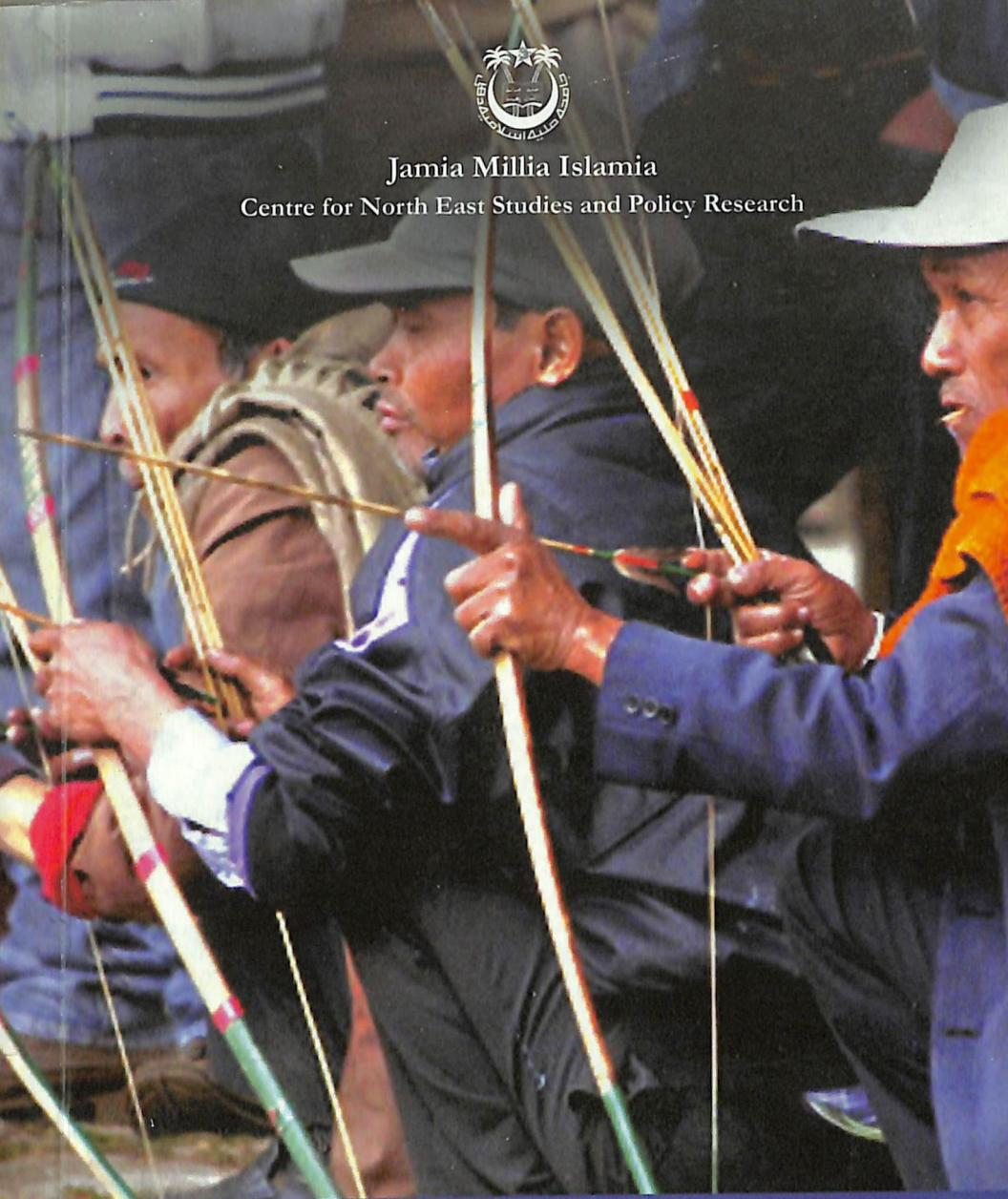




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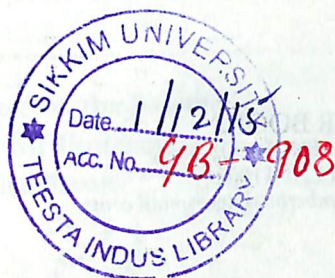
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# Little Known Fighters Against the Raj: Figures from Meghalaya

Edited by Sanjoy Hazarika

*Sanjoy Hazarika*

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Against the Raj:  
Figures from Meghalaya**



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**CENTRE FOR NORTH EAST STUDIES AND POLICY RESEARCH**

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## Introduction

A widespread perception exists that the North Eastern region did not actively participate in the Indian Freedom Struggle. While the Assamese are better known to have taken part in the entire period conventionally termed as the Freedom Struggle, there were those who resisted and struggled against British imperialism in a very different manner and whose names are not known even among scholars and students of that period, for they came from small ethnic groups of the region. Their lives are rarely remembered, except by the work of a handful of academics from the region, occasional writing in the regional popular press and commemorations by local government and ethnic organizations.

At about the time the British were establishing their rule over Assam, their interest was drawn to the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias. In phases these hills were either annexed into or came under political control of the British—but not without resistance from the traditional chiefs and leaders. Historical records have details of the Garo resistance particularly that of 1870 when Togan Sangma led his band of Garo fighters against the incorporation of their hills by the British. Some research has been done on this last bid for freedom. A fresh look at the archival records and oral tradition would enable the emergence of a more detailed picture to emerge of the role of this Garo leader in fighting against the British might.

Much more is known of the Khasi struggle. It has been termed the Anglo-Khasi War, which it was for the Khasis struggling to maintain their independence. The Khasi confederacy waged war against the British between 1829 and 1833. This long drawn struggle came to a close in early 1833 after the surrender of Tirot Sing, the Syiem of Nongkhlaw. Tried and sentenced to transportation, the Khasi Chief was exiled to Dacca. He died there on 17 July 1835. His story is reminiscent – and a precedent – of the manner in which the British dealt with other royalty who were exiled and died far from their homes – Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Moghul, who died in Yangon (Rangoon)

after the failed First War of Independence and King Thebaw of Burma, who was dispatched by the British to Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. Recent research on Tirot Sing and his times have brought out very fascinating details of the struggle.

The Jaintia Raj, one of the larger of the hill states in pre-colonial times, was annexed to the British dominion in 1835. The Raja was pensioned and made to live in Sylhet. In 1860 and again in 1862 the Jaintias raised in revolt against the British, among the impacts the 1857 Revolt. The Jaintias were led by a commoner, U Kiang Nangbah. His struggle against the British continued till December 1862 when he was hung, in like manner many other Indians suffered. Though there are details of the Jaintia struggle, it should be linked up with the broader issues of the aftermath of 1857.

The 150th commemoration of 1857, the First War of Independence, was observed some years ago. Interesting details of various struggles were drawn from the past and collected. However, the studies woven around this event could not fully reflect the position in regions such as the North East. An effort has been made through this book which draws on research, a workshop and seminar to bring pre-independence movement from Meghalaya to the notice of the larger academia and the general public.

Apart from studies on each of the struggles against the British from a military point of view, interesting papers could be developed on the perceptions of the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias on their freedom fighters, and to include persons of whom not much is known, but who deserve to be better understood. The Government of Meghalaya has declared holidays in memory of each of the leaders; poems and dramas have been written on these themes, and artist impressions have been attempted. The people's perceptions in the present may add insight to our understanding of this subject.

A one day workshop on this issue was held on 6 December 2010 at North East Hill University in Shillong which reviewed

the existing literature on the subject and assigned the writing of research papers, including primary research and review of archival material, which were presented at the workshop in New Delhi on 7-8 March 2011, organized by the Saifuddin Kitchlew Chair and the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research in association with the Department of History at Jamia Millia Islamia, to reach a broader audience and influence policy makers to include these figures in the contemporary history of India. The seminar in Jamia was inaugurated by Mr Najeeb Jung, Vice Chancellor, JMI, who emphasized the need for more work on the area covered by the discussions, and the Keynote was delivered by Prof Imdad Hussain, prominent historian, which is a major essay by itself, taking a wide ranging look at political issues as well as structures of tribal units and British rule.

This book is an edited collection of the papers which form a rich range of materials which will be useful to scholars and others interested in general issues before the region, but also for historians who wish to look in detail at figures and policies affecting the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. It can be useful for policy makers in the education process to help develop curricula related to the freedom movement in Meghalaya, at the Centre and State levels, both at the secondary school level as well as under-graduate and post-graduate levels. Too little is known of these issues and times; this book is a fresh effort at bridging these gaps.

I am grateful to my colleagues Dr M Amarjeet Singh, Mr K Kokho and Ms Anamika Deb-Roy for moving the project forward and to Poonam Sahi of Facet Design for her help in publishing it and to the academicians whose papers we have published, for their patience and scholarship.

Sanjoy Hazarika  
New Delhi  
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# The Hill Tribal People of the North East and India's Struggle for Freedom: Some historiographical issues

Imdad Hussain

More than thirty years ago teachers of history in north-eastern India, especially those in the newer universities, frequently lamented the virtual absence of any reference to the region in the standard histories and text books on modern India. To address this concern they formed a regional history association, now a vibrant organisation of nearly two thousand life members. While this has given an impetus to the writing of regional history, its overall impact on the history of India has, however, been less significant. Colonial writings particularly on the hill tribal areas have consequently enjoyed a much longer lease of life as authoritative histories. "Gandhi cuts no ice with the hill people and has less prestige in Assam generally than in most provinces," the Governor Sir Andrew Clow had assured the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, during the Mahatma's "epic fast" in early 1943.<sup>1</sup> Such statements have never been contested so far. Regional historians see a two-fold task: first of providing a more truthful perspective on colonial rule in Assam and the hill and frontier areas, and the next to ensure that this finds its place in our national histories.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Mansergh (ed.) *Transfer of Power*, iii, London 1970, Clow to Linlithgow, 5 March 1942.



This Seminar on the freedom fighters of Meghalaya, the first of a series that has been planned, is a move in that direction. I am grateful to the Saifuddin Kitchlew Chair, Sanjoy Hazarika, for the opportunity given to me to address the gathering. I shall, however, not confine myself entirely to Meghalaya, but speak generally of this vast region. I would divide colonial rule in the north-eastern hills into two unequal periods, first to include much of the nineteenth century and the years after the First Great War, each of which is informed by a distinct historical, and therefore historiographical problem. It is on these that I wish to speak. My purpose is to draw attention to what I consider certain historiographical issues that may be of some use in correcting existing perspectives and situating the hill tribal people of the region in the freedom struggle of the country.

During their roughly one hundred and twenty years in North-East India, the British brought under varying degrees of administrative control, piecemeal, nearly a hundred thousand square miles of hill tribal territory to form, along the districts in the Brahmaputra valley, a single administrative unit, the province of Assam. To colonial writers this expansion was the inevitable consequence of the need to ensure the peace and security of the settled plains districts – that the hills had to be occupied and administered in the interests of these districts (and one might add, the tea industry). And as each new tribal area was brought under administration so the necessity to take over the tract immediately beyond the administrative frontier. "There was no question of imperialism," said Sir Charles Pawsey, the last British Deputy Commissioner at Kohima, the process simply went on as a matter of administration.<sup>2</sup> Pawsey was speaking of his charge, the Naga Hills district of Assam. More than seventy years earlier and long before Kipling celebrated

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<sup>2</sup> Neville Maxwell, *India and the Nagas. Minority Rights Group Report No. 17*, London, 1973.

imperialism in stilted verse and prose, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, whose history of the North East Frontier was a manual for hill and frontier officers, said of Britain's Indian acquisitions: "Fate seems determined to prove that there shall be no rest for the English in India till they stand forth as governors and advisers of each tribe and people in the land."<sup>3</sup>

In India's north-east imperialism and colonialism assumed various forms, mostly clothed in humanitarian raiment. Acquisition of territory in fact illustrates diverse interests: Upper Assam and the Matak-Singpho tracts arbitrarily taken over for tea cultivation; the Garo Hills to obtain control over cotton and cotton trade, Lushai hills, now the State of Mizoram, to facilitate easy communication with Upper Burma, annexed during 1885-86. The case of Assam's northern frontier, what is now Arunachal Pradesh, presents another interesting feature of imperial policy. It became British territory after the Simla Convention of 1914 (which created the McMahon Line) but it was left undeveloped as an effective barrier to external aggression.<sup>4</sup> The folly of this

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, "Memorandum on the North East Frontier," Calcutta 1869, quoted full in his *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884.

<sup>4</sup> *Foreign Secret Proceedings*, (National Archives of India, New Delhi) January 1911, Nos 211-240; The Indian General Staff which initiated this policy had said: "For defensive purposes it is obviously most important that the mountainous country on the border should remain undeveloped as long as possible and to maintain internal peace, it is necessary to render intrigue by foreigners in Indian affairs as difficult as possible. This will be assisted by keeping the frontier in its existing condition." The Indian Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, Sir Syed Ali Imam, was the only one to protest against this policy: "Is it intended to keep the wild tribes as a buffer between the expansion of China and ourselves" (He asked in a Note on 6 December 1910). "If it is so it entails our keeping them down in their present unhappy and barbarous condition for all time to come for we will not govern them nor allow others to do so. I find it impossible to view such a policy as this with equanimity."

policy was only exposed after the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942.<sup>5</sup>

The actions of local officers in extending frontiers can be seen in the case of the Angami Naga and Khasi and Jaintia hills. I will refer to the Naga Hills later. In the Khasi hills, where the first penetration into tribal lands took place, the principal actor in this drama, the Agent to the Governor General for the North East Frontier, David Scott, made this observation in March 1824, that is, months before the declaration of war against the Burmese and two years before the Treaty of Yandaboo gave Assam to the East India Company:

“It is a pity that the Cossya (Khasia) country is not better known and we do not avail ourselves of the obvious advantages it affords for the establishment of a station for the recovery of health instead of throwing away time and money on voyages to the Cape (of Good Hope, South Africa). Within six hours journey from Pandua (a British outpost on the Sylhet frontier), itself a morning ride from this place (Sylhet town) there is a climate probably superior to that of the Cape in point of coolness, and if we judge from the reported appearance of the country, likely to be at least as salubrious.”<sup>6</sup>

Scott soon developed plans to drive a road across these hills to link Sylhet with Assam, to build a sanatorium and plant

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<sup>5</sup> The Japanese occupation of Burma and the tragic fate of the refugees who tried to enter India through the unadministered and undeveloped hill areas discredited policy of hedging the frontier with no man's land. It led to the exploration of the frontier tracts as a prelude to the extension of administration. In the northern frontier, then the North-East Frontier Agency, instructions to Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, who led the first expedition into the Subansiri-Kamala area, was to "establish friendly relations with the unadministered hill tribes, collect data on general conditions and tribal customs, and ultimately explore the upper reaches of the Subansiri River." This resulted in Haimendorf's *Ethnographic Notes*. See also his *Himalayan Barbary* (London 1955).

<sup>6</sup> *Foreign Secret Consultation* (National Archives of India) 2 April 1824: Nos 16-17, Extract of private letter, 21 March 1824.

European military colonies in the higher ranges. A disputed succession took him to Nongkhlaw, the seat of one of the twenty five petty Khasi States, on 2 November 1826, where he witnessed the resolution, in open *Dorbar* or assembly, of the dispute and the acceptance of his proposition for the road. This was followed by a treaty signed at Gauhati at the end of the month, 30 November, with Tirot Sing, the Syiem or Raja of Nongkhlaw by which his state became a protectorate of the Company.<sup>7</sup> By a personal agreement with the Syiem, Scott obtained permission for a sanatorium in his village "to eat the Europe air" as he remarked to a fellow officer. Reporting the conclusion of the treaty, he told the Calcutta Council:

"By the establishment of the influence of the British Government in this quarter the petty chiefs who occasionally disturb the peace of the Sylhet frontier would be completely overawed and the remaining independent part of the Cossya country being separated into two divisions by the territory thus obtained the recurrence of hostilities and feuds between the different chiefs would be necessarily lessened. The improvement of the country itself is an object which the British Government has an evident interest as tending to promote the prosperity of the districts of Sylhet and Assam with which a much more considerable commercial intercourse would necessarily take place were the mountaineers in a situation to exchange for the manufactures of the plains and the several articles of produce that the country is so well-calculated to raise."<sup>8</sup>

The process of imperial expansion into the tribal territories was neither easy nor peaceful. Almost everywhere the tribal people

<sup>7</sup> For Details, D R Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya, Policy and Pattern*, New Delhi, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> *Foreign Secret Consultations* (National Archives of India) 2 April 1827: Nos 20-22, Scott to Swinton, 13 January.

took up arms against the intrusion and almost everywhere opposition was brutally crushed. These events have been very conveniently glossed over in colonial historiography. Charles Callwell's *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* published by the War Office in 1896 which was based on Britain's numerous colonial campaigns does not draw from the Indian army's North East India experience. Yet here the British fought all three types of colonial wars that Callwell writes about: campaigns of conquest and annexation; wars of pacification to suppress insurgency and restore order, and punitive operations against particular outrage or when tribes acted contumely.<sup>9</sup> And how bitterly these so called "small wars" were fought can be seen in the near disastrous assault by British forces under a Brigadier General on the Angami Naga stronghold of Khonoma in 1879 where one British officer earned his Victoria Cross.

The absence of any reference to these bloody encounters of the nineteenth century in the history of anti-British and national movements is not easy to explain in conventional terms. In regional histories they are characterised as rebellions or revolts, though in recent years the term resistance is being increasingly used.<sup>10</sup> These terms are, however, still being used

<sup>9</sup> Callwell added a chapter on hill warfare in his second edition in 1899. See Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies. Guerrillas and their opponents since 1750*, London and New York, 2001, Chapters I & 2, I - 54; Geoffrey Fairburn *Revolutionary Guerrilla Warfare. The Countryside Version*. London 1974, 60ff; also Sir Charles Gwynn's *Imperial Policing*, 1934, based on case studies such as Amritsar, the Mappila uprising, 1921 and the revolt in Cyprus 1931. Like Callwell's work there is no reference to India's North-East.

<sup>10</sup> Cf H.K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes: North East Frontier*. Gauhati 1970, ii, in which he calls the disturbances in the Jaintia hills as "Jayantia Rebellion"; and his "Facts behind the Jayantia Rebellion 1862-1864" *Journal of Indian History*, 51, Pt 1, 1973; J.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Jayantia Rebellion" in N.R. Ray *et al*, (ed) *Challenge: A Saga of India's Struggle for Freedom*, New Delhi 1984. For resistance, D.R. Syiemlich, *British Administration in Meghalaya. Policy and Pattern*, New Delhi 1989, 44; and Shobhan N. Lamare's recent Study, *Resistance Movements in North East India The Jaintias of Meghalaya, 1860-1863*, New Delhi, 2001 Writers on the so called benefits

interchangeably. Precision in terminology, never a strong point with historians unlike sociologists, is of particular importance here. There were generally two distinct responses to threat posed to indigenous societies by a colonial power: in the first where the threat was correctly perceived or anticipated the people at once responded by a resort to arms; in the second reaction set in only after the controls and constraints of colonial rule had been actually experienced by the tribes or people affected. In these two responses, one in anticipation what was to come, not unoften determined by the fate of neighbours, and the other, the actual experience of it, lies the essential difference between, respectively, resistance and rebellion. This distinction proposed in a recent study of anti-colonial movements in Africa is perhaps more conducive to clarity:

“Resistance ... (is, it says) opposition to external hegemony and occupation prior to the time when an alien power has imposed upon a conquered country

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of colonial rule often overlook the brutality of the conquest and pacification, Cf. J. B. Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English*, New Delhi 1978, 241, in which he writes: "The contribution of the British cannot be overestimated. Before the advent of the British not to speak of a regular system of administration and means of education, the Garos had never experienced an established form of Government nor did they possess any written language. There was no regular line of communication and the hills were infested by pestilence and diseases. The society was extremely traditional and the tribes lived in hostile situations. The introduction of education and administrative measures infused moderations and the people gave up the practice of hunting-human heads, preserving skulls, and sorcery. Relieved (by the British) from the oppression of the *Zamindars*, the Garos abandoned the retaliatory feuds and raids and plunder remained only the myths of the past". For a more balanced account, P.C. Kar, *British Annexation of Garo Hills*, (Calcutta, 1970) 77, who says: "Virtually the Garos were left to their own world of tradition and Custom, cut off from the mainstream of Indian economic life and the main tenets of modernisation ... British administration could never uplift the Garos to that level of living which had been much sought after by the authority from the tribe during the annexation of the hills ... Rather the segregation policy stagnated the growth of this community, weakened its competitive spirit and strength, widened the cultural gap between them and their counterparts of the plains."

a new administrative framework (whether or not fully effective) requiring obedience to alien values. Rebellion is the militant expression of discontent at a later stage.”<sup>11</sup>

Still in the north-eastern situation this distinction between the two can easily get blurred. In the Khasi hills, for instance, there was a gap of two and a half years between the protectorate over Nongkhlaw and the outbreak there in April 1829. Again, the Jaintia State was annexed in 1834-35 and the first major outbreak occurred during 1860-63. Often confusion occurs when the conflict becomes protracted over a period of years. A British Officer relates his experience of this with the Angamis in 1871:

“I observe that a first success ... is not always decisive with the hill men; they have a way of letting their adversary win the first game; their opposition will commence only after it was thought to have been put down everywhere, and it might then assume a complexion so severe as to require the application of considerable force.”<sup>12</sup>

Given the theory and practice of colonial rule in the tribal areas, non-interference in the internal affairs of the people and the nominal administrative control exercised at the particular time of an outbreak, resistance more than rebellion would be a more appropriate term to describe the numerous anti-British movements. The nature of resistance, its extent, intensity and the methods by which it was articulated must be sought in the structure of the tribal society, its leadership and the level of its economic and political development.

<sup>11</sup> Robert I. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui (eds) *Protest and Power in Black Africa*, New York 1970. The use by American scholars of "primary" and "secondary" resistance can be very confusing. Nor would "post-pacification" of John Illiffe, *Tanganyika Under German Rule 1905-1911*, Cambridge 1969, to describe the widespread disturbances in that state in 1905 be any more useful.

<sup>12</sup> *Foreign Political Proceedings* (National Archives of India) March 1872: Nos 79-118; Henry Hopkinson to Bengal, 10 May 1871.

the will of the Confederates who were displeased with a treaty which he had without their sanction entered into."<sup>16</sup>

The *Sordars* and *Muntris* were consequently made parties to the subsequent treaties with Nongkhlaw, Myllem and other states that the *Syiems* had to sign granting privileges and concessions to the British, it was at the level of the clan and village leadership that real opposition to the British had developed. To further illustrate this, I would refer to another tribe, in another State, the Angami Nagas.

The Angami Naga hills from about the middle of the nineteenth century was said to be unusually disturbed on account of inter-clan and inter-village warfare. Annexation and enforcement of *Pax Britannica* was put forward by the local officers and the Bengal Government as the only way to put an end to this state of affairs. The offer of tribute by a few Angami villages was cited as evidence that British intervention would be welcomed by these Nagas. In particular, Captain John Butler, the Deputy Commissioner at Samagating, as Chemukedima then was, said to have acquired considerable influence over the Angamis: they called him their father, *Apo Jani* (Apo=Father + Jani = Johnny). And to Butler his friend the surveyor Robert Woodthorpe said "the savage children would carry their troubles and their differences."<sup>17</sup> Did the youthful Butler have such a hold upon the Angamis as it was made out to be, and were these turbulent people ready to welcome the British into their hills? A closer look at the Angamis and the peculiarity of their clan, or as these are known today *kebel*, relationship would provide an entirely different picture. "Although the village may be regarded as

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Pemberton, *Report*, *op cit*, p. 248.

<sup>17</sup> *Foreign External Proceedings* (National Archives of India) September 1892: Nos. 9-62; K W3, "Note on our dealings with savage tribes and the necessity of having them under our rule; R. G. Woodthorpe. 1 October 1891. See also Imdad Hussain, "Apo Jani and the Angami Nagas," *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Kohima Session, 1989; John Butler, "Rough Notes on the Angami Nagas," *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 1875



the unit of political and religious side of the Angamis," wrote John Henry Hutton in his well known *Angami Nagas*, "The real unit of social life is the clan." And: "So distinct is the clan from the village that it forms a village in itself, often fortified within the village inside its boundaries and not infrequently at variance almost amounting to war with other clans on the same village."<sup>18</sup>

This rivalry or antagonism between the clans, Hutton adds, "has coloured the whole of Angami life." Hutton's clans, or *Kbels*, are grouped into two divisions (*Kelbu*) - the *Kepezoma* and *Kepepfuma* or *Pezoma* and *Pepfuma* respectively or as they are called in the southern villages, *Thevo* and *Thepa*. The two divisions are said to have originated from two brothers, *Pezo* being the elder, his descendants took precedence over those of the *Pepfuma*. At feasts, for instance, no *Pepfuma* man could eat before a *Pezoma* did. The *Pezoma Kbels* were therefore always keen to maintain their privileged position, while the *Pepfuma kbels* contesting this were what may be called anti-establishment. Interestingly, there are even certain variations in spoken Angami between the *kbels* of the two divisions. Every Angami village has, or had, *kbels* of the two respective divisions. This in any case was an essential requirement for the establishment of a village in the first place.

The feuds of the Angamis were between the *Kbels* of the two divisions or *Kelbus*. Kinship ties often carried these feuds from one village to another, and the more powerful *Kbels* of the larger villages often bullied their rivals of the smaller villages. The introduction of firearms, largely through Manipur, and military contact with the British which revolutionised Angami warfare intensified *Kbel* conflicts. The result was that Captain Butler (1869-75) received innumerable petitions from these villages

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<sup>18</sup> J. H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed London 1968, 333; Cf. Visier Sanyu, *A History of Nagas and Nagaland Dynamics of Oral Tradition in Village Formation*, New Delhi 1996.

promising revenue in return for protection. The Angamis do not have any institution or mechanism, unlike the *gindung* of the Dafla or Nishi, to end disputes; and the warring *khels* were so evenly placed that external support became vital for a decision.<sup>19</sup> While the *Pepfuma khels* brought in the Manipuris, the *Pezoma* turned to the British. It was over the pro-British *Pezoma khels* that Butler had some influence. Significantly, the fact that he was called "father" by the *Pezoma* "Apo" and never by the *Pepfuma* "Apvu" clearly indicates that his popularity was limited to that group of *khels* and did not extend to the *Pepfuma* group. In fact from the 1850s, the *Phetsuma khel* of Mezoma (though the village was *Pezoma*, this *khel* was linked to the Merhuma of Khonoma) and the Merhuma *khel* of Khonoma, all *Pepfuma*, openly opposed the British, particularly after the latter's support to some *Pezoma khels* of Mezoma.

These inter-khel rivalries and conflicts need not be unduly exaggerated. Village solidarity was maintained in the face of external threats. Khonoma's three *khels*, the *Pepfuma* Merhuma and Semoma and the *Pezoma* Themova, despite their past conflicts, combined (and so did their allies in other villages) against the British siege of their village in 1879. It was the failure of the British to understand this feature of Angami polity that involved them in Angami Naga politics and led to a chain of events that ultimately resulted in the annexation of these hills.

The role of leaders, traditional or those elected by popular will as in the case of Kiang Nongbah to lead the Jaintias in 1862, however, cannot be overlooked. The authority of the chief,

<sup>19</sup> Not unoften conflicts were between *Khels* of the same *kelbu*. Hardly had John Gregory settled in Samagating as the first Deputy Commissioner in 1866, than men from the Semoma clan of Khonoma waited upon him seeking arms against their Merhuma rivals. They told Gregory that Pelhoo, the Merhuma leader and his men with guns obtained from Manipur had killed four of their men while they in spite of their superiority in numbers were so far unable to kill a single Merhuma man.

however circumscribed in daily life was very real in war and conflict. It is in this context that leaders like the Nongkhlaw *Syiem* ought to be seen. Tirot Sing could not have been unaware of the enormity of the task given him of removing every vestige of British presence in the hills. His letters to the disaffected Ahom nobility, to the Khamtis and Singphos and even to the Bhutanese, perhaps to forge a regional alliance, shows a remarkable grasp of contemporary politics. If his determined and relentless struggle against vastly superior forces is seen in this perspective there can be no minimising his genius or gainsaying his patriotism.

Like the Khasi *Syiem* the Mizo chief or *Lal's* powers and function, to give another example from yet another state in the nineteenth century, were well defined by custom. He could not tax his people nor impose *corvee*, for the people's obligations to him were equally well defined. Indeed among the Mizos, from the chiefs down to the people, a social code, called *Tlaumngbaina*, governed their conduct, and this included fulfilling their respective duties and obligations. When the chiefs were made responsible in the early 1890s for revenue and labour neither of which they had any power to impose on their people, they took up arms to resist rather than alienate their people.<sup>20</sup> Both the Khasi and Mizo chiefs enjoyed considerable prestige among the people, a factor that the British took advantage of to evolve a cheap and loyal system of administration. Under prevailing notions of administration through indigenous institutions, the power and position of the Chief was strengthened, thereby changing the character of the chiefship or *syiemship*, and in the long run isolating him from his people. This system extended to the Garo *Nokmas* or heads of village based polities. Where the institution of chiefship

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<sup>20</sup> C. Lalhlengliana, *The Lushai Hills, Annexation, Resistance and Pacification 1886-1898*, New Delhi, 2007. The Mizo custom of expressing dissatisfaction against a chief was to migrate to another village, where the chief would be obliged to receive them. This was called *pem*.

was absent, as among the Angami Nagas, intermediaries such as *gaon buras* and *dobashis* were appointed and though only creatures of the British were later treated as the representatives of the people. This was so-called system of indirect rule.<sup>21</sup> In the north-eastern hills where revenue did not match the cost of administration, it was an attractive proposition to a government driven by and obsessed with their rupees, annas and pies. This policy would have its bearing on the hill people during the later phase of the nationalist movement.

In tribal societies, which are essentially egalitarian and with democratic instincts, it is the tribe and not the individual that enjoys primacy. (I may add, *en passant*, that the main criticism of some British officers against the missionaries was that by emphasising the centrality of individual salvation in their teachings they were destroying this aspect of tribal life.)<sup>22</sup> As a result, those who had played a leading role in the anti-colonial struggles have remained anonymous. The names of individuals one comes across are those who had been incarcerated or were hanged, and had consequently entered British records. Some of them have been picked up from the archives by early writers.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For Mizoram, See J Zorema, *Indirect Rule in Mizoram 1890 - 1954. (The Bureaucracy and the Chiefs)* New Delhi 200. This was what one of the first officers said in what was then the Lushai Hills: "I always held the chiefs of villages responsible for the behaviour of the people, and upheld their authority to the best of my ability. I have repeatedly told them that this policy will be constantly followed, and that, as long as they behave themselves as they should, their orders will not be interfered with, even though the orders may appear to us at times a little high handed, and not quite in accord with abstract ideas of justice ... In upholding the authority of the chiefs, I have, as a rule refused to take up affairs against their orders on petty cases as it only diminishes a man's authority". For Khasi and Jaintia hills, See D.R. Syiemlieh, *Meghalaya, op cit*, Chapter 111, pp. 5-76.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance, *Proceedings of the Conference of Hill Officers held in Government Home, Shillong, 1937.*

<sup>23</sup> This is true of both Tirot Sing's movement and that led by Kiang Nongbah in the Jaintia Hills. In case of the latter movement none of the thirty five leaders who received various terms of imprisonment, with one hanging in addition to Kiang Nongbah are any better known. For a list of these freedom fighters see Shobhan Lamare, *Resistance, op cit*, pp. 122-126.

Here oral sources should come to the aid of the historian; as has been done in a few instances. Thus Togan Sangma, who led one of the early struggles of the Garos against the British but finds no mention in the official records, has been partly rescued from total obscurity through the use of oral traditions.<sup>24</sup> Nor does one hear of Nilholi of the Phetsuma *Kbel* of Mezoma village who in 1849 held out against a massive British attack on his stronghold. Nor still the twenty years of relentless resistance led by the doubtless Pelhoo of the Merhuma *Kbel* of Khonoma village. Fortunately, most tribes have oral traditions which faithfully preserve events and exploits of their leaders. It is this rich indigenous source that historians need to tap to supplement the written word.

In dealing with the terms resistance and rebellion I had emphasised the need for clarity, if only because of their widespread and continuous use in regional histories. These terms, particularly rebellion, have always been used in colonial historiography to mean planned or unprovoked violence, especially when they began with killing of Europeans. David Scott thus called the deaths of the two officers at Nongkhlaw a "cold blooded and insensate murder."<sup>25</sup> Robert Pemberton, who was at Nongkhlaw two years later, wrote: "the vengeance of the savage is never satiated but in the blood of the opponent."<sup>26</sup> Describing what he thought had happened, he wrote:

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<sup>24</sup> Togan Sangma, unlike Sonaram Sangma and his agitations against forest laws, has still not attracted scholarly attention. He does not figure in the list of published works of the leading Garo scholar Milton Sangma, See Mignori Momin (ed) *Readings in the History and Culture of the Garos (Essays in honour of Milton S. Sangma)* New Delhi, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> In H.K. Barpujari, *Problem, op cit*, 47, Nirode K Baruah, *David Scott in North East India*, New Delhi 1970; Captain Adam White, *A Memoir of the Late David Scott*, Calcutta, 1831, who gives an account of the proceedings of the *Dorbar* in November 1826.

<sup>26</sup> Pemberton, *Report, op cit*, 232; also *The Bengal Obituary*, Calcutta 1841, which cites a contemporary account of what was said to have transpired on the fateful 4 April 1829.

“He (Bedingfield) was invited to attend a conference and disregarding the prophetic warnings of his companion Burton, who suspected treachery, he entered the assembly unarmed and was barbarously slaughtered.”

What Pemberton has not said is that Tirot Sing and the *Dorbar* had tried in vain to convey their protest for no less than three days prior to that incident. Nor does he refer to Bedingfield's arrogant behaviour towards the *Syiem*, demanding to know why he had been summoned, questioning his authority to hold a *Dorbar*, and even asking him: “Rajah! What do you say to me”? (The conversation was in Assamese) This heightened the prevailing tension and provoked the violence.

A close examination of the major incidents in the nineteenth century will show that dissent and protest invariably preceded the call to arms. Resistance and rebellion therefore needs to be seen within the matrix of protest. In any case protest against colonial rule, or some aspect of it such as some unacceptable demand or order, was not always expressed in militant terms. How else can Sonaram Sangma's non-violent ten year long agitation against the forest laws in the Garo hills be explained.<sup>27</sup> Equally, the *Seng Khasi* movement can be interpreted as protest against Christian missionaries whose work was affecting traditional Khasi society. Protest would therefore seem more relevant in describing the response of the tribal people to the imposition of colonial rule.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Milton S Sangma, "Sonaram Sangma - A Study of his life and works as a Garo Nationalist", *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Agartala Session, 1985, also by the same writer, entry in *Dictionary of National Biography*, iv, Calcutta 1974; A.C. Sinha, "Sonaram Sangma's struggle for Restoration of Forest Rights and Redressal of Grievances of the Garos", in Mignonette Momin (ed) *Readings*, *op cit* 195 -211.

<sup>28</sup> Rotberg and Mazrui (eds) *Protest, op cit*. I can do no better than to cite the four categories of protest proposed in this study of the African movements: Protest of conservation; of restoration, corrective censure and of transformation. Protests of conservation were those acts or movements which were aroused by a sense of impending peril to a system of values dear to the participants. The reaction

After pacification the hill people were left to their own devices. The chiefs and such village authorities as were imposed over them were made the main props of British rule. A series of administrative measures starting from the second half of the nineteenth century segregated the hills and a long and continuous contact between the hills and the plains people came to an end.<sup>29</sup> The British hill district officer about whom Alexander Mackenzie wrote admiringly in the columns of the *Pioneer*, "Untrammelled by the formalities of regulation and made answerable for their actions only to God and Government" lorded over their charge, writing inconsequential annual reports or pretentious monographs on tribal life and customs. Political developments and the gradual move towards self-governing institutions in India after the First World War were not allowed to break their isolation. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills together with the other hill districts and the frontier tracts were declared "Backward Tracts" in January 1921 under Section 52 (A) of the Government of India Act, 1919. Placed outside the purview of dyarchy, the hill districts remained the sole preserve of the

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was defensive action, to conserve the system of values. Protest of restoration on the other hand sought to restore a past which had been disrupted or destroyed. In corrective censure only a particular modification of the system was involved. What happened in North-East India in the nineteenth century could fit into any of the four categories. There would be overlaps: for instance, corrective censure - the question of income-tax in the Jaintia hills - could turn into restoration of the old order. Protest of transformation, in the sense of the political order, is more relevant to developments from the third decade onwards. These protests are thus described: "Protests of transformation are a manifestation of a profound disaffection with an existing system of values, or system of rewards and penalties. The great impetus behind protests of transformation is a commitment to radical change. If protests of conservation and restoration are oriented towards the past and its preservation or revival; protests of transformation are oriented towards the future and its reformation".

<sup>29</sup> For example, the Inner Line Regulations of 1873. These Regulations as Professor H.K. Barpujari asserts, *Problem of the Hill Tribes, op cit*, iii, Gauhati 1999, Chap I., may not have been framed to divide the hill and the plains people, but the retention of the Inner Line in 1881 when the Naga Hills district was reconstituted completely changed its purpose and character.

provincial Governor (Assam became a governor's province under the Act) and his handpicked officers.

In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills a small middle class that had emerged at once protested against political segregation.<sup>30</sup> Their dissent was expressed in a form that was perhaps characteristic of the class. In December 1924, at the sub-divisional headquarters of Jowai, the leading citizens pleaded before the touring Governor Sir John Kerr to consider a separate constituency for the subdivision in the Assam Legislative Council. It was pointed out to him that these hills could not be called backward for the people were far advance of those in the plains in respect of literacy, and especially in female education. Further, the Jaintias had a heritage of democratic institutions, which made them fitter than most to exercise the franchise.<sup>31</sup> Such demands gathered momentum after the Statutory Commission was announced. In 1928 petitions were submitted to the Governor for the creation of two constituencies for the district, and in November when Sir Lawrie Hammond visited Jowai he was, like Kerr before him, presented an address in which the earlier proposals were reiterated.<sup>32</sup> In Shillong, the Khasi National Darbar dominated by a new emerging leadership endorsed the views of the Jaintias. Refusal of representation would lead to backwardness, it was argued, and inclusion a step towards progress.

These demands and the upsurge of the non-cooperation movement in Assam led to a renewed and more vigorous attempt at isolating the hill districts from political developments

<sup>30</sup> In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills political consciousness developed rather early. The Jaintia Darbar is said to have come into existence in the early part of the century, but it was the Khasi National Darbar, established in 1923, that was in direct response to Dyarchy.

<sup>31</sup> *Assam Secretarial Records* (Guwahati) Political B proceedings, December 1936. Nos 1138-1189. Note on the views of Government and the Jowai people on a constituency for Jowai: J.A. Dawson, 15 September 1932

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



in India. Colonial historiography began to take a dramatic change, as interest shifted from the plains people to the hill tribes. Once described as primitive and barbarous, and even savage, against whose depredations on the plains elaborate schemes of frontier defence were devised, they now suddenly become the object of paternal concern, to be protected against the seditious plainsmen. One Chief Secretary to Government now argued that "it is a matter for the most serious consideration whether the British Government, which found the tribes independent, can leave them dependent." These ideas had crystallised into perverse administrative or political schemes. The most notorious, and one that had a long lease of life, was that submitted to the Simon Commission in 1928, by the Superintendent of the Lushai hills, Neville Edward Parry. Assam's hill districts he argued should be separated and placed under a Commissioner, or "better still" a North-Eastern Frontier province be created consisting of these districts and the contiguous hill areas with headquarters at Kohima.<sup>33</sup>

Racial differences between the Assamese or Indians on the one hand and the hill people on the other received a renewed emphasis and fanciful theories about the latter's origin and migration, gained currency. The Assam Government's own troubled past relations with the hill people were forgotten and gross distortions were passed off as historical facts. This travesty can be seen in Assam's memorandum to the Commission in July 1931:

<sup>33</sup> *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission*. Note by N E Parry, 3 March 1928. "Either of these two alternatives", said Parry, "would be better than condemning the hills and the plains to an unnatural union in which the hill districts would merely act as a drag in the progress of the plains districts and the latter would exercise a detrimental influence on the development of the hills. The second alternative would in many ways be far better as it would group together a large number of tribes with more or less common origin and would ensure uniformity of administration of the hill tribes on the North East Frontier."

“It is a matter of history that some of the most serious outbreaks have been precipitated by the actions of plainmen in the employ of Government, e.g. the murders of Bedingfield and Burton in 1829 ... The Jowai uprising of 1862, the murder of Williamson and Gregorson in 1911... and the Kuki rebellion of 1917.”<sup>34</sup>

“It would be difficult, and might be dangerous, to entrust to the Legislative Council the final administrative control of the hill districts and frontier areas”, the document went on to say. The Government of Assam therefore recommended:

“Certain districts must in their own interest and those of the province be definitely excluded from the control of a popularly elected Assembly in whose deliberations they cannot for generations to come take any part and on whose decisions they can exercise no influence.”<sup>35</sup>

When these views of the Assam Government became public and provincial autonomy was much in the air protests in the Khasi and Jaintia hills increased. In the middle of June 1932 the President of the Jaintia Darbar, the Reverend Lowell Gathphoh, led a delegation to the Governor, Sir Michael Keane, to place before him the actual state of feeling of the Jaintias on the subject. The Governor thus recorded the meeting:

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<sup>34</sup> *Assam Secretarial Records* (Guwahati), Governor's Secretariat, Political B Proceedings, March 1937: Nos 714 - 748, W. A. Cosgrave to Secretary Reforms, Government of India, 29 July 1931. The Khasi and Jaintia situation has already been referred to, of the others it needs to be said that Williamson's arrogance in treating with the Abor (or Adi) headmen or *gams* and others was largely the reason for his and Dr. Gregorson's murder; while the Kuki rebellion was provoked by the recruitment of a labour force for service in France during the First War. In none of these cases any men from the plains were directly or indirectly involved or responsible.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix A, “Description and History of the Backward Tracts.”

“Mr. Gatphoh appears to be an intelligent man. He was entirely confident that the great majority of the Jaintia people were in favour of coming under the new Constitution. I fear he has somewhat exaggerated ideas of the benefits derivable from Parliamentary Government. His theory is that the hill people have always been extremely democratic and so democratic rule rather than the rule of a single man is suitable for them. He went to the extent of saying that rather than be out of the reformed Constitution they would be prepared to pay the same revenue demands for land paid in the plains.”<sup>36</sup>

Shillong's James Joy Mohon Nichols-Roy a member of the Assam Legislative Council since the first election in 1923 and Secretary of the Khasi National Darbar, also met the Governor and assured him that “there could be no question whatever that the majority of the people desired to come in.”<sup>37</sup>

British officials saw these demands as those of the educated classes who wanted “a place in the sun.” And with the provincial capital located at Shillong, in their very midst as it were, the Government could ill-afford to suppress nationalist feelings of the people as blatantly as in the more remote hill districts. The Garo Hills was one such latter area. Here the arguments put forward by the Deputy Commissioner, William Shaw, is of interest as showing the levels to which the officialdom could descend to have their way. Shaw, a former non-commissioned officer who made it to the provincial civil services, listed twenty-two reasons why this district should be excluded from

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, Note by Sir Michael Keane, 27 September 1932. Keane, however, recorded his views that “I am inclined to believe Mr. Gatphoh when he says that the anti-reform party is rather a somewhat small minority.” The reference to the anti-reform party was to an agitation led by Jones Passah, a retired sub-inspector of schools

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Note, Sir Michael Keane, 1 November 1932.

ministerial control.<sup>38</sup> The first six were that the Garos were entirely "aboriginals", except for about two percent who were mostly "stomach Christians" hoping to get positions and other advantages; that the Garos were inimical towards all plains people, and like all hill men were very conservative regarding tribal customs and laws; that they were very nervous that constitutional reforms would mean control by the few educated Christians who would only look to their own interests; that the Garos had nothing in common with the people of Assam or the Surma Valley whom they used to raid only seventy five years ago, the memories of which had not yet faded; unlike the Hindus and the Muslims, they eat cows and pigs and have no religious ties, being animists "no pardah system", "No Tabu" (sic) on widow remarriage, no caste prejudices; and the Hindus and Muslims look upon them as "little better than animals," and so on.

Shaw's main contention was the now familiar argument that the new Assam Legislative would be dominated by the plains people who would exploit the Garos. The last three of his twenty-two reasons which give more details of his ideas and were intended to tilt official opinion in favour of exclusion, bears quoting in full:

"Almost all the Garos have not the slightest idea what the reforms mean and have looked up to the Government (Saheb) to support them. There are a few which can be counted on one's finger who having passed B.A. and lived among babus think they know all about Reforms but are actually thinking of themselves as Council Members than the advantages or otherwise to the Garos if given 'Partial Reforms'. These are Christians and the Garos who are not Christians have no faith in them. Even the Christians are doubtful. It is admitted that they have no

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, W. Shaw Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 1 August 1935.

leaders who truly would have the whole of the Garos primarily in their minds whilst those who think they are leaders do not know what they are talking about. Such men would be valueless in any Council even supposing the Garos were considered for 'partial exclusion'. The non-Christians do not want anything to do with Council of Babus. This is their view. Many of the sensible Christians are against it too. Only the persons who have a hope of getting into Council want 'Partial Reform' and I am not prepared to support such persons. Shaw had come to the conclusion that the Garo Hills should be an Excluded Area, and so ended his note saying that the Garos were "not fit (even) for Partial Reforms at present and very likely for some time to come."

In the event the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District along with the Mikir and Garo Hills became a Partially Excluded Area under the Government of India Act, 1935; the fate of the last district being settled by its geographical position than any other argument.<sup>39</sup> The Naga and Lushai Hills districts, the Balipara and Sadiya Frontier Tracts and the North Cachar Hill subdivision of Cachar district were Excluded. In both the Partially Excluded and the fully Excluded Areas the authority of the Governor remained unchanged. The Excluded Areas remained outside ministerial control; and even the Premier could not enter them without a permit from district officers. It had all too often been argued by British officers in Assam

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, C. S. Mullan to Joint Secretary, reforms, 9 October 1935. The issue was settled by acting Governor Abraham James Laine, who unlike his fellow ICS officers had taken a realistic view of the problem. The Government of India was reminded that the "Garo Hills and the Mikir Hills are not frontier districts or districts in which armed rebellion or acute internal dissensions are to be feared. They are situated in the heart of the province and they must evolve on lines similar to the rest of the province. Change must come and all that can be provided is that such change comes gradually and in accordance with the capacity of the local tribes to adapt themselves to it." See also Imdad Hussain, "Geography behind History: The Garo Hills' Colonial Legacy", in Momin, *Readings, op cit*, 136 - 158.

that Exclusion was in accordance with the wishes of the tribal peoples. The Memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission by the Naga Club in 1928 was cited as the *locus classicus* of the problem of the Naga as to their future. The oft quoted passage in that document so ran: "you (the British) are the only people who have ever conquered us and when you go we should be as we were." In early 1931 the Commissioner of the Hill Districts reported that *gaon burhas* of two Angami villages had told him that the "Angami was satisfied with the present regime, but did not wish and would not consent to be governed by an administration directed by the people of the plains." These views were not tutored, the Commissioner asserted, much in the same way that the Naga Club Memorandum was said to have been the spontaneous reaction of the Nagas to the reform scheme.<sup>40</sup>

Yet there is evidence to suggest that the Nagas were only selectively if at all consulted: not all villages, at least not the more important villages, were given an opportunity to be heard. When the details of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas became public there was a protest in the Naga Hills against exclusion. On 8 August 1933, one Hisale, an employee of the Deputy Commissioner's Office in Kohima and significantly one of the signatories to the 1928 Memorandum, and forty nine others petitioned the Governor: "(to) allow them to have seats on the Assam Council which is constituted and empowered by the British Government when Your Excellency's humble petitioners find necessity to enter on the Council. That the population of the Naga Hills is 178,846 and we can easily find able men for our representatives in the said Assam Council."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Assam Secretarial Records*, Political B Proceedings, December 1936: Nos 1138-1189, The Commissioner adds that the Nagas told him that "the plainsmen ... will not drink with the Angamis or treat them with respect. Consequently, there was mutual dislike and contempt. They therefore demanded independence if and when the white people go, and believed they could maintain it."

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*,

"The agitation for inclusion has been carried on entirely by the educated detribalised western Angamis who hope to get the power in their own hands," said James Philip Mills, the Deputy Commissioner. He immediately induced the head *dobashi* of the sub-divisional office at Mokokchung to submit another petition stating that the Nagas wanted no representation in the Assam Legislature.<sup>42</sup> In the Lushai Hills the Superintendent, Major Anthony McCall took far stronger measures to suppress popular feelings. The Mizos, among whom literacy was as high as among the Khasi-Jaintias, saw no reason why they should be in the Excluded category. Like the Nagas they too petitioned the Governor:

"It is better for them to be connected well with the Assam Council where they can feel the spirit of the country. They cannot forever remain secluded from the people of the other districts of Assam."<sup>43</sup>

McCall dismissed the petition saying that it "may not be understood by the petitioners that their interests might be effected in the struggle of the majority." Two weeks later another petition was submitted which was followed by the submission of fifty three sheets of paper containing the names and signatures of three thousand eight hundred and eighty two persons. All of them were, however forced to withdraw their names from the petition at a public meeting that McCall held on 26 April 1934.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Mills said he had just returned from a tour of the Sema area where the Semas told him that they stood by what they wrote to the Simon Commission and that they "greatly resent any attempt by the western Angamis to obtain power over them and even hinted at what action they would be prepared to take if the worse came to the worst. They say with emphasis that they will be administered by the English or no one. It is to be remembered that Semas, Lhotas, Aos, Changs and Rengmas volunteered in their hundreds for France, whilst the Angamis flatly refused to send any except a few men for clerical posts."

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, The petition asked for two representatives to the Assam Legislative from the Lushai Hills District.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, McCall to Private Secretary to Governor. After the meeting McCall

Neville Parry's proposition of a separate North East Frontier province did not end with the Government of India Act 1935, but was carried far and wide by Sir Robert Reid, Assam's Governor from 1937 to 1942. Reid, largely tutored by Hutton and Mills, became a convert to their ideas and a distinguished purveyor of Parry's scheme. He first raised it in May 1938, and in November 1941 wrote a long note proposing the amalgamation of Assam's Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal areas with the contiguous hill areas of Burma to form a Chief Commissionership directly under Whitehall. The Note did the rounds in London; even the Secretary of State Leo Amery was carried away by it: "supposing Pakistan does come off, there will be possibly two Muslim areas, the whole of the States, Hindu British India," he remarked on seeing the Note, "and finally at least an important primitive tribal area such as that which Reid has interestingly outlined ..." He passed it on to Reginald Coupland saying that it would "do no harm, I think, if the broad idea suggested by Reid were publicly ventilated if you feel it attractive." The Professor found it attractive and incorporated it into the third volume of his *Indian Constitutional Problem*, and came to be called, after him the Coupland Plan or Crown Colony Scheme.<sup>45</sup>

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informed the Governor that "I am told on all sides that the situation had been handled in a popular manner and that the public themselves had condemned whole-heartedly the whole affair and it is anticipated that the agitations have lost all hold they ever had by the poor showing they made when brought before the public in a public meeting. I trust this will end all such unauthorized activities and that this note will suffice to declare the value of the recent representations from the district."

<sup>45</sup> Details of Reid's plan, Imdad Hussain, "Resistance, Pacification and Exclusion: The Hill People and the Nationalist Upsurge" in A.C. Bhuyan (ed) *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, Guwahati, 2000, 271-294; also by the same writer, *From Residency to Raj Bhavan: A History of the Shillong Government House*, New Delhi 2005, pp. 110-118. For Burma's response to the Crown Colony scheme, D.R. Syiemlieh, "Burma: Flirting with Reid's Plan" in Milton Sangma (ed) *Essays on North East India*, New Delhi, 1994, 225-241.



Back in England after demitting his gubernatorial office Reid wrote of Assam's hill people in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* that: "They are not Indians in any sense of the word, neither in origin, nor in language, nor in appearance, nor in habits, nor in outlook and it is by historical accident that they have been tacked to an Indian province." Reid in turn influenced other hill officers, Anthony McCall of the Lushai Hills being his most ardent follower.<sup>46</sup> Through these officers Reid's ideas spread to even remote areas. McCall's understudy, Ian Bowman, the Additional Superintendent, reported in early 1945 after a tour of the remote Lakher region in south Lushai Hills that vague ideas about a Crown Colony were going around and that "the idea is very popular." The Tangkhul Nagas and Kukis of the Manipur hills even claimed "an independent Naga Hill directly under British rule." What should be of interest is that the words of their representation should be so strikingly similar to Reid's journal article:

"We think it is just by a historical accident that we the Nagas and Kukis have been tacked to a province of India. From every point of view, either in culture or habits or religion or any other outlook, we have nothing in common with the people who call themselves Indians. Neither do we have any inborn love with each other. We are akin to all hill tribes bordering the plains of Assam and Burma ... It would therefore, be a great advantage

<sup>46</sup> See McCall's *Lushai Chrysalis*, London 1949, in which he says; "Lushai is bound rather to the Mongolian than to the Aryan races, and this begs the whole question as to which it would be better for Lushai to seek shelter under the Colonial or Dominion Officers, while still remaining within the sphere of Mongolian influences by a closer association with the hills of Burma, the Shan states, the Karens and others with whom the Lushai would find so much in common? The alternative is for Lushai to be handed over to the Aryan influences of India and Burma, by a scrap of paper, in which they might possibly have no hand, and for which they might have no real understanding." Surprisingly, neither Reid nor McCall speak of the Kachins of Burma, with whom the Singphos of Assam, a Tasen branch, are related.

to the hill tribes if, some sort of administrative unit be formed up, comprising all the hill areas of Assam and taking the similar areas of Burma.”

Nineteenth and twentieth century colonial writings on north-eastern India have glossed over the widespread resistance of the hill people to the extension of British control over the territories. From 1921 onwards, when Assam was drawn into the Congress agitational programme this feature of the history of the hill areas suffered gross distortions. The segregation of the hills, a process which began in the second half of the nineteenth century, received a further impetus during these years thus isolating the hill people from the growing momentum of the freedom movement in the plain districts. The relations between them and the plains people were portrayed not as one of interdependence that characterised pre-colonial Assam, but of hostility and mutual dislike. The ethnic and cultural differences between the two came to be magnified. And playing upon the tribal people's natural love for freedom, attempts were made, not entirely without success, to spread these ideas in the hill districts. Sir Andrew Clow's assertion at the beginning of his term as Governor of Assam (his views changed by the time he demitted office in 1947) that the Mahatma had no influence among the hill people of the province should come as no surprise. Organised political activities were disallowed and nationalist feelings were brazenly suppressed. If apparently the hill people were not involved in any significant numbers in India's struggle for freedom the fact remains that they were prevented from doing so.

There is, therefore, a need to take a fresh and closer look at the hill areas of the old colonial province of Assam. In doing this it will be necessary to go beyond colonial sources. Oral traditions, which are particularly rich among the hill people, for instance, could with a properly developed methodology provide insights into their thinking and actions, of why and

how they refused to accept the way their lives were sought to be ordered by others. Nor can the importance of detailed studies on tribes or sub-tribes any longer be ignored: the intensity and spread of tribal response to imperialism and colonialism, the leadership of their struggles and ultimate results of their efforts were determined by the structure of the tribal society itself no less than its political and economic organisation. It is only then that the story of the freedom fighters of Meghalaya, or of the North East, can be meaningfully integrated with the history of the country's freedom struggle.