

Chapter: III

The Strategy of Annihilation in the North-East Frontier: Methods of Warfare in the Hills

British strategy in the North-East Frontier of India under the East India Company was basically defensive. As discussed in the previous chapter, the strategies of exhaustion, subversion and intimidation were adopted and severe warfare was avoided to the possible extent. After the British Crown took over the administration of India in 1858, there was a gradual change in the policy. By that time, trade in the region increased and other avenues like tea plantation proved to be profitable for the British. In fact, the British colonial economy in India became so dependent on the growing tea plantation industry of Assam that they could go to any length to protect it.¹ By the end of the nineteenth century, more than 6 *lakhs* acres of land in the Brahmaputra Valley itself was under tea cultivation.² The average value of the tea produced in these tea estates was not less than INR 10 million per annum.³ Shortly after the Crown took over the charge of India, the authorities realized that regular revenue yielding areas of the North East were being ‘disturbed’ by the communities dwelling in the hills. The hill people considered it their right to get some of their basic needs from the plains. There was not much conflict among the plain dwellers and the hill people in the pre-colonial era. But the transformation of the plains into colonial territory changed the scenario. Constant military and police presence in the borderlands of the hills made it difficult for

¹ Kolsky, Elizabeth *Colonial Justice in British India*, New Delhi, 2010, p. 162.

² Goswami, Priyam *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration*, Guwahati, 1999, p. 236.

³ Kolsky, Elizabeth, 2010, *op. cit.*, no. 1 p. 162.

the hill people to visit the plains and it turned them aggressive.⁴ Consequently the ‘raids’ increased and even some of the officers feared that the British would be driven out of the region if the ‘depredations’ of the hill communities continued.⁵ These ‘depredations’ were actually the mode of resistance to the colonial rule by the hill communities and ultimately the British authorities were compelled to take offensive measures in the North East. The colonial authority realized that in order to dominate the hill communities, ‘reliance cannot be placed on one particular course of policy, but there must be a ready adaptation of expedients to suit ever-changing circumstances.’⁶ This offensive measure is categorized as the strategy of annihilation. Hans Delbrück defined the strategy of annihilation as a strategy “which sets out to attack the armed forces and destroy them and to impose the will of the conqueror on the conquered.”⁷ The strategy of annihilation is generally pursued in order to gain any political objective that an enemy has within his power. This strategy normally requires superiority over local resources and conditions. However, surprise can be used to psychologically demoralize the enemy and to destroy the defence of the enemy.⁸ In the North East Frontier of India, the British developed the strategy of annihilation as a reaction to the repeated outrages by the hill communities and the consequent insecurity of the entire Frontier. Another factor that prompted the British to be aggressive was their victory in the Second and Third Anglo-Burma Wars of 1852-53 and 1885 respectively. It was a boosting factor for the British authorities. The Third Anglo-Burmese War resulted in the annexation of Upper Burma and it encouraged the British government in India to adopt

⁴ Guite, Jangkhomang *Against State Against History*, New Delhi, 2019, p. 207.

⁵ Barpujari, H. K. (ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol: IV*, Guwahati, 2007, p. 154.

⁶ NAI, Home Department, July, 1866, Nos. 15-16.

⁷ Delbrück, Hans (translated by: Walter J., Jr), *The Dawn of Modern Warfare, Vol. IV in History of the Art of War*, Renfroe, Lincoln, 1990, p. 109.

⁸ Bowdish, Randall G. *Military Strategy: Theory and Concepts*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nebraska, 2013, p. 212.

offensive strategy against the communities in the Assam-Burma border territories.⁹ The earlier motive of using these hill areas as buffer zone now seemed to be invalid, as the frontier was secured from Burmese attack.

Warfare in hills materially differed from that of the plain territories. Instead of large armies of plain areas, the hill people organized their fighting men in small groups and did not follow the principles of traditional warfare. The hill communities of the North East Frontier had a long history of inter and intra ‘tribal’ warfare. A warrior tradition was prevalent among the hill communities and it was shaped by the geographical features of their homeland and their population.¹⁰ As they were accustomed with warfare, they often took to the arms to demonstrate their disapproval of the colonial rule. The Khasis, for example continued their armed resistance to the British rule since the last decade of the eighteenth century for four decades.¹¹ The fighting tactic of the hill communities drew the attention of the British army officers and they categorized it as ‘jungle warfare’, giving it a distinctive identity.¹² This ‘jungle warfare’ was similar to guerilla warfare which is defined by Robert Brown Asprey as a ‘type of warfare fought by irregulars in fast-moving, small-scale actions against orthodox military and police forces and, on occasion, against rival insurgent forces, either independently or in conjunction with a larger political-military strategy.’¹³ The hill communities caught the British off guard during the nights and ambushed the camps, headquarters and any other government institutions. Surprise was the key

⁹ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op. cit.*, no. 5, p. 233.

¹⁰ Deka, Meeta ‘From holes under the rocks: Khasi Resistance to British Colonialism, 1770 to the 1830s’ in *GUINEIS Journal*, Vol. VI, 2019, p. 42.

¹¹ White, Adam *A Memoir of The Late David Scott*, Guwahati, 1988, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 23.

¹³ Asprey, Robert. *Brown Guerrilla Warfare Military Tactics*, Encyclopaedia Britannica. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/guerrilla-warfare>, Accessed: 21/10/2020 07.30 UTC.

element in their warfare.¹⁴ They often targeted the supply line of British expeditionary troops to attack in order to weaken them. Major Adam White, Political Agent to the Government in Upper Assam and the Commander of the Assam Light Infantry noticed the hill warriors planned the ambushes almost accurately and hid in long grass or behind rocks and sprung upon the British soldiers to cut them down before they (the British soldiers) had time to fire.¹⁵ They shot arrows from different directions simultaneously in order to counter the traditional European tactics of volley-fire. It is to be noted that some hill communities, like the Khasis and the Abors poisoned their arrows. Their arrows were made of bamboos and there were two types of arrows, the barbed-headed and the plain-headed. Arrow-heads were generally made of locally forged iron or steel. These arrows covered a distance of 150 to 180 yards.¹⁶

On the other hand, the British Army in India was an organized military force. The Military Revolution in Europe influenced the British Army to a great extent. The Military Revolution refers to a radical change in military strategy and tactics in the European way of war caused by introduction of portable firearms which had larger historical consequences. Michael Roberts (1967) brought this concept into the focus of academicians.¹⁷ The radical change in military strategy and tactics resulting from the advent of handy firearms in Sweden in the 17th century led to major changes in military structure. The Dutch army under Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange was the first European troop to introduce the linear formation of the infantry. Some scholars such as Clifford Rogers state the Military Revolution was characterized by long periods of

¹⁴ Pemberton, R.B. *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, Guwahati, 1991, p. 121.

¹⁵ White, Adam 1988, *op. cit.*, no. 11, pp. 19-20.

¹⁶ Gurdon P.R.T. *The Khasis*, 1914, pp. 23-25.

¹⁷ Roberts, Michael *Essays in Swedish History*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967, p. 79, URL: <https://books.google.com>books>, Accessed: 18/08/2015 17.00 UTC .

virtual standstill and episodes of rapid advance of new forms¹⁸. European imperialism can be credited to the Military Revolution. The Military Revolution “exercised a profound influence upon the future course of European history and it was like a great divide separating medieval society from the modern world.”¹⁹ By the eighteenth century, Europe gained control over the six continents. It was possible due to the revolution in European military.

Great Britain took the lead in overseas expansion by the eighteenth century and her naval strength played a crucial role in her expansion. There was a ‘revolution’ in the British navy, in 1615, Britain had twenty three Royal Navy ships and thirty-six hire merchant vessels, manned by 4,429 men. By the end of the 18th century, the Royal Navy maintained one thousand warships manned by over 130,000 men. In less than three hundred years, the British were able to increase their naval power forty fourfold and increase their manpower by nearly thirty fold.²⁰ Great Britain’s naval rivalry with Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries contributed to her naval supremacy. Private enterprises took the lead in creating a strong navy. However, the British Government took interest in the navy as it could contribute to the treasury.

But when it came to expansion in land, the British army was also transformed, inspired by the Swedish army. In India, the British Army had a decisive edge against their Indian opponents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was because they could adapt to the changes brought in the European armed forces in the preceding centuries. Educated and technically skilled officers were employed to train the soldiers.

¹⁸ Rogers, Clifford J. *The Military Revolution Debate in Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe*, San Francisco, 1995, p. 39.

¹⁹ Roberts, Michael *Essays in Swedish History*, 1967, p. i, URL: <https://books.google.com>books>, Accessed: 18-08-2015 17.00 UTC.

²⁰ Sok, Daniel *An Assessment of the Military Revolution*, URL: <https://history.emory.edu>, Accessed: 23-08-2015 13.30 UTC.

However, the most influential aspect was the introduction of fire-arms. Flint lock muskets and socket bayonets replaced old pikes. The army became more infantry dependent. Infantries were divided into effective and tactical units like battalions, regiments and brigades²¹. The English fought as a unit; they marched in columns and formed up in line formation in front of the enemy. The method of firing was called volley fire.²² In a standard line formation, soldiers fired their guns one after the other. So, if the line had fifty men, then fifty shots would be fired within a minute, sometimes in less than a minute. In the row formation, troops were placed in two rows, with the front row kneeling. All soldiers would fire at the same time. When the opponent was greater in number, the British used another method by placing four rows of soldiers. After the first two rows had fired their guns, they would fall back and two fresh rows would take the front line, ensuring continuous fire at the opponent.²³ If the enemy approached the line, the soldiers were instructed to fix bayonets and hold the advancing enemy troops. In battles, the infantry was supported by the field artillery which played a crucial role in field warfare. During the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, the British soldiers were armed with the Short-land Pattern .75 caliber flintlock musket and the India pattern of the same musket. This weapon, popularly known as the Brown Bess was a high-performance gun, which was easier to load; in fact, a well trained soldier could fire four rounds within a minute²⁴. Thus, increased firepower of a combined infantry-artillery force was an advantage to the British troops in close quarter combats. The British army for a long time did not have proper cavalry units in India. This was in stark contrast to traditional Indian armies,

²¹ Sok, Daniel, *op.cit*, no. 20, p. 33.

²² www.royalmunsterfusiliers.org. Accessed: 09-09-2015 , 09:30 UTC.

²³ Wickremesekera, Channa *Best Black Troops in the World*, New Delhi, 2002, p. 52.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 52.

which relied totally on cavalry and gave minimum importance to infantry. The soldiers of the British army were better trained, armed and led. The troops were instilled with the grit that British troops throughout the world had displayed. In any situation, a British army would never fall apart and flee; they would hold their ground. Perhaps, this superior will to prevail made all the difference and helped the British to expand and secure territories of their interest in India.²⁵ The superstructure of the British rule in India was based on the military force.

After the Crown took over the administration, the Royal Commission (known as the Peel Commission after its Chairman Major General Jonathan Peel) recommended reformation of the army in India in 1859.²⁶ The Commission recommended an increase in the British troops and a reduction of Indians in the army. The Indians recruited were selected from different nationalities and castes. Each regiment was reorganized. The Commission further instructed to abolish all irregular troops and to create uniform regiments. Accordingly in May, 1861, the Assam and Sylhet local battalions were placed in the general roster of the Regular Bengal Infantry Regiments. The First and Second Assam Light Infantry became 42nd and 43rd Native Infantry respectively. The Sylhet Light Infantry was converted to the 44th Native Infantry. All infantry regiments comprised of 600 soldiers. These troops were formed according to the 'plum-pudding' system, i.e., recruiting men from different races, religions and provinces. However, no specific rule as to the proportion of each class was laid down.²⁷ For maintaining a uniform pattern, *Hindustani*, a language commonly prevalent on northern India, was used as the dialect of the regiments which had recruits from different parts of northern

²⁵ Roy, Kaushik (ed) *Warfare, State and Society in South Asia, 500 BCE-2005 CE*, 2010, p. 121.

²⁶ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op. cit*, no. 5, p. 209.

²⁷ Saxena, K.M.L. *The Military System of India, 1850-1900*, Delhi, 1974, pp. 89-90.

India and it was mandatory for the officers to pass an exam on the language.²⁸ Kaushik Roy (2000) argues that the British soldiers had a national sentiment and therefore their loyalty was beyond doubt. But the Indian recruits had no such sentiments and in order to ensure their loyalty, the government implemented the system of providing incentives which were not part of the salary. Moreover the soldiers were well fed and their logistical needs were fulfilled sufficiently.²⁹ These efforts of strengthening the army required expenditure. In 1887-88, an amount of £ 650,000 was spent on the army.³⁰ Like the Company period, local recruitment was encouraged in the North East. A Police Militia was formed including the Sivasagar, Lakhimpur and Nagaon Police Militia. In 1890, the name Police Militia was replaced with Military Police. The three military regiments mentioned above had to guard forty military outposts in the frontier regions with the aid of the Military Police. It was observed that the inhabitants of the hills in the North-East Frontier fought behind stockades and artillery had the capability of destroying the stockades. Colonel Simon Hannay after a battle against the Abors in 1859 noted that “A stubborn opposition to our advance, which the enemy’s knowledge of the ground...and his formidable stockade rendered easy. Of these latter several were defended to the last, while in three cases it was necessary to use howitzers to open a way for the assault.”³¹ This statement from a military officer proves that in order to draw the warriors of the hill communities out of their stockades, artillery must assist the infantry troops. However, the European artillery tactics proved ineffective in the mountainous terrains of the North-East Frontier. Some modifications were made in the

²⁸ NAI, *Military Handbook of General Information on India*, Division of the Chief of the Staff, Intelligence Branch, Government of India Press, Simla, 1908, p. 343.

²⁹ Roy, Kaushik, *The Colonial Indian Army: Recruitment And Command Mechanism 1859-1913*, Unpublished PhD thesis, JNU, 2000, p. 144.

³⁰ NAI, Report of Special Commission to Enquire into the Organization and Expenditure of the Army in India, 1888.

³¹ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op. cit*, no. 5, p. 209.

artillery equipments. Initially the 7 PDR Mountain gun was used by the artillery units of the army as it was suitable for firing at the stockades located on the top of the mountains. But it could not hit the target located at a far distance and its aim was not accurate. Later, in order to increase its range, a brass nozzle was screwed to the gun.³² However, emphasis was given to employ local artillery company. As the European artillerymen could not bear the climate of the Frontier region, gunners were generally recruited from the local communities.³³ In the battles against the hill communities, who were themselves devoid of artillery, the moral effect of artillery was very considerable, and this moral effect was much enhanced by the shooting capability of the mountain gun.³⁴

To get them accustomed with the environment, the troops were camped in the hills and jungles for indefinite times. They were instructed to fight with full vigor and not to let the enemy have any rest during the battles. The key tactics in hill warfare was to deploy the soldiers in small units. Emphasis was given to protect the *coolies*. For that purpose the *coolies* were divided into groups of ten and each group was protected by two riflemen in front and rear of the line. The soldiers were instructed to fix the bayonets of the rifles all the time and to use whistle signals whenever necessary.³⁵ During their battles with the hill communities, the British used stinkpots, the ‘forerunner to modern chemical weapons which poisoned its victims by giving off noxious fumes’.³⁶ David Scott recorded the use of stinkpots and detonators to fight against the

³² Younghusband, G.J. *Indian Frontier Warfare*, London, 1898, pp. 171-172.

³³ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op cit* no. 5, p. 210.

³⁴ Younghusband, G.J, 1898, *op. cit*, no. 32, p. 175.

³⁵ NAI, *Jungle Training for Assam Rifles*, Military Department, 1923, pp. 26-28.

³⁶ Adams, Valerie *Chemical Warfare, Chemical Disarmament: Beyond Gethsemane*, London, 1989, p. 26.

Khasis and mentioned that the stinkpots had tremendous impact in breaking the resilience of the Khasis.³⁷

The British authorities became more concerned with the protection of the planters of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys after 1858. By that time, tea plantation had extended beyond the settled areas and there were prospects of valuable minerals and forest products like timber and rubber in the foot hills. The demand for timber increased for making tea boxes, railway lines, bridges etc. Coal was mainly found in the south east frontier of Upper Assam, an area inhabited by many hill communities.³⁸ Likewise, rubber was mostly found in the forest outside the areas under direct administrative control of the British. These areas were frequently visited by the colonial officers with armed forces. The growing British presence in their areas led to clash between the British and the hill communities.³⁹ In the Brahmaputra Valley, there were two fronts from which troubles were reported. First, the Nagas were continuing their raids despite the conciliatory efforts of the British. In the southern boundary of the Sivasagar district, the lands brought under tea plantations were claimed by the Nagas. They considered the planters as trespassers and even some British officers ascertained their claims.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the eastern frontier was disturbed by the Abors. Moreover, the Lushais became unstoppable in their raids on the villages of Cachar and Manipur. After 1860, most of the areas of the North Eastern Frontier witnessed the application of the strategy of annihilation. We shall discuss British offensive warfare strategy in the hills during expeditions against the Lushai, Naga and Abor communities in the post 1858 period.

³⁷ White, Adam 1988, *op .cit*, no. 11, p. 41.

³⁸ Goswami, Priyam *The History of Assam from Yandabo to Partition, 1826-1947*, Guwahati, 2012, pp. 171-176.

³⁹ Bezbaruah, Ranju *The Pursuit of Colonial Interests in India's North-East*, Guwahati, 2007, p. ix.

⁴⁰ ASA, BGP, April, 1862, nos. 214-522.

Three military operations against these communities shall be analyzed as these operations proved to be the most aggressive and effective British expeditions in the Frontier during the period of our study. Some aspects of warfare like battle tactics, composition and organization of troops, use of arms and ammunitions are highlighted here.

3.1 Military Operation against the Lushais (1871-72):

The annexation of Cachar in 1834 brought the British dominion closer to the hills of the south. The southern hill tract in the Cachar-Burma frontier was inhabited by numerous communities and they were at daggers drawn with each other. They often found pushing each other towards the north. Since 1834, reports of raids by communities dwelling in the hills of the south had been pouring in regularly. The most notorious of these communities were the Lushais. In fact, since the eighteenth century, they drove off the Kukis from the hills to the plains of Cachar.⁴¹ In 1847, the Company authority was informed by the Colonel McCulloch, the Political Agent in Manipur about raids by the Lushais. He also reported that these Lushais were armed with guns and they were dressed like the Burmese.⁴² Since then, the Lushais continued to raid in British territories, which became a matter of concern for the British Government in India. From November, 1849, such raids increased in Cachar with more violence. A troop of the Sylhet Light Infantry under Frederick Lister was dispatched to control the Lushais in 1849. But Lister reported that a large force, comprising mostly of European soldiers was required to effectively operate in the hills. Moreover, he expressed that the dearth of

⁴¹ Gait, Edward *A History of Assam*, New Delhi, 2010, p. 369.

⁴² Barpujari. H.K. *Francis Jenkins Report on the North-East Frontier of India*, Guwahati, 1995, p. 135.

proper information on the Lushais was a factor of the ineffectiveness of the invasion.⁴³ The Government of the East India Company decided not to intervene in the hills of the southern frontier of Cachar.⁴⁴ After the British Crown took over the administration, Lushai raids were reported in British territories and European plantations in 1868. The Governor-General in Council sanctioned an expedition against the Lushais in order to protect lives and properties of the British subjects and European planters in February, 1869.⁴⁵ But the difficult terrain and continuous rainfall due to early monsoon, that year, compelled the troops to retreat without any result. From that time, the Government tried to collect vital information on battle tactics of the Lushais before an expedition was directed against them. In the meantime, a temporary defensive policy of reinforcing the frontier outposts and creating new outposts and stationing troops in the outposts to resist the raids was adopted.⁴⁶ Towards the end of 1870, J.W. Edgar, the then Deputy Commissioner of Cachar went into the Lushai territory in an attempt to make peace with them. However, his actual motive was to collect information on the location and geography of the Lushai villages. He tried to conciliate Sukpilal, the most powerful Lushai chief of that time. But his endeavor of making peace failed as an unprecedented raid of ferocious nature occurred in the Cachar border in January, 1871. Twenty five persons of a village near Hailakandi were killed and 35 persons were taken away as captives. A tea estate named Alexanderpur was completely devastated and another tea garden was destroyed to a great extent. The Frontier Police with the aid of a troop sent from Silchar tried to capture the attackers but they managed to retreat into the hills. These incidents provoked the local administration to lead an expedition against the

⁴³ ASA, BJP , 1850, 27 February, Nos. 36-37.

⁴⁴ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op.cit*, no. 5, p. 176.

⁴⁵ ASA, FP-A, 1869, February, Nos. 72-100.

⁴⁶ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op. cit*, no. 5, p. 181.

Lushais. William Grey, the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal proposed a large scale expedition. But the Government of India refused to sanction another expedition. At this point, the bureaucrats, the ‘steel frame’ of the British rule in India, put pressure on the Governor General to initiate an aggressive policy against the Lushais. But it was difficult to fight against the Lushais for certain reasons.

Out of all hill communities of the North-Eastern Frontier of India, the Lushais had a comparatively advanced system of warfare. They used the dense forests of the hills as cover and they had the advantage of moving easily in the hills. British troops found it difficult to climb and move through the hills which gave the Lushais much advantage. As demanded by the physiographic location of their inhabitation, the Lushais mostly fought in the guerilla method of warfare. They put much emphasis on the training of their warriors so that they could fight in every situation.⁴⁷ Traditionally the Lushais used *dao* (dagger/short sword), shield and bow & arrow as their weapons. Interestingly the First Anglo-Burmese War taught them the use of firearms and since then the Lushai chiefs were eager to collect gun and gun-powder.⁴⁸ Moreover during the War they learnt the art of trench warfare which was used in their battles against the British troops. The chiefs employed Burmese soldiers to train their warriors. It was observed that, the Lushais preferred attacking the enemy during night and used full force to destroy the enemy’s fighting capacity. They were considered to be the fastest army among the communities of the Frontier.⁴⁹ The formation of the attacking army of the Lushais was also very systematic. They put the soldiers with rifles in the front column and placed the archers in the second column. The army was followed by a troop

⁴⁷ Chattopadhyay, Suhash *The English and the Lushais (1844-1904)*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Gauhati University, 1970, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 7.

of *coolies* to carry the supplies and the loot. These attacks or raids were well-planned. The chiefs gave more emphasis on using firearms. If the raids failed, the Lushais placed poisoned bamboo spikes on the roads to prevent the enemy from chasing them.⁵⁰ Like the other hill communities, the Lushais also used the system of fortification. However they chose tactical locations to build the forts called *jowlbook*.⁵¹ The walls of the forts were arrow-proof and had small holes to fire guns and shoot arrows from inside the forts. In Lushai warfare, the *jowlbook* were so important that its fall signified the fall of the chiefs to whom the *jowlbook* belonged to.⁵² They used the tactic of camouflage to hide in the jungles when they were losing the battle. They would wear defensive armor that could help them in hiding in the jungles.

The civil and military officers, the European planters and the press were adamant in their demand of an expedition after the raids of 1871. The newly appointed Governor General Lord Mayo ultimately instructed the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Robert Napier, to send an expedition against the Lushais. Napier directed that the expedition should march with two columns, one from Chittagong and the other from Silchar. This expedition was the second most manned and armed expedition in the North East Frontier of India, the first one being the First Anglo Burmese War. The Silchar Column of the Expeditionary Force comprised of 500 soldiers each of the 22nd Native Punjab Infantry, 42nd Assam Light Infantry and a detachment of the 44th Sylhet Light Infantry. Moreover, 300 men of the Cachar Frontier Police, one Battery of the Eurasian Artillery Force and 2700 coolies were added in the Column. On the other hand, the Chittagong Column was raised with 500 soldiers each of the 27th Native

⁵⁰ Woodthorpe, R.G. *The Lushai Expedition*, London, 1878, p. 247.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 248.

⁵² ASA, BJP, May 27, 1849, No. 103.

Punjab Infantry, 2nd Gurkha Infantry, a detachment of the Chittagong Frontier Police, one Company of Sappers and Miners and one Mountain Battery. Similar numbers of coolies were attached with the Chittagong Column. Brigadier General G. Bouchier and Brigadier General C.H. Brownlow were the commanders of the Silchar and Chittagong columns respectively. The commanders as suggested by the local civil officers, appointed men from North India as *coolies* to carry the baggage and supplies. It was observed that the local *coolies* tend to abandon their position during panic situations as they were familiar with the topography of the hills they could find out routes to escape and for this reason, *coolies* from outside the region were employed in the expedition.⁵³ The previous Lushai expeditions failed mainly due to difficulties in communication. Therefore, these large numbers of *coolies* were employed to clear the road for the advance of the troops. They constructed bridges over the streams and bridle paths for the fast mobility of the columns. The British prepared the Expedition so minutely that they asked the king of Manipur to station more troops of Manipur in the Manipur-Lushai Hills frontier to prevent the Lushais from escaping to Manipur.⁵⁴ The Expedition against the Lushais in 1871-72 was the largest in scale among all the military expeditions against the hill communities in the North-East Frontier till that time. However the expeditionary force had the difficulty of communication which was eased to certain extent by the *coolies*. Moreover there was the possibility of ambushes by the Lushais hiding in the jungles. The Lushais used the topography of the hills to encounter against the invading troops frequently. Despite these difficulties the invading troops continued their march overcoming the barriers.

⁵³ ASA, BJP, March 1871. No. 236.

⁵⁴ Chattopadhyay, Suhash *The English and the Lushais (1844-1904)*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Gauhati University, 1970, p . 83.

General Bouchier led his Column to Tipaimukh and chose the area as his base. In December, 1871 the Silchar Column fought against a Lushai force under chief Poiboi. The battle continued up to 30th December and finally Poiboi surrendered in front of the General. In January 1872 the Column occupied a few Lushai villages and destroyed the fortress of Tingridong. General Bourcheir led the Silchar Column in its last offensive against the Lushais at Kungnung. The Lushais were defeated and lost nearly one hundred of their men at the battle field. After that several Lushai villages were destroyed by the troops. Being defeated at the hands of the Silchar Column in all the battles, the headmen of Lalbura and the chief of the eastern Lushais made peace with the British.⁵⁵

The Chittagong Column targeted the Lushai chiefs who were associated with the raid of Alexanderpur Tea Estate. General Brownlow selected Demagiri as the base of operation and from Demagiri the Column advanced towards the villages of Lengura and Vantura. The troops did not face any resistance and they destroyed the villages. However when they advanced further into the hills they found out that all the villages were surrounded by lines of timber stockade with bamboo spikes guarding the walls. Moreover block houses were constructed by the Lushais to seal the entrance of the villages. Despite these defensive measures the Lushais could not stop the invading British force from razing their villages to dust. The Lushais under their chief Lal Gnoora fought well against the British troops and the British force had to suffer a heavy casualty. After defeating the Lal Gnoora the invading force destroyed twenty Lushai

⁵⁵ Woodthorpe, R.G., 1878, *op. cit*, no. 50, p. 257.

villages. Ultimately, the Lushais surrendered the guns and the captives taken during the raid of 1871.⁵⁶

The Lushai Expedition of 1871-72 was not the final expedition against the Lushais. However this large scale invasion demonstrated the use of the strategy of annihilation by the British in the North-East Frontier. The Lushais were compelled to recognize the British as their superior authority. This Expedition was a deciding factor in the future relation between the British government in India and the Lushais. The Silchar Column crippled the military power of the eastern Lushais and made the Cachar Frontier safe from Lushai raids. Because of the military power of the British as demonstrated during the Expedition, Sukpilal, the most powerful Lushai chief of the western Lushai Hills became friendly with the British. The surveyors accompanying the two Columns were able to demarcate the Lushai territory and connected Cachar with Chittagong.⁵⁷ As per their recommendations the boundary between Cachar and the Lushai hills and the boundary between the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Lushai hills were determined. Moreover the eastern boundary of Hill Tripura was also fixed as recommended by the surveyors. Following the Expedition the government established a line of military outposts along the Cachar, Sylhet and Chittagong borders. The Lushais did not dare to disturb the tranquility of the frontier in the near future.

3.2 Military Operation against the Nagas (1879-80):

The Naga Hills had always been a source of trouble for the British authority since the 1820s. After the 1st Anglo-Burmese War, the East India Company government wanted to open up direct communication between Assam and Manipur. In 1832, a

⁵⁶ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op. cit*, no. 5, p. 181.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 182.

British troop under Captain Jenkins and R. B. Pemberton explored a route through the Naga Hills, connecting the two provinces. This was the first instance of British penetration in the Naga Hills and this surveyor troop had to face stubborn opposition from the Nagas, especially the Angami Nagas.⁵⁸ However, the Company did not want to engage with the Nagas at that point of time. The Angamis continuously invaded the villages of North Cachar. In 1836, about 70 persons from eight villages near Haflong were massacred by the Angamis. The Company authority entrusted Gambhir Singh, the king of Manipur with the responsibility of controlling the Angami's raid on Cachar. The Company followed a policy of conciliation towards the Nagas. But the Manipuri forces were unable to stop the Angami's raids and as Cachar was under the Company territory, the authorities decided to intervene into the matter.⁵⁹ In December, leading a small troop consisting of irregulars of the Cachar Levy, E.R. Grange, a civil officer of Nagaon, went into the Naga Hills. This was not exactly a military campaign and the objective of this expedition was to conciliate the Angamis.⁶⁰ During the Company regime, after 1839, the Company troops entered the Naga Hills for nine times.⁶¹ After 1858, the British changed their attitude and on the order of Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, an outpost was established at Samaguting in June, 1866. This outpost was guarded by 150 well armed policemen.⁶² The British gradually extended civil rule in the Naga Hills. The government hesitated to forcefully establish its administrative control over the Naga Hills. The policy was to introduce British administrative measures in a gradual way. Roads were constructed from the outpost at Samaguting to different places

⁵⁸ NAI, Military Report on Presidency & Assam District, Vol. III, Southern Frontier Tracts, GOI Press, Simla, 1930, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Barpujari, H.K. (ed) 2007, *op. cit*, no. 5, p. 147.

⁶⁰ Barpujari, S. K. *Anglo-Naga Relations (1835-1890)*, Unpublished thesis, Gauhati University, 1969, p. 58.

⁶¹ NAI, Military Report on Presidency & Assam District, Vol. III, Southern Frontier Tracts, GOI Press, Simla, 1930, pp. 3-7.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 7.

and schools and hospital facilities were opened up. Consequently, the Naga Hills District was formed in 1871, incorporating the Nagas living in the North Cachar and Nagaon.⁶³ The eastern boundary of the District was extended up to the Dayang River and the territory occupied by the Mikirs and the Dimasas was included in the District.⁶⁴ These arrangements successfully brought the territories adjoining Nagaon district under control. The number of raids in the British territory steadily decreased. But, the Naga tracts adjoining the Sivasagar frontier continued to be a source of trouble as many tea plantations were situated in that tract and the Nagas continued to disturb the planters with their raids. Survey parties who were mapping different parts of the Naga Hills were often attacked. In 1875, a survey party comprising of 80 men were massacred, including a senior British officer near Jaipur in the eastern part of the Hills.⁶⁵ Many cases of disturbance were reported and to establish control over the situation, the government in 1878, decided to transfer the district headquarter to Kohima.⁶⁶ This step was taken in order to extend British political influence up to a central position in the Hills.

The transfer of headquarters provoked the Nagas. The Nagas of Khonoma, Mezoma, Jotsoma and Kohima took it as a sign of British offensive designs. It was reported to the district authority that many Naga villages started procuring fire arms like the Snider and Enfield rifles from Manipur and Cachar and erected fortifications around their villages.⁶⁷ In October 1879, G H Damant, the Political Officer of the Naga Hills District, led a small troop of 65 soldiers to inspect validity of the report. When Damant and his men reached Khonoma, the Nagas made a surprise attack with fire arms and

⁶³ ASA, BJP, 1871, October, Nos. 61-62.

⁶⁴ ASA, BJP, 1871, September, No. 5.

⁶⁵ NAI, Military Report on Presidency & Assam District, Vol. III, Southern Frontier Tracts, GOI Press, Simla, 1930, p. 9.

⁶⁶ NAI, FPP- A, 1878, December, no. 533.

⁶⁷ NAI, FPP- A, 1879; January, No. 528.

daos. As a result of this attack, the Political Officer and 40 soldiers lost their lives. The arms and baggage of the troop were looted by the attackers.⁶⁸ Following this massacre, about 6000 Nagas besieged the British headquarter of Kohima for ten days. They continued to fire and shoot arrows with lighted tow into the fortified buildings in order to burn the buildings at a regular interval. However, Colonel Johnstone from Manipur arrived with a force of 2000 Manipur Levy and the presence of such huge force armed with rifles compelled the Nagas to put an end to the siege.⁶⁹

This bold act of the Nagas aggravated the British Government to initiate offensive warfare against them. It was realized that the policy of pacification and establishing gradual political control proved futile in the Naga Hills. Brigadier General Nation, the then British Commander-in-Chief of the North Eastern Frontier himself took the field against the Nagas. The invading force of 1135 men was raised including the 44th Sylhet Light Infantry, the 42nd and 43rd Assam Light Infantry and a troop of the Frontier Police Force. The contingent had two 7- PDR Mountain Guns and 100 9-PDR Rockets with a detachment of the 16/9 Battery Royal Artillery and the Royal Engineers Artillery Force.⁷⁰ The objective of the Expedition was the total destruction of Khonoma, subjugation of the villages involved in the siege of Kohima and disarming the Nagas. Moreover, it was instructed that if the Nagas agreed to surrender, they must be compelled to pay regular revenue to the British Government.⁷¹ There were a few obstacles in front of the British invading force. The dense jungles of the hills delayed the movement of the Mountain Guns, which were desperately needed to break the

⁶⁸ NAI, Military Report on Presidency & Assam District, Vol. III, Southern Frontier Tracts, GOI Press, Simla, 1930, p. 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ Fecitt, Harry *The Soldier's Burden* retrieved from <http://www.kaiserscross.com/304501/544622.html>, accessed: 21-03-2020 12:25 UTC.

⁷¹ *Ibid*

defence of the stockades built by the Nagas. From Damant's murder to the arrival of the Expeditionary Force, the Nagas had ample time to prepare against the colonial army.⁷² However, General Nation ordered the Force to march and on 9th November, a village named Priphema was occupied. On 14 November, another village named Sachema, a few miles away from Khonoma was occupied by Colonel Nuthall. This village was selected as the base because of its location. Before invading Khonoma, the Naga stronghold, the British Force improved the communication for the movement of the troops. During this time, the officers led their detachments to nearby Naga villages and burnt those villages. The surrounding area of Khonoma was guarded cautiously to prevent more Nagas to join their comrades hiding in the fort. Lieutenant Macgregor and Lieutenant Raban led a scouting party to reconnoitre the position and strength of the Khonoma Fort. But they were chased away by a large number of Naga warriors. A few shots were exchanged without any casualty on both sides. However, the Lieutenants were successful in selecting locations for placing the Mountain Guns and Rockets.⁷³

General Nation was not in a favor of a prolonged war, he wanted to finish the battle as quickly as possible. It was realized that the Fort of Khonoma was heavily defended, as the captured villages were found defenseless. This meant that the Nagas concentrated all their fighting power in Khonoma. The General expected a serious resistance in Khonoma and feared that the Nagas would climb down the hill to attack the British troops in the jungle. Therefore he planned to take the fort in one day of

⁷² Maitland, P.J. *Detailed Report on the Naga Hills Expedition of 1878-80*, retrieved from <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/record/r87628.html>, accessed: 27-03-2020 22:40 UTC

⁷³ NAI, *Military Report on Presidency & Assam District, Vol. III, Southern Frontier Tracts*, GOI Press, Simla, 1930, p. 13.

fighting.⁷⁴ Khonoma, the target of the force stood on a pointed hill, extending into a broad valley and the village was surrounded by high ranges of hills measuring up to 9000 feet (shown in Fig. 1). The road to the village was covered with dense forest and very steep terrain which made it extremely difficult for the British Force to march. The whole village was protected with stone and stockade defenses. Each house looked like a fort, with the main fort situated at the top of the hill.⁷⁵

On 22 November, 1879, a force of 550 riflemen, 2 Mountain Guns under an artillery unit led by 10 British officers, attacked Khonoma. A frontal attack was charged straight on the northern side of the hill. The frontline found no resistance and won its way almost to the top and faced the main fort. Major Evans of the 43rd Assam Light Infantry with his detachment and a troop of the Frontier Police was ordered to move up the valley on the right, and take position in the rear of the village to prevent the Nagas from retreating. Lieutenant Henderson was also instructed to lead his detachment of the 44th Sylhet Light Infantry to take up a position on the south-east direction of the village with the same objective. The Mountain guns were brought to the north-west side of the village and from about 11 a.m., shelling on the fort started under the supervision of the General. However, the Rockets were not working due to an accident while carrying them up the hill.⁷⁶ Colonel Nuttall led the 44th Sylhet Light Infantry to attack the Fort from the front, keeping one company as reserve. The Nagas made an elaborate defense; they built stockades on the stoned terraces and covered the walls of the houses with

⁷⁴ Maitland, P.J. *Detailed Report on the Naga Hills Expedition of 1878-80*, retrieved from <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/record/r87628.html>, accessed: 27-03-2020 22:40 UTC

⁷⁵ NAI, *Military Report on Presidency & Assam District, Vol. III, Southern Frontier Tracts*, GOI Press, Simla, 1930, p. 14.

⁷⁶ Fecitt, Harry *The Soldier's Burden* retrieved from <http://www.kaiserscross.com/304501/544622.html>, accessed: 21-03-2020 12:25 UTC.

stones to make them bullet-proof. Provisions were made to fire from the stockades through the walls. They cleared the nearby jungles and put sharp edged bamboo barricades called *panjies* to prevent the attackers from approaching. Moreover, they kept huge rocks ready to be rolled downwards to crush the British troops.⁷⁷ These defensive tactics prevented the British soldiers from entering the village.

Colonel Nuttall ordered the artillery units to fire the mountain guns without any pause. This continuous firing gave the infantry units sufficient protection and the soldiers of the 44th Sylhet Light Infantry managed to enter the village through a narrow lane and immediately the Nagas fired at them from the houses with guns and arrows. Colonel Nuttall was injured and his detachment lost a few men. The General ordered the Mountain Guns to be taken to a forward position to assist the infantry troops. Continuous shelling from the mountain guns forced the Nagas to halt firing for some time and taking this opportunity, the men of the 44th Sylhet Light Infantry moved to a firing position and continued firing at the stockades. This frontal warfare went on throughout the day and the British troops were able to capture the northern portion of the village. The British Force made a gallant effort in the afternoon to capture the fort, but losing two British officers namely Lieutenant H.H. Forbes and Major Cock and one Native officer named *Subadar* Major Narbir Sahi with forty four soldiers compelled them to retreat. These men tried to break through the main entrance of the fort and were ambushed in the effort. The General ordered the troops to hold their position throughout the night.⁷⁸ The next morning, it was found that the Nagas, after losing ninety men

⁷⁷ Fecitt, Harry *The Soldier's Burden* retrieved from <http://www.kaiserscross.com/304501/544622.html>, accessed: 21-03-2020 12:25 UTC.

⁷⁸ Maitland, P.J. Detailed Report on the Naga Hills Expedition of 1878-80, retrieved from <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/record/r87628.html>, accessed: 27-03-2020 22:40 UTC

during the attack, had abandoned the fort and moved up to another position called Chakka Fort. However, they offered stubborn resistance against the British army and the shelling of the Mountain guns. It was presumed that capturing the Chakka Fort by an expedition would be more difficult than the Khonoma Fort. The fort of Khonoma was demolished by the British troops and a contingent of 200 soldiers of the 44th Sylhet Light Infantry was posted there under Major Walker. The main force withdrew to its base.⁷⁹ In order to compel the Nagas for submission, the Chakka Fort was virtually kept under a siege by blocking the supply routes from all parts of the region to starve out the Naga warriors. But the Nagas were eager to supply provisions to the fort and from January to March, 1880, many skirmishes with Naga supply parties took place to prevent supplies reaching the Chakka Fort. Showing much boldness, a group of Nagas left the fort and made a rapid march into the British territory in North Cachar. There, they raided a tea garden and killed the ranger with sixteen labors. The place was plundered by the Nagas.⁸⁰ This incident prompted General Nation to burn all the villages that were assisting the Nagas in the fort. Almost 50 Naga villages, on all direction of the fort were burnt and those who resisted were killed. Such annihilation of their villages compelled the Nagas to give up and on 26th March, 1880, the Chakka Fort with all the fire arms in their possession was surrendered to the British. The Khonoma men were dispersed of their village and their cultivation was confiscated. The Nagas agreed to demolish all fortifications in their villages. Moreover they accepted the payment of revenue to the British Government and to labour for fifteen days per year for the Government. A garrison of 100 riflemen was stationed at Khonoma to secure the

⁷⁹ NAI, Military Report on Presidency & Assam District, Vol. III, Southern Frontier Tracts, GOI Press, Simla, 1930, p. 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15.

region and prevent further hostility.⁸¹ Following these arrangements, the number of raids reduced. Little skirmishes took place in the Naga Hills in the following period, but no raids of such high magnitude occurred because annihilation of villages and grains by the colonial troops instilled a sense of fear among the Nagas. They became accustomed with British administration gradually.

3.3 Military Operation against the Abors (1893-94):

The Abors inhabited the hilly region between the Dihang and Dibong rivers, to the north of Sadiya. The *Bor* (Great) Abors were the dominant clan of the Abors and they were believed to be the origin of the whole Abor community. They occupied the interior part of the territory, on the eastern bank of the Dihang. The Abors claimed overlordship over the community called Mishing in the plains and had absolute monopoly over the fish and gold collected in the Dihang. The Abor territory was strategically valuable for the colonial government as it was extended up to the Tibetan border. The Abors had trade relations with the people of Tibet and many marts in the Tibetan frontier were within the Abor territory.⁸² Despite the occasional raids by the Abors on the plain territories, the Company was not in favor of military campaigns in the Abor Hills. Two unsuccessful punitive expeditions further encouraged the continuation of the policy of the Company. However, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal proposed to increase the strength of the military bases of Upper Assam in 1861 in order to provide more security to the planters. The government accepted these proposals and eventually, fortifications and construction of new roads in the eastern frontier of Assam began. A new fort was built at Pabha to keep the Abors under watch and another was built at the

⁸¹ NAI, FPP- A. 1880, March. Nos. 331-95.

⁸² Chakravorty, B.C. *British Relations with the Hill Tribes of Assam since 1858*, Calcutta, 1981, pp. 8-9.

confluence of the Dihing and Dibong rivers in order to secure the region between Dibrugarh and Sadiya. Moreover, roads were opened to shorten the communication with Dibrugarh.⁸³ As these places were near to the Abor territory, they felt insecure due to these rapid constructions and considered the growing presence of the colonial troops as a sign of threat. They began to show symptoms of hostility. There were instances of continuous disturbance from the Abors. However in 1865, the Governor General clearly indicated that the government was trying to conciliate the Abors in order to establish British influence over them.⁸⁴ But in 1878, the Abors claimed the lands on the left bank of the Dibong near Nizamghat and threatened to cross the River. The Abors were known for their physical strength and because of this; they considered themselves superior in the region north to Sadiya.⁸⁵ In 1862 they were successful in repulsing a comparatively weak British invasion. Therefore, they laid claim on the mentioned land to prove their superiority. They continued to pressurize the British to withdraw the outposts of Bomjur and Sesseri. Moreover, the Abors were not allowed to enter Sadiya with their arms, which was an insult to their pride. They continuously attacked the Mishings passing through their villages. The Governor-General-in-Council opined to make efforts to conciliate the Abors and secure an influence on them. Much tactics, patience and sound judgment was required for that purpose. However, the Governor-General-in-Council advised the local authority to initiate an expedition, if they find that the policy of conciliation had failed. However, the Calcutta authority did not want to raise an additional force for the invasion of the Abor region. The local troops were

⁸³ ASA, Assam Secretariat Papers, File No. 480 of 1861.

⁸⁴ ASA, BJP, June, 1865, No. 73.

⁸⁵ Chakraverty Archana, 'British Policy towards Some Important Hill Tribes of North East Frontier Agency during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century' in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 50, Golden Jubilee Session (1989), pp. 406-413, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44146073> Accessed: 08-06-2020 14:43 UTC.

advised to assist the civil authority if an expedition was to be initiated; until then, the local troops were instructed to stay alert against the Abors.⁸⁶

In 1893, a group of Abors seized some Mishing fishing boats from the Dibong River. The British officers threatened them that they would stop paying the *posa*⁸⁷ to the Abors if they (the Abors) did not return the boats. But the Abors stated that they captured the boats in order to punish the Mishings for helping the British in navigating the Dibong. However overriding such threats, with utter boldness, they declared that if the British stopped paying the *posa*, it would be retaliated with robbing of villages near Sadiya. Attempts for conciliation by the political Officer were replied by threats of an open war. A few days after, three soldiers were murdered near Bomjur. In another instance, a large party of Abors attacked a patrol party near Kherimpani and killed one soldier. In both the instances, rifles of the soldiers were robbed by the Abors.⁸⁸ These atrocious acts were taken seriously by the government and an expedition to the Abor territory was sanctioned in 1893. Before the expedition began, military outposts on the frontiers were strengthened. To attack the Abors, an expeditionary force comprising of 400 soldiers of the Bengal Native Infantry and 100 soldiers of the 44th Gurkha Rifles was raised. An additional force of the Naga Hills Military Police and Lakhimpur Military Police marched to join the invading force. The Expeditionary Force was divided into five companies. The first Company had two Native Officers, 100 soldiers and the platoon of 44th Gurkha Rifles. The second, third and fourth Companies

⁸⁶ NAI, BJP, July, 1865. Letter from W.Muir, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal. 14th July, 1865.

⁸⁷ *Posa* was the system of conciliating the hill communities. It was introduced by the Ahom kings to stop the raids of the hill communities on the plain territories. The hill communities were granted a share of the produce of the plain territories. The British brought some changes to the system by replacing the produce with cash payment.

⁸⁸ NAI, FE-A, 1894 April, No. 84 (72-86).

consisted of two Native Officers, 100 soldiers and the Battalion of the Lakhimpur Military Police. The 5th Company was led by Captain W. R. Little with two Native Officers, 100 soldiers and the Naga Hills Military Police. The Force had two RML7-Pounder Mountain Guns, carried and maintained by the Gurkha Rifles. However, a small contingent of the Lakhimpur Military Police was entrusted with the duty of protecting the guns. Apart from these, the force had fourteen signalers, one surveyor, 19 orderlies, almost 300 coolies and other professionals. In total, the force comprised of 560 soldiers, and 400 other professionals and 22 officers of different rank.⁸⁹ Before engaging with one of the strongest communities of the Frontier, the British authorities made sure that all the military outposts in the region stood firm. Accordingly, three of the seven outposts of the region were handed over to the 44th Gurkha Rifles and the remaining four were entrusted to the 13th Bengal Infantry with more than 300 rifles to guard these outposts. Moreover, a reserve garrison with the strength of 310 rifles was stationed at Sadiya.⁹⁰ The presence of such huge number of guns and rifles certainly made the intention of the British clear; i.e, to annihilate the trouble-makers.

The objective of this Expedition was to attack and destroy the villages called Bomjur, Dambuk and Silluk, the three villages associated with the murders. It was speculated by Needham that if these villages were subdued, the Abors would be terrified and their courage would dampen automatically.⁹¹ Though the British had adequate men power and resources, they did not attack like the armies do in conventional warfare. In this situation, they had calculated their moves and acted accordingly. The region was

⁸⁹ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Mackenzie, Alexander *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Communities of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, 2012, p. 38.

⁹¹ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 9.

hilly with rivers to cross and in such terrain defence would have been the preferred policy. However, the order was to invade and on 12th January, 1894, the expedition against the Abors started. The force marched in two groups, the 44th Gurkha Rifles leading the first troop. As the Abors of villages named Bomjur, Dambuk, Silluk, Meyebo and Pado started the trouble, these villages were targeted. It was decided that the Bomjur village would be the first mark of the force. The Commanding Officer and the Political Officer reconnoitered the village and concluded that the village was well protected by jungles with dense undergrowth and cane brake from three sides. The village was approximately 500 meter away from the Dibong River and there was dense *khagra* grass⁹², of 10 to 15 feet high, between the village and the river. The surveyor's report was that the side facing the river was the only possible way to reach the village. It was speculated that the village was defended with timber stockades. The Commanding Officer decided to attack the village through the *khagra* grass in the morning. The 1st and 2nd Companies with the 7-PDR Mountain guns marched straight towards the Bomjur Village. The other three Companies marched for about 3 miles along the Nizamghat road and then turned to the left to reach the village. The Expeditionary Force was formed with a firing line being placed in the front, which included soldiers from the Gurkha Rifles and both the Naga and Lakhimpur Military Police Troops. The rears were protected by 2 companies of the Gurkha Rifles and the Lakhimpur Military Police respectively. The 7-PDR Mountain guns were kept in the centre of the force and a reserve troop of the Lakhimpur Military Police was kept at the back.⁹³ (Shown in Fig. 2)

⁹² Reed canary grasses (scientific name *Phalaris Arundinacea*) are generally two meters in height and it was difficult for the troops to move through the grass as the enemy might be hiding amidst the grass.

⁹³ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 5.

Generally, when there were natural obstacles (in this case the reed canary grass) the frontline was instructed to sling arms and use knives to clear the path.⁹⁴ The Commanding Officer ordered the frontline soldiers to fire a volley into the grass before their march began, to check whether the Abors were hiding amidst the grass. The following columns were ordered to fix the bayonets and to move in file formation, so that they could repulse any sudden attack. However, the Force reached the village without any opposition. The village was found abandoned and the Force burnt down most of the houses, leaving a few for their stay. It was decided that the Force would halt there for a few days and later, it would march towards Siluk and Dambuk, the other Abor villages. During the halting days, an arrow-proof fortification using planks was constructed, surrounding the houses used by the soldiers to halt. Moreover, spies were sent regularly to check for any activity towards Silluk and Dambuk. They made sure that the path towards these villages was clear for movements. Little skirmishes occurred during this time between the British spies and the Abor scouts; though no major ambush was reported.⁹⁵ Captain Maxwell, the Commanding Officer of the Force ordered the Force to march towards Dambuk on 20th January leaving behind 100 riflemen to protect Bomjur. The Force was about to reach Dambuk, when a wooden fortification was found, blocking the road. The 44th Gurkha Rifle charged towards the blockade and the Abors retaliated with gunfire, stones and arrows from inside of the barricade. The British Force lost some of its soldiers and a few more were injured. This prompted the Commanding Officer to fire the 7 PDR Mountain guns at the blockade. As much as 10 rounds of shells were fired, but the stockade could not be breached. The soldiers tried to

⁹⁴ Maurice, Frederick *British Strategy: A Study of the Application of the Principle of War*, London, 1935, p. 31.

⁹⁵ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 6.

climb the stockade, but the *panjies* that were twisted round the posts, made it difficult to climb. They cut down the *panjies* in order to climb over the stockade. In the meantime, the Naga Hills Military Police troops got round the right side and scaled the stockade. The front attack troop entered the stockade and found that the Abors had left the stockade. But after a few moments, a battle-cry was heard from the rear of the British force and groups of Abors came out of the jungle to attack the supply line of the British Force. However, the attack could not do much harm to the British force. On the other hand, the Abors were unable to defend themselves from the bullets fired by the British soldiers. This bloody ambush resulted in the death of at least sixty Abors and ten soldiers of the British force. Many of the soldiers from both the sides were injured. The British Force captured Dambuk the next day. The village was found to be abandoned and like Bomjur, most of the houses were burnt down by the troop.⁹⁶ As the villages were situated on the top of hills, heliographic communication⁹⁷ was initiated between Bomjur and Dambuk.⁹⁸ Mr. J. Needham, the Political Officer decided to march towards Silluk lying further west. The Force crossed the Sessleri River and marched through jungle to reach Silluk. But the firing line, which was in the front line of Expeditionary Force, confronted another stockade. The Abors inside the stockade provoked them to fight. The Commanding Officer ordered the soldiers to shoot the stockade with the Mountain guns and denied permission to breach the stockade before the shooting. The stockade was shot at continuously and it was partially destroyed. The soldiers of the Gurkha Rifles and the Naga Hills Military Police then breached the stockade from two sides. While they were penetrating the fortification, another group of Abors attacked the

⁹⁶ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 8.

⁹⁷ Heliography is the system of signaling by movable mirrors that reflect sunlight to a certain distance.

⁹⁸ Mackenzie, Alexander *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Communities of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, 2012, p. 41.

coolies carrying the baggage. This created panic among the *coolies* and they began to run away, leaving their baggage. However, the soldiers of the Lakhimpur Military Police began shooting at the Abors, leading to the death of at least forty five of their soldiers. Many of the Abors were injured in the attack. No such skirmishes occurred after this and the Force reached Silluk without any resistance.⁹⁹ Silluk was completely abandoned by the Abors and the Force halted there. Messages were conveyed to the village headmen that the Political Officer desired to meet them. Several heads of villages met the Political Officer at Silluk and promised to be friendly with the British Government.¹⁰⁰ Most of the guns stolen by the Abors were returned to the Political Officer. The objectives of the Expedition were thus achieved; the targeted villages were burnt down and the food grains were destroyed. Some neighboring Abor villages were also destroyed to demonstrate the capability of a British force in the hills. These retributive measures ensured tranquility in the Abor territory for the next few years. The Expedition helped the colonial authority to initiate the process of mapping the Abor territory which would further advance the process of extending British administration in the hills. This passive attitude of the Abors following the Expedition prompted the colonial officers to embark on a mission through the Abor Hills to find trade route to south-eastern Tibet.

However, the British had some tactical failure in the Expedition. While the main forces marched ahead to the villages of Dambuk and Bomjur, a reserve troop with rations was stationed at Bordak. The village was not defended properly and some Abors on the pretext of collecting rations approached the village on 2nd March, 1894. The

⁹⁹ Bentinck, A 'The Abor Expedition: Geographical Results' in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Feb., 1913), pp. 97-109 URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1778862>, accessed: 27-06-2016 02:22 UTC.

¹⁰⁰ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 11.

British soldiers did no proper check and let them enter the village. A *dhobi* of the 44th Gurkha Rifles, who survived the attack narrated that the Abors took out their weapons all of a sudden and began their attack on the British soldiers. The British soldiers were unprepared and they could not fight back. The sudden attack resulted in twenty seven casualties on the British side. Only eight of them survived the attack by escaping from the village. The British camp including the stored ration was destroyed by the Abors.¹⁰¹

So far the military tactics of the British troops in offensive warfare have been discussed. The formation of the expeditionary troop, making provisions for carrying food and baggage and systematically surveying the region, all these were the key elements in the formation of offensive policy. Military officers collected the vital information regarding the fighting strength of the Abors beforehand the expedition by sending out spies. Information of the arms used by them was also extracted. The Abors generally fought with long, straight *daos* of Tibetan manufacture. They also used spears and bows and the arrows were poisoned with aconite. They wore cane helmets and shields, effective against cut from swords and *daos*. It was brought to the attention of the officers that the Abors possessed at least 16 rifles and a few guns. The British medical officer accompanying the troop realized that the poison used in the arrows was less effective and it was not fatal. The Abors used the common aconite (*Aconitum Napellus*) which was a weaker poison. If the wound was well washed, the effect of the poison would go away. The medical officers and assistants were ordered to carry glass syringes and to clear the arrow wound either with water or liquor ammonia.¹⁰² Therefore, the British soldiers were advised not to panic if they were hit by arrows. To

¹⁰¹ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, pp. 22-24.

¹⁰² ASA, ASPPA, Birdwood, Surgeon Lieutenant, 44th Gurkha Rifles to J. Needham, Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya, no. 6, December, 1893, December, 1893.

fight against these primitive and traditional arms, the riflemen of the Gurkha Rifles and the Military Police Forces were armed with up to date arms like the Snider-Enfield rifles and the Martini rifles. These rifles were very accurate and were capable of faster firing; a well trained soldier could fire as much as ten rounds per minute.¹⁰³ In the Expedition, the main hurdle of the British Army was the stockades. The stockades were usually constructed by the hill communities of the North East Frontier in strategic places. These fortifications were built with timber, generally with the length of one mile and the walls were protected with sharp bamboo sticks, joined together, called *panjies*. *Panjies* were also often used on the roads in the jungles, making it difficult to navigate through the roads. The stockades were very thick, making them shell-proof. The Abors did not surround their villages with ditches or stockades to defend. They built the stockades in the middle of the roads so that, when an attacking army was clearing the stockade, the women and the children got time to desert the village. Stockades were built across the only path leading to the village and owing to the denseness of the jungles; the invading force could not turn and they had to pierce the stockade to reach the village.¹⁰⁴ Another strategy of the Abors was that, when the front line was engaged with the stockade, the Abors hiding in the thick jungles would attack the supply line of the British troops.¹⁰⁵ So the British troops needed to guard the flanks with much caution. The supply line was very crucial in hill warfare. The British troops were generally large in number and naturally they had to carry huge amount of essential commodities. It was very difficult to carry supplies in the hills and if the supply line was attacked, it would be hard to survive. The British troops found the 7 PDR Mountain guns very effective while

¹⁰³ Bodinson, Holt *Britain's Big.577 Snider*, 2006, Publishers' Development Corporation, The Free Library URL: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com>, accessed: 10-04-2020 08:30 UTC.

¹⁰⁴ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 32.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 32.

fighting against the stockades. These guns produced a decisive moral effect among the soldiers. Perhaps the British would have had many casualties without the guns. Moreover, they used light scaling ladders, made of bamboo to scale the stockade and fired on the Abors from the top of the fortification. Another tactic used by the Abors was the booby traps.¹⁰⁶ These traps consisted of solid bamboo hurdles piled up with rocks and built out from the hill side, the inner edge resting on the ground and the outer edge was supported by two strong canes. The rocks were freed by cutting the canes with *daos* and eventually the rocks would go down. The rocks would obtain an enormous velocity while going down the hill and it would crush anything that came in front of it. The British troops could not march without killing or driving away the Abor warriors waiting near the traps. It considerably delayed their march. But during the Abor expedition, only one coolie was killed by a rock from a booby trap.¹⁰⁷ The British troops observed that the rock took a few seconds to come down the hills and the soldiers were instructed to take cover and then to cut the device, setting the rock free. During the Expedition, they mostly used this tactic to get away from the traps.

So far discussions have been made on three important British expeditions in the hills of the North East Frontier of India. It is evident that all expeditions of the colonial government in the region were carefully planned. The expeditions were retributive but not hastily planned. The bureaucrats had a firm control in policy making and military expeditions were also planned according to their advice. In fact civil officers actively

¹⁰⁶ A booby trap is an unsophisticated trap used to kill or injure a person or animal when the target touches the object that it is connected to.

¹⁰⁷ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 23.

* The term *coolie corps* refers to the group of labours accompanying armies during expeditions. Each regiment had *coolie corps* attached to it. The labours carried the load, repaired and constructed roads, bridges etc for the army.

took part in the military expeditions. The local officers often influenced the government in taking decisions. They provided information regarding the favorable time and easy routes to the military authorities which proved valuable in expeditions. The colonial authority did not plan expeditions with an aim to annex the hill territories all the time. It was a strategy of the British to demonstrate its military power by destroying the sources of troubles and thereby instilling fear in the minds of fellow community-men. One aspect of the expeditions was that, in every expedition, there was a *coolie corps** whose service was extremely valuable. It has been discussed that expeditionary forces were large in number and therefore sufficient ration and *coolies* were considered as the founding stones of any expeditions in the hills. The expeditions continued for several months as maximum time was spent in the movement of the troops. Therefore the soldiers had to carry a large amount of accessories with them during expeditions. The *coolies* carried the required ration, clothing and other commodities. Moreover, the artillery equipments were also carried by the *coolies*. As most of the expeditions were carried on in the hills, the *coolies* had to carry and climb at the same time. Though elephants were used to carry the needed goods, the success of the expeditions fully depended upon the speed and capacity of the *coolies*. They constructed roads, bridges and cleared jungles in the hills for the smooth movement of the troops. Therefore much emphasis was laid upon the employment and commanding the *coolie corps* during an expedition. They were given proper security because the hostile communities often targeted the supply lines of an expeditionary force. The offensive policy of the British in the North East Frontier resulted in the gradual expansion of colonial administration in the hill tracts of the region. The knowledge on the community, territory and topography collected during the expeditions fastened the process of colonial expansion in the hills.

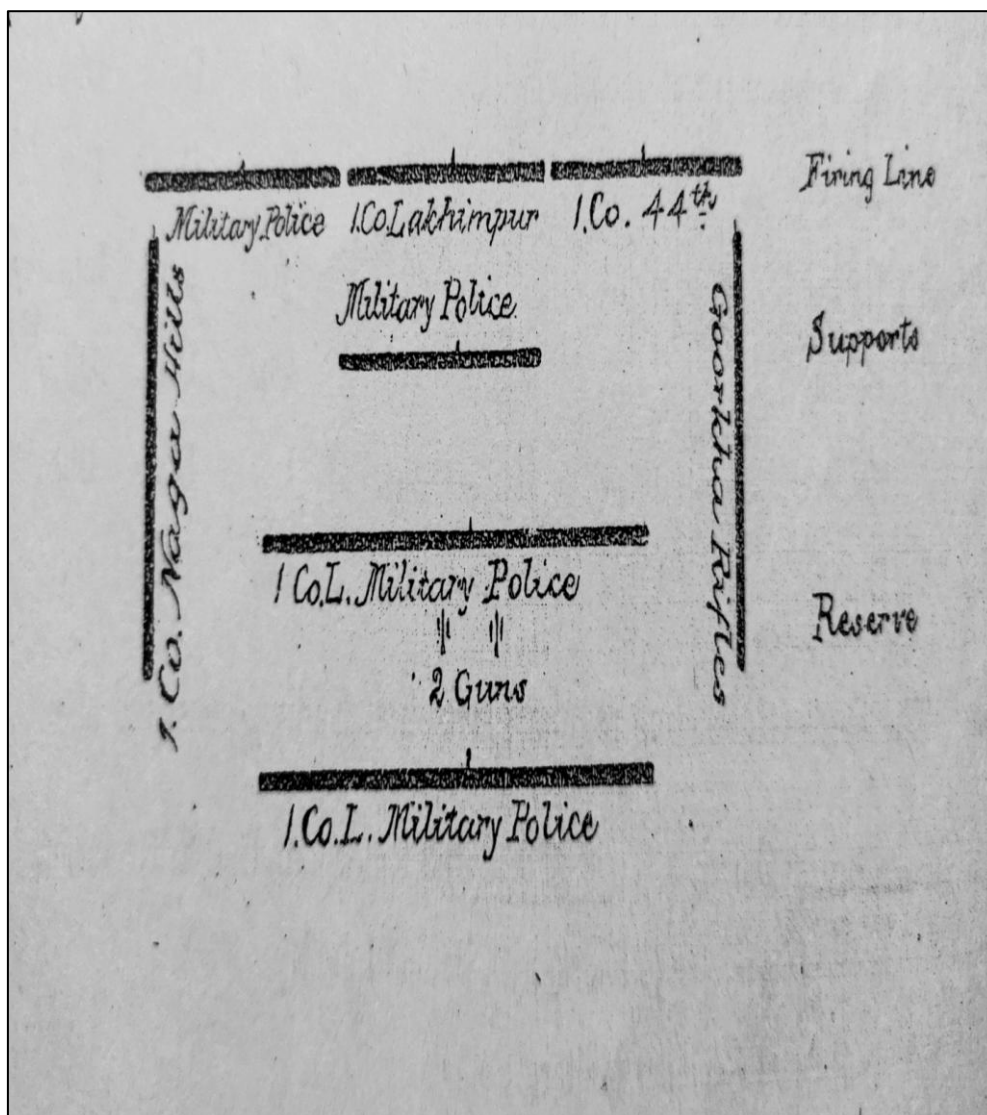
Colonial penetration in the northern hills (present day Arunachal Pradesh) of the Frontier culminated in a confrontation with China in the twentieth century.

Fig. 1: Map of Khonoma.¹⁰⁸



¹⁰⁸ Maitland, P.J. Detailed Report on the Naga Hills Expedition of 1878-80, URL: <http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/record/r87628.html>, accessed: 27-03-2020 22:40 UTC.

Fig 2: Composition of the British Force invading the Abor Hills, 1893-94.¹⁰⁹



¹⁰⁹ ASA, Report on the Abor Expedition by Captain W.R. Little, 1894, Government Central Printing Office, Simla, 1895, p. 5.