shillong 1987, p. 196. Chaube, S.K., **Hill Politics in North East India**, 1973, p.6.
  34. Waddel, L.A., "The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley" in **Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal**, Vol. No.1, 1900, Part III, p.2.