

**FRESH DIMENSIONS TO THE STUDY OF THE BRITISH
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TRIBES OF
ARUNACHAL PRADESH**

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The colonial rulers reduced India to a series of communalised stereotypes - scheming Brahmins, indolent Bengalis, turbulent Pathans, martial Rajputs, criminal Lodhas etc.¹ In the same stereotype the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh were described as barbaric savages. In the eyes of the foreigners Arunachal was a land said to be inhabited by "neckless cannibals", where a mountain of ruby was guarded by yellow snakes.²

In such a mysterious land with the savage tribes, the relationship of the British had always been uneasy like in Nagaland and Mizoram. Since their first intercourse, with the Burmese war in full swing from 1824-26, the British had been virtually at war with the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, almost till their departure.

In three different phases, the colonial masters of India came in contact with these tribes. In the first phase (1824-1873) the contact was limited to casual raids and counter-raids, climaxing in the Inner Line Regulations of 1873. The second phase (1873-1914) witnessed a tremendous upsurge of the British imperialist thrust into the depths of Arunachal and was accompanied by deadliest encounters with the tribes. The third phase (1914-47) passed lacklusturably, but not without hostilities with the local populace. The entire story has been described by the British as "a clash of culture."³

But the comment when put to analysis stands negated. No doubt culture played its part in stirring trouble but it cannot be given the prime place in the history of the unsavoury relationship between the

British and the tribes. It is surprising to note that the "economic interests" which overshadowed the political interests of the British in India also played its role in a remarkable way in Arunachal Pradesh as well. The way 'posa' dominated the entire gamut of conflict, is just a pointer to the economic issues involved therein.

The Burmese war, 1824-26, brought the British to the north eastern part of India for the first time as an imperial power. However, the aftermath of the war witnessed a steep decline of the Ahom power and a tremendous upsurge of palace war and internal rebellions in Assam, rendering the eastern frontier of Bengal perilous. In order to secure and stabilise their economic interests in Bengal, the British intervened and David Scot supervised the first takeover of Assam's internal administration and security.

While meddling into the revenue settlement of Assam, the British came across the claims of tributary payments by the different tribes of the north east frontier from the villages below their Hills or the services of the paiks in those villages. Such claims were known as 'posa'. In the first instance, the British recognised such claims as 'posa', but later they were bent upon extinguishing 'posa', which they regarded as 'blackmail'.⁵ As late as the twenties of the twentieth century the British used 'posa' as a weapon in demanding good behaviour, subservience and total surrender from the different tribes on this side of the frontier. The outcome of such policy was a series of savage raids and counter-raids.

Since 'posa' dominated the entire gamut of history, it needs a deeper analysis from the standpoint of legality, and historical recognition. To the British and many others, it was just 'blackmail' collected by brute force. In the opinion of others, 'posa' was the yearly subsidy which the

provincial government paid to certain hill tribes, a practice that had once been followed by the Ahom rulers.⁶ Still there is another section of opinion which describes 'posa' as tribute paid since the Ahom days in exchange, of guarantee of peace on the frontier by the tribes. Thus, it appears that 'posa' had historical acceptance and was also recognised by the British. the legal aspect is still open to discussion. Hence branding it as blackmail and playing it up as a weapon to bring the tribes to total surrender is no justice to history.

For convenience of the study of the details, it is worthwhile to proceed from west to east. The British in order to deal with the different tribal groups facing the valley of Lower and Upper Assam in north and east divided the area primarily into three sections: the western section, central section and the eastern section. Since the encounter was with the bordering tribes only, the tribes inhabiting the interior of Arunachal, i.e. in the south of the McMahon Line did not figure prominently in the chequered history of British relationship with the tribes. As such the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Akas, Daflas and Nishis in the western section, Abors and Miris in the central section and Mishmis, Khamptis, Singphas and Patkoi Nagas in the eastern section were the main tribal groups who were at war with the British in order to secure their economic interests, whatever they had of it in the foothill regions.

The economic issues at stake were however confined to the outlet for trade in the plains, preservation of forest lands, exclusive dependence for the supply of salt and cotton from the plains procuring labourers and slaves from the nearby villages, assertion of rights to the fertile plains in the duars and collection of grains and other necessary items not available in the hills. Such economic issues, statistically counted may be of meagre importance to the

British economic interests, but for the self asserting and poorly-fed people of this hardy terrain it was a question of life and death. If they failed to protect these vital interests the ultimate reality may have been starvation and death. Thus it was a question of the protection of their rights and for that they waged a veritable war against the British.

In the western section Capt. Vetch, Collector of Darrang proposed in 1838 that Bhutias (Monpas and Sherdukpens) should not be allowed to collect 'posa' and suggested an agreement with the Bhutia chiefs near Kuriapara Duar for a settlement of their claims in terms of cash. The proposal was approved and agreed upon by the Company. In 1844, the agreement was signed with the Sat Rajas. However, in 1852-53, tension mounted over the issue of the appropriation of the 'posa' amount by a Gelling Raja and the consequent demands of the Monpas and Sherdukpen chiefs for their extradition, which the British Government refused. The British threatened the suspension of 'posa' and demanded good behaviour. In 1872-73, Lt. Col. Graham who was authorised for boundary demarcation was vehemently opposed by the Sat Rajas over the claims of their rights on the fertile lands. After the enactment of the Inner Line Regulations in 1873, the hill chiefs also protested against the restrictions put on the movement of traders and ryots to the hills. The British however kept the restrictions in suspension and continued to have a sound relationship with the Monpas and the Sherdukpens.

The Akas living in the hills north of Charduar posed a major challenge to the British over the assertion of their rights in the plains of Charduar. David Scott, the Governor General's Agent initiated the commutation of 'posa' in terms of cash with the Hozarikhowa Akas, which was finally agreed upon.¹⁰ But the Balipara massacre in 1835 by Kapachor chief, Taghi Raja brought an immediate halt

to the payment. In 1842, an agreement was also signed with the Kapachors to solve the problem arising out separate claims by the two different groups. In 1857, the Akas protested against raising the 'posa' amount and refused to receive the 'posa' unless and until their demand was heard. The Demand was based upon the sound logic of price rise. The Boundary Commission under Lt. Col. Graham in 1872-73, evoked lot of protests, climaxing into raids and punitive expedition in 1883-84, which finally brought them to surrender. But such forced surrender brought by the strength of arms failed to usher in peace and the problem was prolonged till the end of British rule.

The Dafla, better known as the Nishings inhabited the hills lying in the north of Naoduar and Charduar in Lakhimpur. As late as 1852, they were allowed to collect 'posa' in kind. But the continuation of this practice created a lot of administrative troubles for the local administration. So finally commuted for monetary payment. Thereafter, the relationship continued to be normal till 1870. But later on the upheaval started once again when the British interfered into intra-tribal feuds and into their acquisition of slaves from the plains. This soured relationship never eased out and witnessed major upheavals till 1938-39.

The Abors, better known as Adis, and the Miris inhabit the land east of the Daflas and between rivers Dihang and Dibang. The hill Miris collected 'posa' from different villages, but the Abors had no claims to 'posa'. The Hill Miris claims of 'posa' were settled by the British as is evidenced by a ¹¹ resolution of the Chief Commissioner of Assam. But the Abors remained hostile even to the slightest interference of the British in their territory.

Right from the very beginning the Abors had misgivings about the intentions of the British in

their part of the frontier. The Mishmis living further east of the Abors had similar convictions. These two tribes opposed vehemently any effort of the British even to explore their areas. Fortunately, for strategic and commercial reasons the British were keen on exploring and manning routes to Tibet through the Abor and Mishmi country. Thus even though the question of 'posa' was not there, the British came in direct tussle with these tribes for the security of their vital trade and strategic interests. In the process, the British interfered in the practice of slaves, collection of dues from the gold washers, fishermen and persons engaged in the exploitation of forest products.¹² such interference coupled with trade embargo and punitive expeditions into the Abors and Mishmi hills resulted in a virtual "war of attrition" against the British.

The Singphos and Patkoi Nagas inhabiting the eastern most part of Arunachal Pradesh posed a major challenge to the British like the Abors and Mishmis. The Nagas and Singphos had no claims of 'posa' from the plains of Assam. As such there was no dispute over this issue. The issues of conflict were the same as that of Abors, except some specific issues. The salt wells of Naga Hills and British interests in the mineral deposits of Hookung valley were the main issues, besides the question of acquisition of slaves and jurisdiction in the frontier. From 1825 onwards the British faced a 'volley of fire from these tribes.

The only exception were the Khamptis. Barring minor confrontations and misunderstandings, the British had maintained a near-good relationship with these tribal groups living in the hills between the two dreaded tribes; Singphos and Mishmis. The Khamptis were given a better deal only to maintain a buffer zone in that part of the frontier. Thus the good relationship with the Khamptis was not without any interest at stake.

A number of British scholars dedicated to the aforesaid subject made tall claims about the non-feasibility of the economic aspects involved in the long-drawn struggle for the assertion of freedom and preservation of economic rights on the part of the Arunachalees. But viewed in the background of a growing population and disproportionate rise in the production level because of difficult terrain and obsolete means and techniques of agriculture, the economic issues were in fact the issues of survival for the tribes of Arunachal. Since there were hardly any political, social, religious or cultural issues at stake, the economic issues should be an 'eye opener' leading to fresh study of British relationship with the tribes of Arunachal.

Notes & References

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