

Sir Robert Neil Reid, 1883-1964
(His carrier as an I.C.S Officer)

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Sir Robert Neil Reid was one of the typical bureaucrats of the Indian Civil Service. He served His Majesty's Government most loyally and even against the popular feeling of the people over whom they ruled. In his total service of 35 years, he tried his best to serve the best interests of his colonial masters and to strengthen the colonial power. He served in the Bengal Government in various capacities for 30 years and the last concluding five years was designated as the Governor of Assam.

Birth and Education : Reid was born in 1883. He was educated at Malvern and Brazenose College, Oxford where he secured only 3rd Grade. His Tutor, sad but possibly far-sighted wrote to him expressing his belief that he would have a successful administrative career. His college, however, later forgave his scholastic failures by conferring on him an Honorary Fellowship¹.

Services in Bengal : Reid Joined the Indian Civil Service and arrived in India in 1907. On arrival, he was posted at Ranchi as Assistant Magistrate and Collector and worked in Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi and Barrackpore². In 1911, he became Under-Secretary in the Revenue and General Department, a position which concerned subjects then distributed among not less than 20 Ministers, Secretaries, Deputy Secretaries, Under-Secretaries and Special Officers. Here he worked under the able administrator, Sir John Kerr³. After that he was on Special Duty⁴ as Secretary, Calcutta Port Facilities Committee.

When the re-partition of Bengal, announced as one of the boons to the Indian empire at the Delhi Coronation Durbar in 1912, he was

retained in Bengal though much against his will, having applied like nearly everyone else to go to the new Province of Bihar and Orissa. War cut short his leave in 1914. Two years in Bengal Districts were followed by appointments as a "Temporary Gent" in the Indian Army Recruiting Officer and then posted to the 1st Skinners Horse at Risalpur. After two years service there, mostly spent in training recruits and remounts, he had towards the end of the war a brief experience of the East Persia Cordon where a Scots Collection of Officers and men were engaged in preparing the way for the Divisions who were to be sent up to meet the expected invasion of "Bolshevik hordes from the north".

The north Bengal floods of 1922 seriously affected the northern half of the district of Rajshahi and there he worked for the distressed and the displaced persons even after the water subsided necessitating displaced person's relief. Reid was presented the Kaiser-I-Hind Gold Medal (1st Class) for his services in this connection. He then took long leave from 1923 to 1925 mainly due to an injured spine resulting from an accident in pigsticking.

He was posted at Midnapore in 1925. In 1926, he was sent to Kharagpur to deal with the communal riots that broke out there and in 1927, dealt with the big Railway strike that took place there.

During 1927-28, he was again at the Bengal Secretariat as Secretary, Agriculture and Industry. He was at Jalpaiguri as Commissioner, Rajshahi district during 1929-30.

In 1930 he acted as the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal and served in the Bengal Secretariat till 1937, except for a winter season of 1931-32, when he was posted in Chittagong. His going to Chittagong coincided with the despatch

of troops there and inauguration of elaborate attempts to round up the numerous absconders of the Armoury Raid of April, 1930. Success was a long time coming and the soldiers with whom he was indeed on very good terms are credited with the brilliant ideas of tying up the Commissioner as a live bait to attract the wily terrorists.

He was brought back as Chief Secretary just before the arrival of Sir John Anderson as Governor of Bengal. There were difficult times for Reid as the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 18 April, 1930 badly affected the ill-equipped Government and it took a long time to catch the long-prepared terrorists.

He served with John Anderson for five years. He served with John Anderson for five years of the latter's term, first as Chief Secretary and then under Late Sir William Prentice and when the latter died in 1933, as Member of Council in charge of Home Department. He acted for Sir William Prentice for a short time in 1932 when he had to pilot a piece of repressive Legislation, the Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act, 1932, through the Bengal Council. Though the Congress members were not there to oppose the Bill, there was still a strong element of opposition to Official Bills, constant criticisms and tactics of obstructions.

1930-34 were anxious years for the British Government. They saw numerous murders and attempted murders of faithful Government servants. To name a few, there was the attempt on Sir Charles Tegart, Commissioner of Police, Calcutta on August 25, 1930; there was the Writers Building outrage of December 8, 1930 when Colonel Simpson, the Inspector General of Prisons was shot dead at his desk at Calcutta Secretariat by a gang of young terrorists, and two other Civilians-messers Townsend and Nelson were wounded; there was the murder of Mr. Garlick, the Session Judge of Alipore as he sat on the Bench on 27 July,

1931; there was the murder of Mr. Lowman on 29 August, 1930, the Inspector-General of Police at Dacca, Mr. Hodson of the Police who was with him being dangerously wounded; there was the attempt on Sir Stanley Jackson at the Calcutta University Convocation on February 6, 1932 just before he retired; there was the Pahartali outrage at Chittagong on 24 September, 1932 when a gang of terrorists headed by a girl bombed and shot at a number of Railway Subordinates in the Railway Institute; there was the attempt on Sir John Anderson himself at the Lebong Race Course, Darjeeling on May 8, 1934 though not successful; there was the murders of three successive magistrates of Midnapore— Messers Peddia, Douglas and Burge in 1931, 1932 and 1933. Though the Government were behind hand at the start, they gradually caught up with the terrorists and more and more drastic measures were passed and put into force.

At last, on Sir John Anderson's initiative, the aid of the Army was invoked and seven Battalions of Troops were brought into Bengal, when no troops has been seen outside Calcutta since the Dacca Concentration of 1914. The Andamans were reopened as a place of imprisonment for Bengal terrorists with effective results. The morale of the Police and law-abiding public gradually went up as more and more of terrorists were brought to book and either convicted of specific crimes or placed under restraint without trial in one or other of the Detention Camps which the Bengal Government opened at Hijli, Buxa, Berhampore and Deoli in Rajputana. The number thus obtained was at its maximum close on three thousand⁵.

As the Governor of Assam: Sir Robert Reid succeeded Sir Michael Keane as the governor of Assam. He left Calcutta on the 1st March, 1937 and arrived at Shillong on the 2nd March and assumed charge of Governorship on the 4th March, 1937. He Served as the Governor of Assam for three terms, each for short durations. His

first term was from 4 March, 1937 to 24 June, 1938; second term was from 25 Oct., 1939 to May 1942. In between these periods, he officiated as the Governor of Bengal. As the Governor of Assam, his activities mainly centred round the formation of Ministries, War efforts, writing Reports and other Social works.

Ministry Formations: During his tenure as the governor of Assam, four Ministries were formed, three of which were sworn in by Sir Robert Reid. In fact, on his assumption of Office, the urgent and the most difficult task was the question of the formation of the Ministry. But from the first, on Michael Keane's advice, his hopes centred on Sir Muhammad Saadula, an Assam valley Muslim, an experienced politician who had been Executive councillor under the Act of 1919. Sir Saadula told Reid that he was burning his boats in Calcutta (Practice in Bar) and was returning to Shillong. The political scene in Assam presented many peculiar and troublesome features—ethnic, communal and constitutional. On March 15, 1937, Saadula told Reid that he would have his Ministry. On March 30, 1937, Saadula told Reid that he was carrying on well and would bring his Ministers to see him the following day. On March 31, 1937, Saadula, Nichols Roy, Rohini Kumar Choudhry and Shamsul met the Governor in the morning and finalised the Ministry, and formed the first Ministry on the 1st April, 1937. Thus the Governor was partisan in his attitude towards the formation of this Ministry, because the Governor, before installing the Saadula Ministry did not consult the congress group, the biggest single party in the assembly, which normally ought to have been done, as per democratic norms and Parliamentary practices.

The fourth Coalition Ministry headed by Saadula was also an instance of partisan attitude of the Governor, Robert Reid. The formation

of the Saadula Ministry was announced on 17 November, 1939 by the Governor through a Gazette Extraordinary and six Ministers were sworn in. But to get the support of the Muslim League, Saadula included four more Muslim Ministers in his Cabinet. Despite that the Saadula Ministry did not command a majority in a House of 108 members. This forced the Governor of Assam to cancel the Notification of 17 November 1939 summoning the Assembly on 30 November 1939. However, the Governor Robert Reid allowed the minority Government of Saadula to continue.¹⁴

Being unable to secure a majority, the fourth Coalition Ministry led by Saadula tendered its resignation on 12 December, 1941, and the Governor invited G.N. Bardoloi, the leader of the single largest party to form an alternative Ministry. Bardoloi met the Governor on December 17, 1941 and explained to him why the Congress was not wanting to form the Ministry but was ready to support Rohini Kumar Choudhury. But Robert Reid being doubtful of the stability of Rohini's Ministry, did not invite him to form the Ministry. Rather, the Governor by a proclamation under Section 93 of the Government of India Act, 1935, took over the administration of the Province into his own hands on December 25, 1941, making him supreme in Provincial affairs¹⁵, and continued to rule till he left Assam on May 3, 1942.

His War efforts: Reid as the Governor of Assam during these critical periods in world history mainly confined himself to the seeking of cooperation in the conduct of the war and collection of War Funds¹⁶. In fact, Reid bargained with Saadula that his minority Ministry would be allowed to continue and the Premier would reciprocate this gesture by supporting the British war efforts. So Saadula headed a Provincial War Aid Committee along with R.K. Chakravarty, Abdul Matin Chaudhury, Hirendra Chandra Chakravarty and Rupnath Brahma. Its branches were opened at Guahati, Tezpur

and other district headquarters. The Congress leaders did not associate themselves with the Committee. In July 1940, the Saadula Government contributed one lakh rupees to the War Fund. In November 1939, Reid also appealed to the people to raise funds and organise workers to boost the morale of the troops engaged in the war and to provide for them comfort and recreational facilities. Archery Competition was organised in Shillong in aid of the war fund and Rs. 800 was collected. In response to the Governor's appeal, the Local Boards of Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nowgong, Tezpur, Dhubri and the Municipal Boards of Shillong and Golaghat and the Town Committees decided to contribute to the War fund. But the opposition of the Congress members, the Communist and the Provincial Unit of the All India Student's Federation and others brought down enthusiasm in collection drive.

In his speech at the meeting of the war Committee of Digboi on 4 December, 1941, Reid admired the way in which Digboi has contributed to the war fund. He said, "Up to 31st October 1941, you have contributed Rs. 58,385 to the Lakhimpur Fighter Fund and Rs. 45,720 to war Charities, or a total of Rs. 1,04,105"¹⁸. Thus Reid tried his utmost to involve the whole Province in his war efforts.

His Writings and Reports: Reid was a great writer. He wrote books, prepared Official Notes and Reports, some of which have been published and some are still lying in Manuscript and typescript forms which have been deposited in the India Office Library and Records, London, by his wife and daughter

One of the books published was *history of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941* published in 1942 in which he followed up the work of Alexander Mackenzie's *Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of North East Frontier of Bengal* by bringing it down to 1941. His other publication is the book entitled *Years of Change in Bengal and Assam*. Besides,

the following Notes and papers in Type-
scripts are deposited in the India Office
Library and Records London, under "Reid
Collection". Records, London, under "Reid
Collection".

1. A Note on the Future of the present
Excluded and Partially Excluded and
Tribal Areas of Assam (22 pages, printed),
1941. Areas of Assam (22 pages, printed).
2. A note on the history of the Government
House, Shillong. history of the Government
3. Notes on his Career in the Indian Civil
Service. his Career in the Indian Civil
4. Speeches delivered between 1935 and
1949. speeches delivered between 1935 and
5. Introduction to the North-Eastern, Frontier
of Assam, 1942. the North-Eastern, Frontier
6. Assam and North-East Frontier of India,
1946. and North-East Frontier of India,
7. Manipur Rebellion, 6 April to 15 Dec.,
1891. ur Rebellion, 6 April to 15 Dec.,
8. Copies of Articles in various periodicals
on Assam and India. in various periodicals
9. A paper on "Assam and the War II" pre-
sented at the meeting of the East India
Association at the Caxton Hall, West
Minister, Dec. 1st, 1943. xton Hall, West
10. An article on "Assam and the War Time",
September 16, 1943, Overseas League. Time,
11. Article on "The Hill Tribes of Assam"
in the Royal Empire Society dated 20
October, 1943. Empire Society dated 20
12. A Note on the part played by the Assam
Rifles, during the years 1941-45, on
the Assam-Burma border (Typed 15 pages).
13. A Note on "The Assam Rifles in Peace
and War". (Typed 15 pages). files in Peace
14. A Note on "Assam" (Typed 67 pages).

Besides the above, there are other Files
and Letters, and also his Personal Diaries from
1907 to 1964. and also his Personal Diaries from
1907 to 1964.

His Social Works and Tours: Apart from his official duties, Reid kept himself busy in other social works. He was a President of the Bengal Club, Calcutta for two terms, and Steward of Royal, Calcutta Turf Club for three Sessions¹⁹. It was also at the encouragement given by Sir and Lady Reid that the Chest Clinic was opened at Shillong on 6 October, 1937 at the Civil Hospital for one day a week with Dr. Ganguly as the trained Doctor after which, a separate Hospital called "Reid Chest Hospital" was started²⁰. In 1937, he also inaugurated the opening of St. Marys College, Shillong. Reid also addressed the Centenary Celebration of Welsh Mission, Shillong on 30 March, 1941.

The Jaintia Durbar also welcomed Sir and lady Reid on their visit to Jowai on 11 February 1942 and presented Rs. 8343.3p, being the proceeds of the Stall and Archery which Reid announced that an Ambulance to be known "Pnar Ambulance" would be purchased with that amount²¹. He also laid the foundation Stone of the Agriculture Training School of the Seventh Day Adventist Mission on 2 February 1942 at Thadladskein, Jaintia Hills. The unveiling ceremony at Cherrapunji on 8 March, 1941 of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission Centenary Memorial was performed by Reid.

In course of his tours, he addressed the Abors at Rotung on 9 December, 1942 and addressed the War Committee of Digboi on 4 Dec., 1942. He was also a Chief guest at the Prize Distribution Ceremony at St. Edmunds College, Shillong on 14 November, 1941, and at the Annual Prize Distribution Ceremony at St. Edmunds College,

Shillong on 14 November, 1941, and at the Annual Prize Distribution at Welsh Mission High School for girls on 13 November, 1941²².

He also travelled extensively all over North-East India and met people, rode on horseback, went hunting and fishing. For all his loyalty and dedicated services to the cause of His Majesty's Government, he was conferred the titles of K.C.S.I. and K.C.I.E., besides being a recipient of the Kaiser-I-Hind Gold Medal (Ist Class).

Thus as the Sylhet Chronicle dated 20 April, 1942 put it, "Sir Robert Reid was a sun-burnt bureaucrat"²³.

Notes & References

1. Robert Reid, Notes on his career as I.C.S. Officer, MSS. Eur. E. 278/9, India Office Library and Records, London.
2. **The Civil and Military Gazette**, Sunday, January 17, 1937.
3. Robert Reid, Notes on his career as ICS Officer, MSS. Eur.E. 278/9, IOLR, London.
4. **The Civil and Military Gazette**, Sunday, January 17, 1937.
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6. **The Civil and Military Gazette**, Sunday, January 17, 1937.
7. **Government of Assam Political History of Assam**, Vol. II, p.367, 1978.
8. Robert Reid, **Years of Change in Bengal and Assam**, MSS. Eur. E. 278/22, IOLR, London (June-Sept. 1963).
9. Robert Reid, Diary dated March 15, 1937, IOLR, London.

10. Ibid., March 30, 1937.
11. Ibid., March 31, 1937.
12. Robert Reid, **Years of Change in Bengal and Assam.**
13. Government of Assam, **Political History of Assam**, Vol.II. p. 337.
14. Ibid. Vol. III, P.11, 1980.
15. Ibid. Vol. III, pp.44-45, 1980.
16. MSS. Eur. E. 278/11 (j), IOLR, London.
17. Government of Assam, **Political History of Assam**, Vol. III, pp. 11-15.
18. MSS.Eur, E.278/11(j), IOLR, London.
19. Robert Reid, Notes on his career as ICS Officer.
20. MSS. Eur. E. 278/15.
21. MSS. Eur. E. 278/15
22. MSS.Eur. E. 278/11(j).
23. MSS.Eur.E. 278/15, **Sylhet Chronicle** dated 20 April, 1942.