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The Crown Colony Plan for the Hills of North East India: Concept to Collapse 1941-1946

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That a volume is being organised to discuss the process of integration of States with the Indian Union assumes significance in those states having come under an 'Indian' administration for fifty years. The half century of this experience gives sufficient time to look back and re-examine, if not to reinterpret the momentous developments that came shortly before, with and after India's Independence. The seminar also assumes significance because this will be the first attempt to bring together persons of varied academic and other interests with the simple purpose to recall the process by which eastern and north eastern India came to be. I believe that an important stimulant which has made this discussion possible are the questions on the integration process that are being raised by individuals, groups of persons with a variety of political affiliation, which no doubt will be discussed in detail.

The purpose of making this presentation is to situate the hill areas of north India shortly before the transfer of power in 1947 and the process of integrating the hills into the Union. In doing so it will partly answer why the integration of some of the hill districts into Assam and India was not as smooth as might have been wished. Further it suggests that the neglect to consider British opinions on the future of the hill areas in an independent India has been the Assam problem in its relations with the hill people. The paper makes no attempt to support or espouse the Crown Colony/Protectorate, only that it had in it a feeble and ill timed bid to do something for the political future of the hill people.

II

What motivated Sir Robert Reid, Governor of Assam to write the Confidential *A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam*,¹ is not

certain. But that he wrote it after travelling around the province of his charge, meeting deputations of tribal leaders, consulting the district Deputy Commissioners and officials in the Assam administration there is no doubt. A hint comes in the very first paragraph where he writes: "the identity of the countries with which they March and their importance from the point of view of strategy and international politics are factors which cannot be overlooked".² A footnote to this opinion clarified that in his mind "Problems arising out of the Sino-Japanese and the World War of 1939, have underlined the importance of the North East Frontier in it relation to Tibet, China, Burma and Japan".³ As a build up to his plan Reid reviews the pattern of administration of the Excluded Areas,⁴ Partially Excluded Areas,⁵ the unadministered tracts between India and Burma before the Act of 1935 came into operation. He drew much from the memoranda of N.E. Parry (who had earlier been Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills and later Superintendent of the Lushai Hills) and Dr. John H. Hutton (for many years Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills) to the Indian Statutory Commission. Hutton's view was that the hill people were racially, historically, culturally and linguistically different from the people of the plains of Assam, while their administration was wholly on different lines. Both he and Parry had suggested to the Commission, the formation of a North Eastern Frontier Province to comprise of as many of the backward tracts of Assam and Burma as would be conveniently included in it.⁶ Hutton subsequently elaborated his views in 1930 and 1935.⁷ Reid believed the boundary between India and Burma which only in 1935 was separated from an Indian administration was "artificial as it is imperceptible".⁸ The Governor revived Hutton's idea of a North East Province or Agency embracing all the hill fringe from the Lushai Hills and Lakher land in the south in a crescent shape round to the hills of present day Arunachal Pradesh. He would have included in this administration the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the areas occupied by the Nagas and Chins of Burma and the Shan states. Also considered for inclusion were the 25 Khasi states and Manipur and the unadministered territory. He estimated that the population of the Agency excluding those areas of Burma would be 2½ million.⁹

The most significant departure Reid made over Hutton's plan was that the latter proposed that the North-East Province or Agency would be administered by India (it is to be remembered that Hutton wrote this memorandum before the Act of 1935 was implemented), the Governor "would put this under a Chief Commissioner and he in turn would, I imagine have to be divorced (as is Burma) from the control of the Government of India and put under some appropriate department at Whitehall".¹⁰ He visualised that the form of polity would be on self-governing lines.¹¹

Institutions of this kind in the plains are as good as dead, but in the tribal areas they are untouched and working ... Elders or Chiefs with their Advisors settle the vast majority of disputes, villages have their own funds and village roads and bridges are kept by communal unpaid labour.

He admitted finance would be difficult as these hills, except the Jaintia Hills, were deficit areas. Were the scheme to take effect this Agency would have to draw finance from Imperial sources for which there were precedents.¹² The province, Reid suggested could be manned by an expanded Burma Frontier Service. The amount of control would undoubtedly have to be "very considerable for a time," but it is essential that it should come from Whitehall and not from India to which the hill tracts are entirely alien."¹³

Reid admitted that what he had drawn up was only a tentative proposal in broad outline for which much detail would have to be filled in. But, supposing it were decided, for whatever reason that the scheme he had outlined were impracticable, he trusted, that he had sufficiently explained that to place the hills under the control of an Assam Ministry was impossible and unworkable.¹⁴

III

Surprisingly Reid chose the school children of the Welsh Mission Girls' High School in Shillong and their parents to hint that he was up to something. Addressing the audience on 13 November 1941 he said that India was on the threshold of great changes. "Where do you come in this picture?" he asked them. He then said.¹⁵

It may be - it is no new thought, for it has been canvassed in the press often enough that the destiny of these Hills and other areas in Assam will follow another course than that of being linked with those of India proper. It may be otherwise. But sooner or later the question is going to be canvassed and the decision will depend on large measure on public support.

Soon copies of the confidential note reached the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow and L.S. Amery, the Secretary of State for India. The latter was so impressed with the plan that he gave a copy to Professor Reginald Coupland who used it in his third and final volume on the constitutional problem in India,¹⁶ and is wrongly credited with masterminding the Crown Colony Scheme. The opinions of the Burma administration, then housed in Simla following the evacuation from Burma, were divided. J.H. Mitchell, the Chairman, Commission on Scheduled Areas of Burma was not in support of Reid's plan.¹⁷ His personal views may have influenced the Burma administration supporting the Crown Colony Scheme and Burma's inclusion in it.¹⁸ The Plan was discussed by L.S. Amery and Lord Wavell shortly before the latter left England to take charge as Governor General and Sir Reginald Dorman - Smith then in London to discuss Burma's future.¹⁹ Shortly after Wavell was credited with taking home in 1945, a plan for a province to be solely ruled by Britain.²⁰ Wavell some time later saw Dorman-Smith in Simla and discussed a number of points with him the most important was the Governor's idea that the Tribal Areas of Burma, Assam and possibly Bengal should be formed into a separate unit and administered by the Governor General or by the Governor of Burma.²¹

Meanwhile discussion progressed through 1943-1946 on the question of administrative amalgamation of the Burma and Assam Tribal areas. A matter of concern was the readjustment of the frontier between Burma and India and the Tribal Areas and the desirability of some system of coordination of administration. Representatives of the Burma administration viewed that distinct tribes should generally not be divided between two administrations and the boundaries should be drawn as to bring as far as possible the whole of a tribe under that government which already has included in its territory the majority of a tribe. J.P. Mills conveyed his Governor's opinion that he "preferred to envisage a future in which the Tribal Areas and the Excluded Areas should be merged into the province of Assam rather than be cut off from it".²²

IV

Reid's belief that the plans he had revived would be canvassed was limited to discussion between the officials of the India Office, London, India and Burma. Public support which apparently was not sought meant that the plans did not percolate to the people who would have been affected by the secret discussions. Some tribal political leaders got wind of the plan. Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy representing the Khasi Hills submitted a memorandum to the British Cabinet Mission in which he categorically stated that the Protectorate would not be economically viable. "When the whole of India will get independence", he wrote, "the hill people of Assam should get their own share of independence and they should be connected with the Province of Assam".²³ Another clergyman, Rev. L. Gatphoh, representing the Jaintia Hills hoped his hills would come into the Protectorate.²⁴ Three Garos wrote to the British Parliamentary delegation in February 1946 saying they had heard rumours that a plan was considering to exclude the Garo Hills from Assam and India. They opposed the plan.²⁵ Nagas meeting in Kohima in early 1945 asked to remain under the British Crown with their own legislative council. The Mizos of the Lushai Hills voiced their disapproval of the plan. They favoured autonomous status for the Lushai Hills within the Province of Assam.²⁶

While the tribal leaders in the hill areas were getting increasingly drawn into discussions of the future status of their hills, Reid's successor, Andrew Clow, the last British Governor of Assam published in 1945 a *Memorandum on the Future Government of Assam Tribal People*. Prepared between March-October 1945, the *Memorandum* demolished Reid's proposal, first by suggesting alterations in hill area administration and secondly, by giving his personal views on the matter. He made it clear that the time was not opportune for such a proposal:²⁷

It seems most unlikely that a British Government which is prepared to set India and Burma on a self-governing footing should now undertake the administrative and financial responsibility for a patchwork of sparsely populated hills lying

where these hills do. Indian opinion would be equally strongly opposed to the constitution of a foreign territory with its natural boundaries.

Clow preferred a merger of the hills and plains of Assam in a manner which would conserve tribal rights and would recognise in an effective manner the different needs and outlook of the two areas.²⁸ The Governor's last paragraph of the *Memorandum* reads:²⁹

Assam is never likely to be as homogenous as other provinces. The plains people are not so divided as those of the hills, but they are far from being a single people such as can be found in many equally large or larger areas in India. But this great collection of peoples, in hills and plains, have been set in a particularly well demarcated corner of the world and their welfare will depend on their proving able to live together. Assam should look to her diversity and to her capacity for toleration, which is greater than that of other provinces, to provide her strength.

J.P. Mills, Adviser to the Governor of Assam was also at work to settle the problem of hill area administration. He published in 1945 a small but very concise pamphlet, *A Note on the Future Administration and Constitutional Position of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas in and on the Border of Assam*. After reviewing the indigenous tribal administrative system, the historical background, the racial and cultural setting and other related subject, he put down his view of the possible alternative of the relationship between the hills and the plains of Assam. He ruled out that it was in the best interest of the hill tribals to be included in Assam. An alternative appeared to him to be a choice between the two extremes of excluding only some of the Tribal Areas and to including only the Partially Excluded areas. Another alternative was to temporarily extend all the hills of Assam with special treatment designed on the lines of indirect rule, to develop those institutions which still survived and to fit the tribals for eventual union with the province of Assam.³⁰

Dorman - Smith, despite the advice of his officers was drawn to the plan and admits to "our flirting with the Reid idea of a separate Agency for the Burma-Assam frontier".³¹ With the return of British administration to Burma and changed situation with discussion beginning for Burma's independence he could "see nothing, but trouble ahead in Burma if we attempt to pursue the separate Agency Scheme and I would like this matter now to be considered closed."³²

On 6 May 1946 the Secretary of State for India recorded a minute:³³

At the present stage of proceedings agreement had been reached by the Secretary of State and the Viceroy of the impracticability of transferring responsibility for the Backward Tracts from the Provinces to any outside authority whether that should be a British High Commissioner or a United Nation's Mandate.

Four months later Rohini Kr. Choudhuri of Assam raised a question in the Legislative Assembly. He asked Pandit Nehru, member for external affairs whether it was a fact that a proposal by the Adviser to the Governor of Assam for tribal areas was under consideration for forming "a separate area to be named North East Frontier Area Agency and to be placed under the Crown and not to be included in the Constitution of India."³⁴ Nehru replied that there was no such proposals before Government.³⁵

V

Pethick Lawrence's minute sealed the fate not only of the Crown Colony for North East India but also the plans (not discussed here) for other backward areas. With Prime Minister Clement Attlee's Labour Government committed to India's freedom; an enclave of a Crown Colony for the hill areas under review was not possible in the background of assurances, apart from it being ill-timed and conceived rather late to enable it to take shape. Moreover the motives underlying it would have been grossly suspected by the new Indian leadership. The British plans other than the Crown Colony Scheme for the hill areas were either shelved or ignored if not openly flouted by the new Assamese leaders. Counsel had been carefully prepared by those who left and quickly ignored by those in authority after 1947. As for the hill leaders their view mattered little in 1947-1950. Events after 1950 were to show just how perceptive India's former administrators had been towards India's North East.³⁶

REFERENCES

1. India Office Library and Record, London, L/P&S/12-3115A. The *Note* is dated 7 November 1941.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, footnote 1, p. 1.
4. The North-East Frontier (Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur) Tracts; the Naga Hills District; the Lushai Hills District; the North Cachar Hills Subdivision of the Cachar District.
5. The Garo Hills District; the Mikir Hills (in the Nowgong and Sibsagar Districts) and the British portions of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District other than the Shillong Municipality and Cantonment.
6. *Memorandum of the Government of Assam to the Indian Statutory Commission*, Vol. XIV, 1930, pp. 111-122.
7. See D.R. Syiemlieh, "Burma Flirting with Reid's Plan", in M.S. Sangma (ed.), *Essay on North East India*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 226.
8. IOLR. L/P&S/3115A. A Note ..., pp. 14-15.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
11. *Ibid.*

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12. Reid does not indicate the precedents in the *Note*. A typescript "Assam and the North East Frontier of India" (1949?) written after retirement and intended perhaps for publication, mentions precedents of finance of the Crown colonies of Basutoland and Swaziland. IOLR., R. Reid collection MSS Eur 278/19, pp. 19-20.
13. A Note ..., *op.cit.*, p. 18.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
15. IOLR., R. Reid Collection, MSS Eur E/278/11 (d).
16. D.R. Syiemlieh, "Burma with Reid's Plan", *op.cit.*, pp. 228-229; R. Coupland, *The Future of India*, London, 1943, p. 164.
17. IOLR, M/4/2803, "The Scheduled Areas of Burma", a confidential note signed H.J. Mitchell, 26 November 1942.
18. For details see D.R. Syiemlieh, "Burma Flirting with Reid's Plan", *op.cit.*, pp. 231-233.
19. IOLR., L/P&S/7/6787, Extract from private and secret letter from Lord Wavell to Mr. Amery, dt. 27 July 1944.
20. N. Mansergh (ed.), *The Transfer of Power*, Vol. V, No. 397.
21. IOLR. Letter indicated in ff. 19.
22. IOLR, L/P&S/12/3115 A. A Record of the Meeting of 10 March 1945.
23. A Note by Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, : Hill Districts of Assam: Their Future in the New Constitution of India", recently incorporated in O.L. Snaitang (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life and Political Writings of the Hon'ble Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy*, Vol. 1, Shillong, 1997, pp. 13-14.
24. D.R. Syiemlieh, "The Crown Colony - Protectorate for North East India: The Tribal Response", *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Eleventh Session, Imphal, 1990, p. 208.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.
27. Andrew Clow, *Memorandum on the Future Government of the Assam Tribal People*, Shillong, 1945, p. 29.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
30. Chapter 14.
31. IOLR, M/4/2803, Dorman-Smith to Pethick Lawrence, 13 August 1945.
32. *Ibid.*
33. IOLR, L/P&J/6787, Minute on Backward Tract, 6 May 1946.
34. Extract from the Official Report of the Legislative Assembly Debates, 29 October 1946, p. 164, extract in IOLR, L/P&S/12-3115 A.
35. *Ibid.*
36. For details read D.R. Syiemlieh, "The Crown Colony - Protectorate for North East India: The Tribal Response", *op.cit.*, pp. 209-211; D.R. Syiemlieh, "Reponse of the North-Eastern Hill Tribes of India Towards Partition and Independence", *Indo-British Review*, Vol. XVII, Nos., 1 & 2, (Theme: The Partition of India, 1947-1971), September 1989 - December 1990, pp. 27-35.