

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

NINTH SESSION

GUWAHATI ; 1988

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Edited & Published by
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General Secretary
on behalf of

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PREFACE

The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.

Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.

The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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The Appointment of Political Agent and the Tussle between Maharaja Birachandra and the Bengal Government

Dipak Kumar Chaudhuri

The idea of a Political Agent for Hill Tipperah was first advocated by Lord Mayo, the Viceroy, in October 1869. Three years earlier in September 1899, the Government of India unilaterally changed the name of the State from "Independent Tipperah" to 'Hill Tipperah', thereby ending the century-old appellation of the State. The Tripura Durbar was quite unaware of its implications, and hence, did not raise any objection at that time. It is plausible, as Sur points out, that "the Raja thought that the appellation of 'Hill Tippera' was used by the British Government in contradistinction to the British District of Tippera"².

In fact, it was an ominous sign of the changed attitude of the British government towards the State, - a first step to switch-over from the policy of non-interference, which it had so long followed, to deliberate interference, in the internal administration of the State. The appointment of the Political Agent was only the logical next step towards this policy of interference. Birchandra Manikya, the Raja, came to know about it only during his installation ceremony, held in March 1870³, when Lord H. Ulick Browne, the Commissioner of Chittagong (who represented the British Government in the ceremony), informed him that the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal had already proposed to the Government of India, for the appointment of a political Agent in his State⁴.

The Raja was shocked and surprised at this unexpected move, which would be an encroachment on his independence and an insult to the dignity of the throne. He was particularly distressed as the move came after more than a century

of their relations with the British, and after the British Government had declared, more than once, that this was an 'independent territory'⁵. It was, moreover, a personal insult, as the move came with his accession only. The Commissioner had, of course, assured him that the Agent would be there only to advise the Raja. But the Raja was intelligent enough to understand and well aware that it would be a 'dictated advice'. In a desperate bid to maintain his independence as well as his personal dignity, Birchandra decided to remonstrate against the proposed move to the Government of India. He sent three such remonstrations, between June and August 1870, to the Secretary to the Government of India and the Viceroy as well.

The first remonstrations, addressed to the Secretary, was dated 14 June, 1870. The letter displayed the feelings of a heavy heart with which Birchandra appealed to the goodness of the British Government, to spare him of the ignominy of accepting a Political Agent, which would not only reduce his independence over his hill territory, but also lower his prestige in the eyes of his subjects.

In this letter, the Raja pointed out how their independence over the hill territory was honoured not only by the Mughals, who had occupied all the adjacent plain lands of the kingdom, but also by the British since their first contact with the Tripura Rajas in 1761:

"On the decline and fall of the Moghul empire, the Rajas of Hill Tipperah retained the possession of the hills as an independent Chief, paying the revenue for the zemindaree of Chacklah Roshenabad according to certain settlements. From the time of the very commencement to the present day no Government ever formed any scheme for appointing a Political Agent in my independent territory, although there

have been and still are Residents and Political Agents in other Native States. This peculiar privilege was reserved by the Government only for the Tipperah Rajas, they being inclined to be benevolent and show a good feeling towards this most ancient family⁶.

The Raja further pointed out that when Mr. Harvey, the then Commissioner of Chittagong, tried "in fact, to annex the territory" in 1838, it was the Bengal Government who had rejected the proposal on the ground that it was "always an independent territory". Apart from the historicity of his claim, the Raja also touched the practical problems which were complicating his relations with the Bengal Government. He wrote:

"If a person commits an offence in the British territory and makes his escape into mine, he is, on the receipt of roobkaree from the local authorities, arrested by my officers and sent to the Court from which the process was issued, and in the like manner offenders are made over to me when the offence is committed in my hill territory.

" 3. A few years ago the Looshais Kookees living in the north frontier of my territory, and the Siloos in Chittagong Hills, made raids on our frontier villages. I always wanted to punish them, and ready to assist the British Government to prevent these evils"⁸.

The Raja finally pleaded that, "Although I am not aware of its objects, and orders have been passed, yet ... as there are some reasons that this policy would be prejudicial to the British Government, and cause a reduction of my power and interest, therefore I humbly solicit the favour of the laying before His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor-General of India" the observations put forward in the remonstrations.

Everything however, depended on the reports of the Bengal Government and it was on the basis of these reports that the actual decision to station an Agent in Tripura was taken. The Bengal Government was not at all happy with the Raja and accordingly, sent a series of damaging reports against him. In its first proposal to station an Agent at Agartala, made on 17 December, 1869, (when Birchandra was ruling as a Jubaraj), the Bengal Government wrote to the Government of India:

Another point which has for some time past pressed itself upon the attention of the Lieutenant-Governor, is the appointment of an officer as Agent to the Government of Bengal with the Raja of Hill Tipperah. The position held by this Chief is exceedingly anomalous. Though in respect of his zemindaree in the plains he is a British subject, he is, as the Raja of Hill Tipperah, to all intents and purposes, independent. This Government has no means whatever of knowing anything that goes on in his territory, and it is undoubtedly the case that he is at constant feud with the Kookies, and sends expeditions into their hills without any communication with British officers. The Kookies are altogether incapable of apprehending any distinction between the acts of the Tipperah Raja and the acts of the British Government, and there is much reason to believe that many of the raids made into our territory have been in retaliation for acts committed by the subjects of Tipperah.

It seems to the Lieutenant-Governor that a British Agent is wanted at Tipperah as much as at Munnipore, and that one should be appointed on the same footing and condition as the Munnipore Agent, the Raja of Tipperah being absolutely prohibited from waging war or sending

hostile expeditions into the Hills except with the concurrence of this Government¹⁰.

Thus three points emerge from the first proposal; first, the Raja was in the habit of sending expeditions against the Kookies, who retaliated by raids into the British territory; secondly, the Bengal Government had no proper means of knowing what went on in Tripura because of the anomalous position of the Raja; and finally, it was absolutely essential to prohibit the Raja from making war upon the tribes. This proposal was, in fact, part of a general plan to contain the Lushai-Kookies from making raids particularly on the Cachar-Sylhet border on the north-east and the Chittagong Hill Tracts on the south-east of Bengal. These were potential tea producing areas. The Bengal Government was particularly interested to settle a boundary from the borders of Manipur of Hill Tipperah. This line would leave in the Cachar District a large portion of territory well suited to tea cultivation, which industry might increase if peace were thoroughly restored¹¹. "As no single officer located at any point in the country between Cachar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts will be able to deal with more than one set of Looshies"¹², it was suggested by the Bengal Government that a chain of officers be set up, - one on the Cachar and one on the Chittagong side, with a Political Agent at Tripura in the middle¹³. A general rough estimate of the cost of the measures proposed, was also submitted to the Government of India:

Cachar and Sylhet.	Per Annum.
An Officer at Looshai Hat, on a salary of Rs. 400 per mensem.	= 4,800
Establishment at Rs. 50 per mensem	= 600
Cost of additional Police	= 58,864
	<hr/>
	Total Rs. 64,264

Chittagong Hill Tracts.	Per Annum.
An Officer at Rutton Pocea's village at Rs. 400 per mensem	= 4,800
Establishment at Rs. 50 per mensem	= 600
Cost of Additional Police	=78,840
	<hr/>
	Total Rs. 84,240
Agent at Hill Tipperah, on a salary of Rs. 800 per mensem	= 9,600
Establishment at Rs. 200 per mensem	= 2,400
Total Rupees	=12,000
	<hr/>
	Grand Total, Rupees 1,60,504

The Bengal Government justified the proposed expenditure with the hope that "we must recognise our responsibility to protect the peaceful inhabitants of our frontier villages, and that this can not be done at a less cost than that proposed, which will certainly be an economical one in the end if it does away with the necessity of any future expeditions"¹⁴.

In continuation of this, the Bengal Government sent further papers on 30 March, 1870, to the Government of India. There it was shown that the Raja had asked for firearms with a view to operations against the Kookies which "seems to the Lieutenant Governor to be excessively large"¹⁵ and that, "It appears to the Lieutenant-Governor by no means impossible that the Raja carries on a trade in arms with the tribes"¹⁶; that the Tipperah troops were incapable of offering any resistance to Looshais; that there were difficulties in regard to border offences and so forth, all of which reasons rendered the appointment of an Agent desirable¹⁷.

It is interesting to note that officials of the Bengal Government were divided in their opinion about the posting of an Agent in Tripura. While A. Eden, the Judicial Secretary, A. Mackenzie, Officiating Junior Secretary, and Lord H. Ulick Browne, the Commissioner of Chittagong, were pressing for a Political Agent in Tripura, the Commissioner of Dacca, F.B. Simpson, was against it. In fact, in a letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated 23rd April, 1870 Simpson categorically remarked, "I cannot regard any Political Agent of the Indian Government located at Agartollah as likely to be of the slightest use in supervising our action or administration of the Looshai hill tribes, or the country directly between Cachar and Chittagong lying east of Hill Tipperah. I much doubt if for any other purpose an agent of this kind is required at Agartollah. If the country I refer to is to be administered by a British officer in connection with Agartollah, he must either be stationed to the East of Hill Tipperah, or Hill Tipperah should be annexed, and such officer must have power and authority in the country lying between Bepari Bazar and Agartollah"¹⁸.

In view of Simpson's objection, the Judicial Secretary, Eden, once again set forth all the arguments for the appointment of an Agent in a letter dated 25th May, 1870¹⁹, addressed to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, which made it clear that the Looshai-Kooki question was not the all-important factor for the appointment of the Political Agent in Tripura as is generally maintained. The admission of the Bengal Government on this point is clearly stated in paragraph 3 of the letter that "So far as control over the Looshais and Kookies is concerned, it may be, as the Commissioner of Dacca asserts, that an officer stationed at Agartollah would be too far off to exercise direct influence over our relations with these people, .. "Other considerations were there and these were no less

significant than the Looshai-Kooki question. And the most important was the question of reform. The Bengal Government made it clear that without the influence and guidance of European officers, no enlightened administration could be expected in the State which was closed from all outside influences. And this actually prompted the Viceroy, Lord Mayo, to sanction the appointment of the Agent, which was communicated to the Bengal Government on 21 November, 1870²⁰.

Lord Mayo and his chief political adviser, C.U. Aitchison, according to Copland,²¹ were great believers of the ultimate triumph of good over evil. They believed that with proper guidance, the native princes could be persuaded to introduce reforms. And optimism was shared by a majority of the political service men. These men mostly came from the middle class English families, and as such shared in that devotion to progress which was perhaps the most important aspect of the middle class Victorian creed. Like Lord Mayo, they wanted to fulfil their mission, - 'the white men's burden' - of civilising the native states by means of reform. There was also a political imperative for reform during that period. In the aftermath of the 'Mutiny' annexation, as a tool of British feudatory policy ceased to exist. Now the only alternative to princely misrule was reform. And the Political Agents were the instruments of these reforms. This had been the reason why so many Political Agents were appointed in so many states in the 1870s and the force behind it was Lord Mayo himself. It was only natural that it was Lord Mayo again who first thought of posting an Agent in Tripura with a similar end in view.

The Government of India was, however, under the impression, obviously created by the Bengal Government, that the Raja of Tripura would agree to this policy. But when Birchandra remonstrated against it, the Government of India, was surprised C.U. Aitchison,

Secretary to the Government of India, in his note remarked reufully, "I was always under the impression that in this policy the Raja agreed; but it appears now that he does not"²² But the Bengal Government was in no mood to consider the Raja's objections. The following letter, dated Simla, the 3rd October 1870, was sent to Birchandra from Aitchison:

"I have laid before the Viceroy and Governor General your letter of 14th June 1870. His Excellency desires me to assure you that there is nothing further from his intention that to adopt any policy which will "cause a reduction of your power and interest". On the contrary, in appointing a Political Agent at Augurtollah, His Excellency believes that he is adopting a measure which will result in strengthening your State. As the Commissioner of Chittasgong has personally explained to you the reasons which render necessary the appointment of a Political Agent, I need not enlarge on them. I may add, however, that Political Agents are maintained by the British Government in most of the Native States in India, and with such advantage to the rulers and subjects of those States that several Chiefs of high rank, who have not the benefit of the advice and assistance of a Political Agent, have voluntarily applied to the Viceroy for the appointment of such an Officer, and have offered to bear the whole expense of the appointment. It is not the intention of the Viceroy to invite you to contribute to the cost of the appointment of the Political Agent at Augurtollah. The salary of the Officer and the cost of his establishment will be entirely defrayed by the British Government²³.

In the meantime, Birchandra sent another remonstrations addressed to the Viceroy. In fact, he sent two letters, dated 16th August, 1870, one addressed to the Viceroy, and the other to the Secretary, Government of India.

In his letter to the Viceroy, Birchandra complained that "some reports against my administration has actually been submitted to your Excellency, ²⁴ by his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal". But, he wrote, "it would be a matter of great sorrow should your Excellency without calling for an explanation from me be disposed to sanction the appointment of an Agent in my territory" ²⁵. Then again, in paragraph 8 of the letter, he said, "I presume that some of the local authorities, displeased with my conduct towards them (though I do not recollect that this was ever the case), might have made some unfavourable reports against me to his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, who, most probably relying on them, made the aforesaid report, recommending your Excellency for the appointment of a Political Agent. But since I have no knowledge of the circumstances under which the said authorities have recommended you to appoint an Agent in my territory, I most humbly solicit that your Excellency will be graciously pleased to pass an order that copies of the unfavourable reports be forwarded to me, and that they will call for an explanation from me." ²⁶

Thus after complaining about the ways by which some unfavourable reports were made against him, Birchandra logically proceeded to set forth his objections:

"5. The proposal for the appointment of an Agent in the heart of my Independent territory is evidently made on presumption that I am not fit to act independently over my territory and incompetent to administer justice properly, otherwise there could be no reason of appointing an Agent during my administration, whilst there were no officers ever employed on the part of Government to supervise over the acts of my ancestors.

"6. The appointment of an Agent must in some degree reduce my independence, as, to the

best of my knowledge, there is no reason why I should be deprived of the power I have always had. The mode in which I administer justice had never been worse than what had been adopted by my ancestors, nor am I aware that any complaint had ever been made against my judgement; how, then, is my incompetency to the administration of justice ascertained so far as to require the control of a Political Agent.

"7. I do not recollect that anything against the will of Her Majesty or British Government has been done by me, so that my honour and independence may be at stake. No one has ever complained against my conduct, nor has any explanation been called for. I have always carried out the orders and wishes of Government with all my heart and to the best of my abilities.

"8. I beg to state that I have never made any aggressive expedition against these Kookee tribes. I only made resistance to their encroachments into my territory and to the ravages they made on my subjects, and troops on our part were sent against these tribes only when the local authorities of British Government made arrangements to check them in their outrages and desired us to assist them.

"9. Under these circumstances, I most humbly beg that your Excellency will be graciously pleased to allow me to have the copies of the Reports stated above in order to clear the accusations made against me and put off the appointment of the Agent till my explanations on these points are submitted".

In spite of Birchandra's appeal, the Government of India had no intention to let him know the contents of the Reports made by the Bengal Government. Aitchison merely informed him on 14 November, 1870, that:

"His Excellency desires.. to state in reply that you will ere this have received my letter of 3rd October in answer to yours of 14th June. My letter explains the reasons which render necessary the appointment of a Political Agent at Augurtollah. His Excellency believes that the reasons therein given will have already satisfied you that this measure will have no other effect than to promote the welfare and enhance the dignity of your State. It is not His Excellency's wish or intention to interfere with the lawful and proper exercise of your authority over your subjects"²⁸.

With this short reply, the Government of India closed all further correspondence in this respect. The adverse reports made against Birchandra by the Bengal Government remained on record, though some of these were evidently wild charges, particularly, the charge that the Raja was carrying on trade in arms with the tribes. This was denied even by the Commissioner of Chittagong, Lord Browne; in a letter to the Bengal Government, he categorically stated that "I do not think the Raja would carry on a trade in arms with the Kookies, or Looshais, but I believe the authorities in Sylhet and Cachar were satisfied last year that some of his subordinates near the Sylhet²⁹ frontier had been in the habit of doing so. Again, there is no evidence that punishments inflicted were of particularly barbaric nature. On the contrary, all the Political Agents had admitted that the crime-rate was virtually nil among the tribes, who formed the overwhelming majority of the population of Hill Tipperah. Similarly, it is highly doubtful that the Raja would, on his own, send aggressive expeditions against the Looshais. It is on record that his force was very small in number, badly armed, and to quote Lord Browne "scarcely capable of offering any resistance to an attack from Looshais"³⁰.

It was thus very difficult on the part of the Bengal Government to substantiate the charges made against Birchandra, and that is why the government was not ready to make the reports known to him. The decision was already taken, and the Government stood by it. Birchandra was made to understand that "while it is not the intention of the Government to interfere in the detailed management of his hill possession, the present anomalous state of things under which a British subject exercises absolute and entirely uncontrolled authority in a tract of country surrounded by British territory can no longer be permitted"³¹.

Thus ended the independence of Hill Tipperah. The first Political Agent came to reside at Agartala in July 1871. Officially, he was to guide and counsel the Raja, yet secretly he was given wide supervisory powers covering every aspect of administration³². With regard to war and peace against tribes living outside his territory, the Raja's power to act independently was taken away. With regard to internal administration and finance, the Agent was to guide the Raja. And it was made clear to the Raja that the Political Agent's 'counsel' were not to be disobeyed.

Notes & References

1. For Lord Mayo's motive see D.K. Chaudhuri, 'The Mission Civilisatrice: the Appointment of Political Agent in Tripura', in **Indian Archives**, to be published shortly from New Delhi.
2. H.K. Sur, **British Relations with the State of Tripura**, (Agartala: 1986), p. 69.
3. Birchandra was recognised as de facto Raja of Tipperah in 1862; but his investiture was deferred

- pending the result of an appeal pending the result of an appeal to the Privy Council by Nilkrishna Thakur, the rival claimant of the Tripura Raj. The Privy Council upheld the rights of Birchandra on 13 March 1869, and his investiture ceremony finally took place in March 1870, with Lord H. Ulick Browne, the Commissioner of Chittagong, representing the British Government.
4. Birchandra's letter to Sec., Govt of India, dated 14 June 1870, Foreign P. No - 362-374, Dec. 1870., NAR.
 5. **Ibid.**, par. 2.
 6. **Ibid.**, par. 2.
 7. **Ibid.**, par. 3.
 8. **ibid.**, par. 3.
 9. **Ibid.** from Eden to Sec., Govt of
 10. Letter from Eden to Sec., Govt of India, No-6569, dated 17 Dec. 1869, Pars. 17, 18, Foreign Proceedings A-254, NAR.
 11. Letter from Aitchison to Sec., Bengal Govt, No-1126 p, dated 30 June 1870, Par. 4, Foreign Proceedings No-266, NAR.
 12. Letter from Eden to Sec., Govt of India, **Op.cit.**, par. 8.
 13. **Ibid.**, Par. 19.
 14. **Ibid.**, Par. 19.
 15. A. Mackenzie's letter to the Commissioner of Chittagong, No-776, dated 15 Feb. 1870, Foreign Proceedings A-258, NAR.
 16. Eden's letter to the Offg. Commissioner of Chittagong, No- 6162, dated 24 November 1869, **Ibid.** dated 24.8.70.,
 17. Notes of Aitchison, dated 24.8.70., Political A Dec. 1870, No-362-376, NAR.
 18. Letter from F.B. Simpson to Sec, Bengal Govt, No-56, dated 23 April 1870, Foreign Proceedings No-265, NAR.
 19. Eden's letter to Offg. Sec, Govt of India, No-2513, dated 25 May, 1870, Foreign Proceedings No-264, NAR.

20. Note from Finance Deptt., Govt of India, No-4384 of 25 October, 1870, Foreign Political A.Dec.1870, No-362-374, NAR.
21. See Ian Copland, **The British Raj and the Indian Princes**, (Pune: 1982), Chapter IV: Mission Civilisatrice, 1870 - 1890.
22. Note of Aitchison dated 24.8.70., **Loc cit.**
23. Aitchison's letter to Birchandra, dated 3 Oct. 1870, Foreign Proceedings No-799, NAR.
24. Birchandra's letter to Earl Mayo, Viceroy, dated 16 Aug, 1870, Foreign Proceedings, No -266, NAR.
25. **Ibid.**
26. **Ibid.**
27. **Ibid.**
28. Aitchison's letter to Birchandra, No -1919 p, dated 14 Nov, 1870, Foreign Proceedings No-266, NAR.
29. H. Ulick Browne's letter to Sec, Bengal Govt, No-26, dated 21 Jan, 1870, Foreign Proceedings No - 258, NAR.
30. H. Ulick Browne's letter to Sec, Bengal Govt, No - 95, dated 15 March, 1870, **Ibid.**
31. A. Mackenzie's letter to Aitchison, No - 155 T, dated 2 Sept, 1870, Foreign Political A, Dec. 1870, No - 362-374, NAR
32. **Ibid.**

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

NAR - National Archives Record.
 Sec - Secretary.