

Frontier Officers In Colonial Northeast India

Suhas Chatterjee

FRONTIER OFFICERS IN COLONIAL NORTHEAST INDIA

Suhas Chatterjee



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This treatise aims at giving a glimpse of the renowned frontier personalities shaping the British frontier policy acting in different capacities as civil and military officers under trying circumstances in a hostile climate to open up the North-east to the world. They studied carefully the topography of the hills and plains, made survey of the forbidden land, mixed with the unknown people at the risk of their lives to know their customs and usages, gave a shape to their languages and made them conscious of their rights. Today's North-east what we know now, is the product of their hard labour, sacrifice and farsight. There had been, however, a large number of such officers but we had selected only four; Lieutenant Colonel F.J. Lister, Lieutenant Colonel T.H. Lewin, Sir John Edgar and R.B. McCabe. Those Goliaths came to India in the 19th century to transform the North-eastern hills into a prosperous province full of life and expectation. This multi-disciplinary work will prove of utmost use to one and all concerned.

Rs. 850/-

Suhash Chatterjee (b. 1935) is the author of *Mizoram Under British Rule*, *Mizoram Encyclopaedia* (three volumes), *Making of Mizoram* (two volumes), *Mizo Chiefs and Chieftdom*, *A History of Mizo Economy* (two volumes), and *Socio-economic History of South Assam*, besides scores of articles in journals and magazines. Recipient of state awards he was a Senior Fellow of ICSSR and ICHR. A Gandhite, he was closely associated with Gandhian Institutions and edited the Gandhi Centenary volume entitled *Non-violence and the World Peace*. He is regarded as an authority on Frontier History of North East India.

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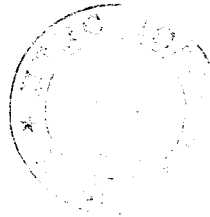
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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Illustrations/Photos & Maps</i>	xv
1. Lieutenant Colonel F.J. Lister (1823-1854), Political Agent of Governor General of India in Khasi Hills and Officer Commanding, Sylhet Light Infantry	1
2. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Herbert Lewin (1858-1873), Superintendent and Deputy Commissioner, Chittagong Hills Tracts	33
3. Sir John Ware Edgar (1862-1892) Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal	176
4. R.B. McCabe (1875-1897), Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills and Kamrup & Political Officer, North Lushai Hills	264
<i>Glossary</i>	289
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	294
<i>Index</i>	305

1

Lieutenant Colonel F.J. Lister

The celebrated British Political Agent, Khasi (Cossia) Hills had been a fine soldier and a wise Frontier Officer. He joined the East India Company's armed forces as a cadet and was admitted in the Assam Light Infantry but soon got transferred to Sylhet Light Infantry. He took direct part in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) where he displayed his military abilities. He was rewarded for his courage and valour and was elevated to Officer Commanding, SLI in 1829. His exploits have been highly extolled by historians A C Chowdhury (*Srihatter Itibritta*) and Sir Edward Gait. Lister's punitive expeditions against the head hunting Nagas and Garos brought them under control. Lister was successful in penetrating into the inaccessible areas of Naga Hills and Garo Hills where from the British influence gradually extended to the hilly terrains.

At the close of the First Anglo-Burmese War, David Scott was appointed by the Governor General as the Political Agent for Assam, with Cherrapunji as the headquarters. Cherrapunji was in Khasi Hills (now Meghalaya). The difficulties faced by the enterprising soldiers in the North-east had been the unhealthy, hostile climate and the poor communication. Roads were of utmost necessity for the

movement of the armed forces. Edward Gait writes in *History of Assam* "as soon as the Brahmaputra valley had passed under British rule, the shrewd mind of David Scott had been impressed by the expediency of opening direct communication between it and the valley of the Surma; and in 1827 he had in interview at Nungklow with Tirat Singh, the *Syiem* of that place, and other Khasi chiefs, at which they unanimously gave their consent to the construction of a road from Rani, via Nungklow, to the Surma Valley. The project was at once put in hand; a track was cleared, and bungalows were erected at Nungklow. The officers employed on the work mixed freely with the tribesmen and for eighteen months the greatest apparent cordiality prevailed. But, in April 1829, the Khasis, alarmed by the foolish boast of a Bengali peon, who in a quarrel, taunted them with the prospect of subjugation and taxation as soon as the road should be completed, made a sudden attack on the small party. Lieutenant Bedingfield, one of the two officers at Nungklow, was enticed to a conference and massacred; the other Lieutenant Burlton, defended himself all day against greatly superior numbers, and at night fled some way towards Gauhati. He was overtaken and put to death with most of his followers, of whom only a small remnant escaped to British territory. David Scott himself had a very narrow escape, having left Nungklow for Cherrapunji only a short time before the rising."

Troops were immediately called up from Sylhet and Kamrup and vigorous reprisals were undertaken. Lister was the Officer Commanding SLI Battalion. Lister advanced with his artillery (1829) from Sylhet, in his forward march he avoided rest despite the heavy strain but his contingent had to face difficulties because of the peculiar character of Khasi Hills. Moreover, the Khasis dodged the British forces to make several surprise night attacks and before the English could take position they left and got faded into the forests. But Lister was commander of indomitable energy and carried his

mission to a success. In the punitive expedition against the Khasis other than the SLI there were 23rd Bengal Infantry and a strong detachment of armed police. All under the command of Lister assisted by Lieuts Townshend, Vetch and Brodic.

Lister proposed to David Scott "the Khasi chief of Cherapunji be given a land grant at Bholagunj (Sylhet) and in exchange the government should acquire the land for the office complex of the Political Agent at Cherrapunji", to which the authorities of Fort William readily agreed (1830). Thus, the inimical chief of Cherrapunji was won over. The task of Lister, thus became little easier, however, the loss inflicted on the government contingent by the freedom loving Khasis has been massive. The troops became restive; Lister proposed an increment of allowances to the government employees which the Government of India agreed.

"I am directed to desire that you will communicate to Captain Lister and the officers of corps the acknowledgements of the Governor General in Council for their active and zealous exertions in the hills. As a reward to the men of corps for their good conduct, His Lordship in Council has been pleased to grant them Batta of Re 1 per mensum during the time they were actually employed in the Hills, and to resolve that in future, they shall be entitled to the some indulgence whenever they may be engaged in service in the Cossiya hills thus placing them on a footing during such service, with the local corps in Assam."¹

The increased hill allowance was an incentive to the soldiers fighting in an alien territory under trying circumstances. But the Khasis made occasional counter raids into the British territory shaking the confidence of the residents of the border. Lister was however, resolute and his courage and endurance proved effective. "Suffering frequent defeats, one chief after another made his submission. On 9th

January, 1833 the ringleader Tirat Singh, surrendered himself, and a general pacification followed almost immediately. The chiefs were allowed to retain a large measure of independence, but they had to submit to the general control of a Political Agent, who was thenceforth stationed in the hills and dealt with all serious cases of a criminal nature. They had also to agree to the construction of such roads, bridges and roadside bungalows as might be considered necessary. The first Political Agent was Captain Lister of the Sylhet Light Infantry who held the post for more than twenty years (1835-54)".²

It is pertinent to point out in this connection that after the death of David Scott (1833) T.C. Robertson and Colonel F. Jenkins officiated his post. But they did not reside at Cherrapunji. The geographical remoteness from the seat of governance accounted for the failure of the authorities to look properly at the problems in their right perspective and this led growing restlessness among different conflicting Khasi chiefs. The two years (1833-34) absentee rule of Khasi Hills led the administration to realize the defects and they created a separate dignified post Political Agent, Cossya Hills; Lister immediately after his appointment moved to Cherrapunji from his military residence in the plains of Sylhet. Despite the damp and inimical climate of the rainfed hills of Cherrapunji he never grumbled and lived there for more than thirty years.

Lieutenant English was the son-in-law of Lister. He was also the Assistant Political Agent. Both of them were in the SLI. Robertson, the Political Agent withheld the title of Raja from Rajendra Singh of Jaintia and even returned the letter of the Supreme Government which addressed Rajendra Singh as Raja (letter dated 28 Feb 1834). The action of Robertson was not only a violation of norms but also the principle for which the administration stands. He was angry as two British subjects were sacrificed before the goddess *Kali*

in Jaintiapur. He planned annexation to Jaintia kingdom and instructed Lister and English to make an economic assessment for the Jaintia *Raj*. Lister informed Robertson that cash revenues to Jaintia amounted to Rs.30,000/- annually in addition to what was paid in kind and that "a treasure amounting to nearly 20 *lacs* of rupees had accumulated in the royal vault."³ On the basis of that information Robertson imposed a heavy tribute on the Raja and finally recommended his deposition. During the regime of Jenkins in March 1835 the British government informed the young Raja Rajendra Singh the confiscation of his properties in the plains.

On 15 March 1835, Captain Lister took formal possession of Jaintiapur and issued a proclamation announcing the annexation of the Jaintia Pargana to the British Dominion. The dependency of Gobha met the same fate a few weeks later. Deprived of his valuable possessions in the plains, Rajendra Singh gave up in disgust his unremunerative territory in hills which passed into the hands of the British. The hill tribes of Jaintia, however, did not submit to the new regime so easily. They broke in to open rebellion which was easily suppressed and very liberal terms were given to the insurgents by Captain Lister to weaken their opposition. The hillmen were interfered with as little as possible; no revenue was demanded from them and the hill chiefs or *Dolois* were left in the administration of petty cases.⁴

So far the Khasi states were concerned the British Government followed a uniform policy. The *Syiems* of the semi-independent Khasi states were permitted to exercise, with the aid of the *durbars* and elders, sole-criminal, civil jurisdiction in their respective states over their own subjects on matters pertaining exclusively to them. The dependent chiefs were permitted to investigate and decide all civil and criminal cases in which the parties were own people with the

exception to cases of murder, homicide and accidental death which were reported to the Cherra authorities for their decision. Both categories of states were bound to take to the Cherra court cases in which British subjects and the inhabitants of more than one state were concerned. These Khasi states came within the jurisdiction of the Political agency at Cherrapunji when it was instituted on 11 February 1835 under Captain Lister, the Political Agent and his Assistant and son-in-law, Henry English. British Paramountcy was further extended over the Khasi states by formalizing succession of chieftainship.⁵

Lister, The Political Agent

Thus, began the diplomatic career of Lieutenant Colonel Lister in March 1835. He conducted tribal negotiations with sagacity and courage but did not hesitate to resort to punitive measures whenever necessary. He earned immense popularity among the different Khasi chiefs and helped consolidation of British rule in Khasi Hills. The Supreme Government was impressed by the outstanding services rendered by Lt Col. Lister. He was termed as the worthy successor of David Scott. Lister was, however, basically a soldier and displayed his unique capabilities in military operations. So the Honourable Company often requested him to take to arms to save the administration from the political imbroglio in Naga Hills, Lushai Hills and Garo Hills. He responded to those calls, hooked his pen a while, put on his uniform and saddled his horse to the field to charge the brigade. His military adventures were all crowned with success. In his chequered military career Lister surpassed any one in the history of modern Assam who played the vital role in subjugating the wild races. Not only the top brasses of the army but the successive Governor Generals also had a very high esteem about his power of handling most difficult situations.

Lister and the Lushais (Mizos) of Tripura

The British district Sylhet had its border in southeast touching the state of Hill Tripura and also the Lushai Hills (unadministered). The Paite (Pytoo) Kukis of Lachukla's clan swooped upon the Kachubari village in Sylhet committing large scale massacre (1843). The punitive expedition, 1844 by Captain Blackwood suppressed the Lalchukla's clan but the Sylhet border remained defenceless as before because the Kukis again raided the British territory in the cold season in 1847. The District Magistrate of Sylhet sent the SLI to the affected frontier to restore confidence among the demoralized villagers. The Sylhet authorities accused the Raja of Tripura of dereliction of duty and the Raja's office retorted promptly. Thus ensued a wordy duel between the District Magistrate of Sylhet and the Political Agent Tripura involving the Foreign Department of the Government of India. When both the central and local authorities were seriously thinking over the problem of the security of the eastern border of Sylhet, there came the news of Kuki attack upon the SLI on January 1848. Cooper, the Magistrate of Sylhet, entrusted with the law and order of the district was indolent and he neglected to conduct a proper enquiry of the incident and simply accused the Raja of Tripura as a source of the trouble. The negligence of Cooper annoyed the Government of Bengal relating to the enquiry of the incident was not complied with. The authorities in Calcutta took a very serious note of it. Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General, issued a minute empowering Lieutenant Colonel Lister to institute an enquiry of the matter.⁶

The Minute of Lord Dalhousie, The Governor General

"I have no confidence in Mr. Cooper's willingness or ability to do what is necessary especially under the new circumstances which have arisen to embarrass this case. "I propose therefore, to request to Col Lister to proceed in person to the spot where the outrage is reported to have taken place,

taking with him, or at all events putting in motion, such a force as he may judge necessary for any subsequent operations. I would propose also that full power be given to Col Lister to conduct the enquiry and to conduct any subsequent proceedings which may be judged necessary "I would propose further to instruct Col Lister that if upon enquiry he shall find that the attack on the guard made on 12th January was made by an armed force to any extent, or if he shall be satisfied that the massacre committed in April was upon the bodies of person settled in the British territories, he shall proceed to take effective measures with the troops under his command to inflict such punishment on the Kukies as they may most sensibly been and as is usual in similar raids on the frontier.

(On the margin... I should consider this infliction of punishment necessary under all circumstances but especially when the Raja is manifestly either unable or unwilling to punish himself.

Lord Dalhousie)

"If on the contrary he should decide that the occurrence of 12 January was only a squabble which may be reached and punished sufficiently by the civil power. He shall direct that proceedings may be taken by it. And if his enquiry should clearly satisfy him that the massacre of the 13 April was committed within the hill territories of Raja as has been alleged he should then abstain from any further proceedings. I am given to understand that the decision of this alternative may be safely left to Col Lister's judgement and experience. "I would gladly wait until we could hear the result of the enquiry. Mr Cooper has been directed to make supposing him to have commenced it before issuing any instructions at all. But time passes urgently and it appears to me to be before anything indispensable that those who live under our rule should see that we are willing and able to protect them, and

that the barbarous tribes in the vicinity should be made to feel that we are not powerless for that purpose and that they cannot injure us with impunity.

"I am unwilling to act in any matter of this kind without consulting with my colleagues in the Govt. of India. I have therefore sent this statement of the case in hopes that they may consider my views correct so that we may act at once, and they save the present season.

Sd. Dalhousie 24-1-48

I concur

Sd. F. Millett 24-1-48"⁷

As per instruction contained in the Minute the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, F.J. Halliday wrote to Col. Lister, the Political Agent, Khasi Hills on 25 January 1848 asking him to take the charge of the matter.

"Under these circumstances and considering the new circumstances which are now reported to have taken place with your detachment on the Rajah's frontier and which are not improbably connected with the events of last April, the Governor has determined to place the matter entirely in your hands; being convinced that he may rely with confidence on your judgement and experience to bring it to an early and satisfactory conclusion.

"With this view the Governor has resolved to appoint you, and you are hereby appointed and invested with the full powers of a Magistrate in the district of Sylhet, for the purposes of this investigation you are requested to proceed to the scene of these outrages with all possible expedition."⁸

He was assured that Cooper had been instructed to assist him whenever necessary and the Tipperah Rajah was also informed in the usual manner through the local authorities, to cooperate with him. He was also empowered to take the number of armed force men as he thought necessary. And if

he found in his investigation that the outrage was committed within the British territory, "You will proceed forthwith with the troops under your command and without any further instructions from Government, to beat up the quarters of the offending tribes living beyond our frontiers and to inflict upon them such military punishment as in your judgement they may most sensibly feel and as usual in cases of similar outrages by barbarous frontier tribes.

"It will be the duty of the Rajah of Tipperah to assist and cooperate with you in any incursion you may require to make within his territory for these purposes but it will not be necessary that you should await his assent to your crossing his frontier, and you will not fail to note and report to government if he should make any underhand opposition to your progress should he make any open resistance you will treat him, as a possible enemy."⁹

Abstract of the letter was also sent to the Raja of Tripura, Raja Kissen Kisore Manikya.

The Secretary, Government of Bengal informed Cooper the Sylhet District Magistrate, and Dampier, the Superintendent of Police, Lower Provinces, were also formally instructed to cooperate Lister and informed them, 'Colonel Lister has been directed to make his reports direct to the Government.'¹⁰

The Military Board requested Lord Dalhousie, to make the military survey of the disputed spot of the occurrence of the raid by Captain Maxwell as that would define the boundary line as well as the actual place of occurrence. Accordingly, the Secretary Bengal government further informed Lister that Captain Maxwell was willing to serve under him, "you are accordingly requested to call upon Captain Maxwell if you should consider it necessary."^{10a} "However, Captain Maxwell because of his heavy engagement in the road construction work at the Chittagong

could not join Lister's party and J.H. Maxwell substituted him. Returning from the spot of enquiry Lister wrote to the Secretary, Bengal Government on 19 February 1848.

"I have the honour to acquaint you for the information of the Right Hon'ble the Governor of Bengal that I have returned from the Eastern frontier were agreeable to instructions - conveyed in your letter No.11 dated 25th January 1848. I visited Lall Mee Sing's Barea. The post of the detachments of Sylhet Light Infantry Battalion Sing See Raja, the scene of the third massacre and am of opinion that the localities of these late translations are entirely within the Tipperah Raja's independent territory."

The deserted state of the whole country within the confines of the hills precluded the possibility for procuring evidence respecting either the boundaries or the occurrence which have given rise to the immigration. This however is of no moment as Lt. Fisher's Report in connexion with his map as sufficient to prove the matter of territory.

"The hill of Chattachoorra is noted in the report of which I append an extract as being situated in Badarpur or Sidessor Range in latitude $24^{\circ} 19^{\circ}$. All territory north of this line assigned to the British Government with the exception of Dharmanagar, which with all land south of the above mentioned line is placed in the dominions of the Tipperah chief. A place therefore from Kailasshar in a direction any way south east must necessarily be entirely within that person's jurisdiction, we marched from Kailashar at 8 A.M. on the 11th instant attended by a small escort and arrived at Lal Mee Sing's village at 6 P.M. The estimated distance being twenty miles and the direction south-east as per accompanying sketch.

"On the 12th we proceeded towards Sing Shee Raja at 10 A.M. reaching the ruined village at 4 P.M. The distance about 12 miles and the direction south-east.

The other two scenes of massacres lying still further, so I did not visit them as from the aforementioned reason, I was satisfied of their position within the Tipperah frontier and every additional step in their direction would take us farther from that of the British Government. "Lall Mee Singh's village and the other localities are situated between the Surajog and Jampoe ranges, both of which run north and south and extended southward some fifteen or twenty miles from the former place at about the distance between these two ranges is another small range of hills running east and west, apparently joining on to the Savajog only as mere is an opening between it and the Jampoes."¹¹

Lt. Col. Lister further stated "there is a conflicting evidence as to the owner of this small hill. But the sketch map of Fisher proves that this hill comes under the territory of Tipperah and that it can in no way affect the question of boundary."¹²

He also stated that he had withdrawn the advanced armed guards for not only this was objectionable but also put strain upon the supply position.

With respect to the attack upon the guard considering the extent which the English in the first instance became aggressors, in occupying the village whereby the inhabitants were compelled to fly to the jungles, Lister could not think himself justified in carrying into effect the orders contained in the paragraphs 10 especially as it authorised such only in the event of sufferers residing within the British territories. He had however demanded Lall Mee Singh to be given up, to account for his share in this transaction. The local authorities of the Raja at Kailashar were under an engagement to produce him within fifteen days, and in case of this agreement being fulfilled Lister had the honour to request instructions how the case to be disposed of.

He further stated that he had returned to Sylhet posting a company at Hingajee, pending the final adjustment of the case.

He also complained of the ill defined southern boundary. "In conclusion permit me to state that the southern boundary seems ill defined and little known a matter to which I would direct the attention of Government suggesting the construction of permanent pillars on conspicuous hills in the absence of a natural boundary, without which the imaginary boundary a line of latitude must continually afford, grounds for dispute."¹³

Extract of a report on the boundary between the Sylhet and the Independent Hill territory of Tipperah addressed by Lt Thomas Fisher, 24th Regiment H T to the magistrate of Sylhet without date para 19th. By a decision of Mr Ewing, Magistrate of Sylhet in 1820/21 the whole of the villages watered by the Simla and Lungaee nullahs together with the ranges called the Siddheswar and Sevallia Hills were declared to be within the Company's territory and it was determined that the boundary commenced at Chattachora, vide Plan Latitude 24'17" north Longitude 92'10" E and extended in an irregular line to Kasinagar in *pargana* Patharia."¹⁴

He also pointed out that a letter of an Amin addressed to the Magistrate, Mr. Roberts of Sylhet in 1801 stated that the place between Patharia (Sylhet) and Dharmanagar (Tipperah Ind. Territory) was within the Tipperah Raja's territory and the stream in question had been claimed by the Political Agent of Raja. "The place Kasinagar is called by the people of Sylhet as Surma chera and they claim it within the Company's territory but a careful examination of all the evidences prove that the idea of the Sylhet people is not correct and the stream regarded as the boundary."

Lister in his report to the Bengal Government informed that his investigation was similar to that of Lieutenant Maxwell of Bengal Engineers who met him personally and supplied him with Banner role and chainmen. The Nazir of Sylhet obstructed Maxwell in his work. "There being nothing further for Lieutenant Maxwell to do at this season of the year I have permitted him to return to the Presidency reporting his arrival to you (Secretary)".

The report of the Maxwell is important as it related to the boundary between Sylhet and Tripura. It is quoted here, "I have the honour to compliance with your instructions to forward a sketch of the ground showing the relative position of Lall Mee Sing's Baree, the stockade and place of the late massacre in the neighbourhood with the boundary line between the Hon'ble Company's territory and the Raja of Tipperah and at the same time make the following report. "Lall Mee Sing's Baree and stockade are situated about half a mile from the banks of the Deogung river on the east side Oonkattar Sarajung range of hill about 24 miles to the south east of Hungjuah or 8 miles south east of Kailashar and according to the Boundary Line laid down by the Late Captain Fisher within the territory of Raja of Tipperah.

"Referring to Captain Fisher's own words in pointing out this position of the boundary, vide report para 19th latter part, he states, it was determined that the boundary commenced, at Chattachora, vide place Lat 24'17 N Longitude 99'10E and extended in an irregular line to Kasinagar."

"Latitude 24'17 is therefore it will be observed the most southern point of the British territory at this spot and it is evident if for no other reason should this be considered as the true boundary and it is admitted by Government, I believe as a boundary which should be respected by both parties till government decided otherwise. All to the south side of it must be beyond the Company's territory and amongst other places

Lall Mee Singh's Baree, are as shown in the plan which is upwards of eight miles to the south of this.

"This places of massacre Singhshepuja, Dokompore Baree and Lampore Lall's Baree are as seen in the plan much further south than even this and consequently still further within the Rajah of Tipperah's dominions."

Laying aside, however, Captain Fisher's boundary and even following that as laid down and shown to me by the Nazir as his desired line, it will from the following errors he has made in his sides of the frontier, be impossible. I conceive in any way to bring these points within our territory. In the Nazir's imperfect knowledge of the country as it really is and which has misled I believe the authorities at Sylhet had been forwarded to Government three points have erroneously been taken for granted.

1st. The Jooree river rises in the Sarajoy range of Hills.

2nd. That the Jampoe range of hills i.e., those marked in the sketch as such and that in the continuation of which Satoo is situated runs into the Sarajoy range a little below the latitude of Kailashar and the Lall Mee Singh's Baree is on the east side of this.

3rd. That the Chattachoorra Teela or peak the boundary line should run from is not correctly laid down by Captain Fisher but should be as pointed out by the Nazir about miles further south at a point in the Langbear and Singture ranges.

Now could the hill and rivers be so disposed of a glance at the sketch will show it would have the desired object or bringing the places under dispute within the British territory but as the two first of these suppositions are totally incorrect even allowing the third which at best is more than doubtful this arrangement is upset.

The Sarajoy and Jampoye ranges do not approach one another but run in a parallel direction north and south nearly

and at the distance of about eight miles. The Goori river rises close under the latter and to the eastward of Lall Mee Singh's Baree.

Capt. Fisher's plan and boundary compared with the country as it really stands, and we observed it is tolerably correctly laid down and there can be no doubt as to what he intended as the line Chattachoor Tila being admitted by all parties as a point in the Badapore range, there are however not marks upon the peaks, by which the country people can be guided and without a campus and Captain Fisher's plan to refer to a mistake to be made.

Where boundary line strikes as at a,b,c,d, pillars might be built to advantage, but is likely a road to these points would have to be cut through a dense jungle and the materials conveyed there either by coolies, mules or elephants the expense of each pillar would be considerable.

The nature of the ground of Lall Mee Sing's Baree to *Jal nadi* also extending to the south is one mass of dense bamboo jungle and forest and can only be valuable to the owner from the numerous herds of wild elephants it shelters with the exception of a few patches round Lall Mee Singh's Baree, little or no longer or no land it cultivated.

Sd. Harley Maxwell.¹⁶

In recognition of the Lister's service Halliday, the Secretary Bengal Government (later on Governor) wrote to Lister on 26 April 1848:

"I am directed by the Right Hon'ble the Governor of Bengal to acknowledge the receipt of your dispatch of 19th Feb and 29 March last respectively. In the first of these your report, your first visit to the scene of the massacres committed by the Kookie tribes in April last and your observations upon the boundary question between the territories of the British Government and those of the Raja of Tipperah and declaring yourself

stasified that the place of massacres is far within the Raja's boundary.

"In the second dispatch you report your second visit to the same spot in company with Mr. Cooper and Lt. Maxwell and you transmit a copy of Lt. Maxwell's report upon the boundary dated 25th March and his sketch of the frontiers to illustrate his observations.

"Governor approves of your report and thinks that as the massacres took place within the Raja's territory therefore no necessity for taking any other steps regarding those occur-rence; Governor also approves of the military withdrawal from the advance posts. He also thinks undesirable to call Lall Mee Singh for his any share in the massacres."¹⁷

The Governor also regretted that the civil authorities of the Government were wrong in determining the question of the boundary as it misled the Government at Fort William. He also informed that the magistrate of Sylhet had been directed to dismiss the nazir immediately who obstructed the survey work. The expenses he applied for sanction were sanctioned and Governor also stated that the Military Board would be consulted the demarcation of the boundary permanently which would be economical and useful, as suggested by Lister and Maxwell.¹⁸

Halliday praised Lister for his service and requested the Military Board to submit a plan and estimate for drawing the boundary between the territory of the East India Company and the Raja of Tripura. The Board was further requested to consult Lt. Maxwell who was in Calcutta.

Thus, because of Lister the boundary between Sylhet (now Karimganj in Barak Valley, Assam) and Tripura was clearly defined to avoid future political complications. The investigation, of Lister is characterized by his qualities of leadership. He was capable of harnessing the talents of his

subordinates and boosted the morale of the workers to effect a team work. Lister was the Political Agent of Khasi Hills but the Honourable East India Company retained his service as the Officer Commanding in the Sylhet Light Infantry. And that was necessary, so it was he who was the sole authority to decide the number of Companies and the quantity of ammunition to be despatched in a particular expedition. During the Blackwood's Expedition 1844 he sanctioned four Companies to capture the Paite (Pytoo) Kuki chief Lalchukla. But in the present expedition which was personally led by him had five Companies of soldiers. Lister originally belonged to the Engineering Division of the army, so, in road construction work or survey work he had expert's knowledge. In fact, as an officer of the armed forces he was possibly the most versatile one in the North-east and the Government of India valued his suggestions and sought his advice frequently.

In the military history of India Lieutenant Colonel Lister left an indelible mark as a dynamic officer of significant military acumen. His contributions as a diplomatic officer was well-known. During his twenty years of service as the Political Agent of Khasi Hills he made impossible possible. He brought the whole of the Khasi Hills under the strict administrative control of the East India Company and considerably tamed the wild tribes. The tribes also gradually got accustomed to the principle of inviolability of the British boundary. The experience made them wise to realize that a price was to be paid for stepping over the line.

Lister and the Lushais (Luchays) of Cachar Frontiers

John Edgar, the Civil Officer, Left Column of the Lushai Expeditionary force 1871-72, in his famous report (1872) describing the past historical connexion with the Lushais wrote that Lister's operation had been a great success and there had been no raids since the expedition for a long time.

Let there be an analysis of the event necessitated the armed intervention of Lister. Captain Verner, the Superintendent, Cachar in his letter dated 21 November 1849 to Lister informed that he had collected evidence from the two Kukis of the affected village, according to them the attackers, principal chief Lalingbhoo remained at home in the distant hills but under his instructions his two sons Barnerlal and Lalpooe with some 200 followers advanced towards Cachar. Verner also pointed out that Salpooe Raja had been friendly chief receiving subsistence from the Government and also had promised to supply Kuki coolies to help the road construction in the border region. Salpooe's *mantry* met personally recently the Superintendent in his court.^{18a}

On the basis of the letter from the Superintendent Cachar, Lister, the Political Agent, Khasi Hills, informed the Secretary, Bengal Government, J.P. Grant on 31 December from Cachar that he (Lister) visited the scene of massacre at Roopa Chera with a view to determine whether the place was within the British territory or not.^{18b}

"The village on the Roopa Chera in which the murders were perpetrated is beyond dispute is within our present boundary. It is situated eight miles south by east of Chargola on the fork of Roopa chera and *Simlah nuddi* and is full three days march directly from Chuttar Choorra, the boundary laid down in the map of Capt Fisher. As to the perpetrators of crime he states that according to the Superintendent, Cachar the crime was committed by Lushai Kookies an independent and powerful tribe, occupying a tract north east of Chittagong and some nine or ten days march south of Cachar. Raja of Tipperah also in a recent statement had stated that the Lushais do not come under his authority. Lister also informed that the country south of Cachar was dense jungle and very difficult to get the supplies so he proposed to take only the essentials there.

Accordingly, Lister advanced to the Mollah or Mora's punji on the hills far south of Cachar at the head of the SLI troops. He conducted the operation from 1 January 1850 to 23 January 1850 and communicated immediately on his return to Cachar to the Secretary, Bengal government of the safe arrival at Silchar and informing him that he would send his detail report from Cherrapunji. Further, stating only for the present that his expedition had been a success. He had destroyed the village of Mulla, the *sardar* in the Roopa Chera raid. He had destroyed the grains and also killed 40 men or Mollah. "Because of the small number in the force I considered it safe of come back to safety and I think a large number of force is needed to create an impression on the mind of this powefrul and wild tribe, and I hope that the Government will also form the same opinion."^{18c}

Report on the Expedition Mulla

Lieutenant Colonel Lister sent his detail report on the Expedition to the Secretary, Bengal Government on 2 February 1850 (vide B.J.P. 27 February 1850 No.36 *Lister's Report*).

Lister submitted his report of the expedition to the Secretary Government of Bengal from Cherrapunji on February 2, 1850. He stated that the expedition started from Silchar on 4-1-50. The detachment was consisted of 200 men. The road was dangerous because of small rivulets and dense jungles and absence of thoroughfare. The elephants and other caravans found it extremely difficult to penetrate in to those dense jungly hills. Lalpoe Raja, of course, helped him with Kooki coolies. On January 1850 the contingent reached the Mullah's village. Mullah took a very strategic position in his cantonment on the top of a high mountain. Considering the small number of force in the contingent Lister considered it risky and improper to follow Mullah further up so he retreated after destroying the village of Mullah. The return

journey took from 17th to 23rd January. He explained that the expedition was made to cut short else severe damage should have caused to expeditionary force in case of delay.

The Lushai Socio-Military Pantheon

“The Lushais are very powerful tribe under the government of six *sardars*, of whom one is the acknowledged chief. They have their separated cantonments with a number of dependent villages attached. In these cantonments the fighting men reside. In the dependent villages are located their *ryots*, who merely used as coolies and for tilling the soil. They consist in many instances of the captives they have brought away in their different expeditions, or great part of them probably taken as mere children and generally reconciled to their captivity.”

“The fighting part of the Lushai population is composed to Lushais who appear to be cross between the Kookies and Burmese; secondly a certain number of true Burmese entertained for the purposes of warfare and thirdly of refugees and outlaws from Manipur and our own frontier.”

He said that the chief of the head of the tribe is known as Barmooielin (Barmoolin) who has 300 hundred Burmese in his service. His headquarters is a village south west of Mullah's village which Lister saw from his telescope. This is a very big village of 3,000 houses. The *sardars* subordinate to him can raise a fighting force 5-7 thousand men. The Burmese has the muskets and the others are armed with *daos* and spears. That is why Lister did not take the risk of further advance.

“I have before remarked that the Lushais are a cross between the Kookies and Burmese, and this opinion is strengthened by the belief universally prevailed, that a part of the Burmese army which occupied Telyne and its neighbourhood in 1824 never returned to Ava but settled in

the jungles south of Cachar. Almost all the Kookie tribes are migrating in their habits, changing their residence every two or three years, but in the substantial way in which the Lushai villages are built I am convinced that they are a stationary tribe and this stamps them from as different from the other Kookies who one and all entertain a great dread of this."¹⁹

Lushai Defence

He informed the Lt. Governor, how he had overcome such a powerful tribe. He state that during his expeditions the fighting men were absent from their cantonment and were in their maurading excursion. Besides, the expedition was a sort of surprise to them who thought that their cantonments were only known to themselves. He had many spies with him. The spies, when he reached the villages of Mullah, desisted him from further advance.

The Lushai country consisted of several hills run from south to north Cachar and Chittagong were the two terminal points of these hills. The Chittagong side faces the steep mountain ranges, many uneven ranges and swamps face the Sylhet and Comilla side. Whereas, from Cachar a chain of hills runs down unbroken into the Lushai country and, according to Lister, along this a good practicable road might be constructed.

Recommendations of Lister

Lister did not finish his duties simply submitting an official report of the expedition but he also recommended certain measures for the security of the Eastern frontier.

He suggested the formation of a border security force consisting of three thousand men. From five hundred to one thousand of these would be required for keeping open the road from Cachar, and protecting the various depots. A portion of this force must consist of Europeans. The Europeans having the experience of the character of the

Burmese stockade should be taken in to the border security force.

The occasional powerful demonstration of force would yield no result. Small and sporadic British expeditions would excite the spirit of revenge of the tribes. The only remedy lay in breaking the spirit of Independence of the Lushais.

Handling of the delicate problem of the Lushais was closely connected with the affairs of Manipur and Tripura. For an effective settlement of this cooperation of the Rajas of Manipur and Tripura was necessary.

For the maintenance of peace in the southern border of Cachar the help of the settled Kukis in the British frontier was essential. Those Kukis would collect necessary intelligence and in case of emergency they would render their service as frontier guards. For this purpose Lister proposed a few hundred Kukis of Cachar frontier should be armed with muskets; and they should guard the paths and bypaths under a young and enterprising European officer.

Results of the Expedition

The Government of Bengal readily agreed to the last mentioned suggestion of Lister and appointed him as the Frontier Officer to ward off the Lushai raids. The unnecessary interference of the local officers of Sylhet into the frontier affairs came to an end. The burden of vigilance on the frontier fell upon an officer of considerable rank under the direct control of the Fort William. Thus, new chapter was introduced in the Lushai policy of the government. The company moved from its old base of Sylhet to a new base Cachar for the exploration of the Lushai frontier.

Importance of Lister's Expedition

British connexion with the Lushais, in the true sense of the term, owes its origin to Lister's expedition. Formerly, the

British Government suffered from a sense of megalomania entirely alien to its traditional political spirit. Neither the local authorities nor the authorities of the Fort William endeavoured to collect valuable information regarding the topography, political organizations of the country and people of the Lushai Hills. The local authorities considered the unique military prestige of the Company was sufficient to draw the admiration of the wild children of the hills. Besides, the local officers failed to study the Lushai problem in the proper perspective when they were busy in quarrelling with the Raja of Tripura, a great political change took place in the Lushai Hills. Laulul dynasty of the Lushai clan firmly established its hold over the whole of the hilly country south of Cachar and east of Chittagong. All these did not come to the notice of the local officers. Lalingbhoo, of whom we came to know of at the time of Roopacherra raid, was the son of the chief Lalul, the founder of the Lushai dynasty. The danger lay in the southern frontier of Cachar and Lushais of the Lalul's family were the authors of all the massacres committed on the frontier. After the expedition of Lister, the English gradually came in direct contact with the ruling Lushai clans and ultimately annexed the Lushai Hills from them.

English Company and Lister

Lindsey Company was pioneer lime and saltpetre company in Sylhet with a huge annual turnover. Lindsey left Sylhet in 1789. Robert Reid and George English set up the Reid and English Company in 1794 which subsequently became the English Company (1819). Harry, the eldest son of George English, the enterprising lime merchant, became the sole proprietor of the English Company as his brother John sold out his shares to him and enjoyed an easy and carefree life in London. The company was the largest industrial concern in the low countries of the Bengal presidency with a very good liason with the government. The East India Company appointed Harry English as the Assistant

Political Agent, Khasi Hills (1835) under Lt. Col Lister. Harry English worked as Assistant Political Agent from 1835 to 1850. When Lister led his famous expedition against Mollah, Harry officiated the post of Political Agent. Harry married the daughter of Lister. The necessities of commerce compelled Harry to give up his government job. In the English Company there were large number of Khasi and Jaintia workers and many influential Khasis were engaged in lime business as *gomostas* (agent) and lessees of the lime mines. Lister took advantage of this by distributing monetary favour and spread the network of spies in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

Lister was not merely the Political Agent of Khasi Hills but also the civil judge. Lister for the first time made revenue settlement in Khasi Hills and his settlement formed the basis for future settlement. In 1854 Lister relinquished his high post and the Commissioner of Assam created a new post Principal Assistant Commissioner of Assam with Cherrapunji as the headquarters. The post of Political Agent, Khasi Hills was abolished.

Lister had been a versatile genius. He was a brave soldier of proven calibre, skilled diplomat, tactful administrator and shrewd but competent civil judge. Lister was an Engineer by profession and when made revenue settlements in Khasi Hills he made intensive survey of the land, came to know of the coal mines and lime-stone mines of Khasi Hills. He was indirectly connected with the lime business through his daughter. He was aware of the mining potential of the area and informed the authorities of Fort William about it. R.G. Hadden of Messrs Goldstone Wyllic and Company was sent to the Khasi Hills and Sylhet to conduct the survey as to the possibilities of drilling petroleum by the government.²⁰ Lister for a while engaged himself in orange plantation and exported them to Calcutta market in association with his son-in-law Harry English. Thus, Lister opened up the Khasi Hills and Sylhet for commercial activities and in a sense he laid

the real foundation of modern commerce in Meghalaya. Lister was a rich man invested his money in shares of different companies and has close connexion with the Managing Houses in Calcutta. He returned to England as an wealthy person living the life of a Nawab in London.

Lister and Sylhet Infantry

With the advance of Burmese up to Manipur and finally to Cachar, the security of the British district, Sylhet was threatened. The authorities of Fort William became aware of the situation, Gobinda Chandra the deposed ruler of Cachar and Gambhir Singh took refuge in Sylhet. Edward Gait writes:

“The defence the Surma valley was entrusted to a force called the Sylhet Local Battalion, afterwards the Sylhet Light Infantry, with headquarters at Sylhet. It was raised in 1824, and was recruited chiefly from Manipuris who had left their own country and settled in Sylhet and Cachar during the internal troubles and frequent Burmese invasions of the first quarters of the last century. Two companies of this regiment were stationed at Silchar, and at a later date it also occupied Cherrapunji.”²¹

SLI played a vital role in the First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26). The prolonged war in the unknown hostile hilly terrain compelled the authorities of Fort William to organize a force, proficient in hill operations. Thus SLI was revamped and reconstituted under the able leadership of Major F.J. Lister who upgraded the force and beefed up its intelligence network involving the non-combatants. The force was fully equipped with up to date ammunition. The men of the force were recruited from the Gorkhas and the Punjabis replacing the older recruitment norms. The headquarters of the force was shifted from Sylhet to Cherrapunji when Lister moved to Cherrapunji as the Political Agent Khasi Hills. Though decentralised in action SLI in its approach became a

personalized one, Lister remained in charge of SLI in addition to his political post. The SLI defended the Sylhet and Cachar borders from the Lushai Kuki incursions and tackled the larger problem of law and order in the district of Sylhet. SLI conducted several punitive expeditions in to Khasi, Lushai and Naga Hills. Lister led several expeditions personally. The operation at Khonoma in Naga Hills (1849) at the outskirts of North Cachar Hills was conducted by the SLI. Cachar Levy was a battalion of SLI and its head Mr Grange, considered as the father of Frontier Police and he led several successful expeditions in to the Naga Hills. Lieutenant Colonel Lister, the main pillar of SLI, was the guiding spirit and leader of the force. The SLI developed a new military culture unknown in the frontier history under Lister's leadership. Vincent, Blackwood, Campbell, Butler, Johnstone, Grange etc the giant military officers who played crucial role in the trans-Indo Burma border in the 19th century, all had a stint of service in the SLI and had the opportunity to receive training from Lister. Lt. Col. Lister was a source of perennial inspiration to them. Almost all the military historians have showered unalloyed praise on Lister. The SLI later on got changed to Lushai Hills Military Police Battalions and 8th Gorkha Battalions. Finally they got merged into Assam Rifles.

Assessment of Lister

During the early part of Queen Victoria's reign only the daring younger generation of England seeking fortune came to India to join East India Company's service and the more daring amongst them opted for the military service, and Lieutenant Colonel F.J. Lister belonged to the latter category. He was indeed, a brave soldier having romantic liaison with the vicissitudes of a soldier's life. Lister had been a down to earth military activist who moved in the inaccessible, dense forests and insurmountable hills with rifles and bullets slung across his back. When charged the artillery he seemed to be absolutely fearless. His operations were mostly crowned with

success. His had been an eventful military career and awards and medals had come a plenty. But Lister was not merely an officer of the armed forces he was also an important Frontier Officer of caliber and as such played a very vital role in formulating and handling the British frontier policy. His well written numerous reports were the basis of many important decisions of the Supreme Government in Fort William. As a diplomat he had been shrewd and often resorted to bribing the opponent to win a price. He broke the persistent Khasi resistance by liberally distributing cash to the Khasi chiefs. Similar tactics were contrived to deal with the Lushai-Kukis and Jaintias. Lalmir Sing was heavily bribed to assist the English to capture Lalchukla. A large section of the servants of East India Company were corrupt and they had no qualms of conscience wither to accept or distribute graft. Lister was no exception to the general run of the Honourable Company's personnel.

Lister's dealing with Rajendra Singh, the young *raja* of Jaintia had been very harsh. Rajendra Singh was a victim of a carefully laid plot of political fraud. T.C. Robertson was the chief person to hatch the conspiracy to confiscate Rajendra Singh's property and possessions in the prosperous plains. Lister's exaggerated report strengthened the well laid game plan of Robertson. The plea of justification of Lister's conduct that he had been acting under the instructions of the superior officer is a weak defence and contrived because he was working at tandem. Biased Robertson even did not carry out the Supreme Government's instructions. Triumphant Lister entered in to Jaintia capital, Jaintiapore at the head of a garrison to take possession of the deposed *raja* whose faith in British sense of justice was completely shaken. Here also Lister acted under the instruction of his superior officer Colonel F. Jenkins but the entry of Lister into the defenceless Jaintia capital had been like a medieval Taimur's aggressive about performed in a miniature scale. Raja Ram Singh, the

grand father of Rajendra Singh had been comrade-in-arms, only a few years ago of Lister and Robertson in Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) but the camaraderie soon gave into the greed of looting the treasure of the hapless native. How much of the confiscated treasury reached Fort William is at anybody's guess. The share of Lister and Harry English had not been insignificant. The revolt of 1857 was engineered by greedy officers like Lister and his ilk. As Political Agent of Khasi Hills Lister had to maintain the law and order and his motto being *pro rege, lege et grege* and anybody found breaking the Company's law were sternly brought to book. Whatever may be his motives Colonel Lister did draw attention to a potentially explosive problem- ethnic uprising that had been left unresolved since the incorporation of small but ticklish principalities in to Company's dominion in the low countries of the Bengal Presidency a few years ago.

However, his administration of justice was not always free from all the hassle, despite the drum beating of the Company officials about its efficacy. So far the natives were concerned Lister's law enforcing machine was as punctual as the rising sun. He had to dither, however, when he had an axe to grind and in that connexion he could hardly be distinguished from a muslim Kaji of his preceding age. The English Company carried on the monopoly trade in limestone. But the monopoly was not the result of market economy but an enforced one. The lure of profit often invited the Calcutta merchants, and all of them Europeans, to the lower provinces to start the lime business but George English, the father-in-law of his daughter and the Managing Director of the company restored to flagrancy to harass such entrepreneurs after abducting and not infrequently murdering their agents or representatives. And all these were made to restrict competition. But Lister persistently refused to take cognizance of the crimes and did not initiate action against the culprits. All such digressions of Lister were known to his subordinate

European officers and though they disapproved of Lister's malafide acts privately or disliked the Harry English, Lister's son-in-law, they could not bring it to the notice of the Supreme Government for fear of reprisal. Lister, thus ruled like a dignified despot, almost independent of the Supreme Government situated long six hundred miles away. Edward Gait (*History of Assam*) writes:

“That the Sylhet district, which had previously been administered entirely from the headquarters station was clearly impossible, in a way to deal adequately with the requirements of a tract containing a population of two millions, and possessing a most difficult and complicated system of land tenures, and in which the communications were almost inaccessible at certain seasons of the year. To remedy this state of affairs, four outlying sub-divisions were formed, viz. Sunamganj, Habiganj, Maulavi Bazar and Karimganj and a separate officer at headquarters was told off to deal with *Jaintia parganas*.”

It is no wonder that Colonel Pollack went to Assam shortly before the formation of the Chief Commissionership (1874) had a very poor opinion of the manner in which the province was governed. But discharging the duties of a civil officer with occasional bouts of digressions or his unsavoury personal behaviour should be given much prominence and for that Lister ought not be slighted nor his action be construed as *mala fide*; taking the stock of the turbulent political condition prevalent in Assam and Lower provinces of Eastern Bengal and the awful transport condition in his territorial jurisdictions Lister had to act according to the exigencies of a particular situation. He did not consider it negative to reap the whirlwind. Everything was necessary if that suited the administrative needs. Moreover, he worked in a system which was by itself a corrupt one. The system improved sufficiently with the creation of the Chief Commissionership in Assam and by the change in legal machinery of Assam including

Sylhet. Under a vastly transformed scenario the new national perception is bent on pointing out that the Officer Commanding, SLI had much fighting but little glory. But it is Lister who gave the government a credible defence policy to fight the disruptive forces. Without Lister at that critical juncture the much needed peace would have remained illusive to the disturbed 'Lower Country' gasping under the impact of Burmese aggression - for many more years. His long twenty years of colourful and formidable administration - which had been the logical fulfilment of David Scott's dream - witnessed Lister's concern for the solidarity with the stability and peace of Honourable Company in the *terra incognita* of the Northeast of the Empire. His conviction to restore order at any cost isolated and marginalized the disturbing element along with their fissiparous tendencies who had thrived on erroneous passive proposals of bureaucratic inaction. His stable administration ultimately ushered in a new era of tremendous financial and economic spin offs for the Lower provinces. The flourishing tea industry in the next decade was the direct outcome of the strong rule of the Officer Commanding SLI. The bright side of Lister's character had been unlike many of his imperialist compatriots of upper India, he never allowed himself to be a prisoner of the politics of hate and for that reason he was never out of tune with the needs of the time.

In criticizing the officials like Lister we often forget that Lister was an officer of the East India Company and not of the British Crown, besides, he had been primarily a military officer with strong mould, naturally, his civilian image lacked the refinement of administrative candour. He was never shy of his military image and this paramount military concern often compelled his civilian task to play the second fiddle of the military amplitude.

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