

**BRITISH STRATEGIC POLICY IN THE NORTH  
EAST FRONTIER OF INDIA (1826-1914)**

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‘For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill, to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.’<sup>1</sup> This statement of Chinese strategist Sun Tzu can sum up the strategy of the British in the North-East Frontier of India during the period between 1826 and 1858. In the eighteenth century the English East India Company established itself as one of the most formidable powers in the Indian subcontinent. The occupation of Assam proved financially beneficial for the Company. In 1826, the Company had a deficit balance of – 1,256,793 £ in its treasury, whereas in 1838, the year in which Upper Assam was annexed the Company had a surplus balance of 3,259,202 £.<sup>2</sup> The Company wanted to gain more profit from the North-East Frontier and for that purpose utilized its military forces. The army of the Company was modeled on the British Army and it was provided with the best of the arms and ammunitions. The Company’s army blended with the local conditions and utilized its hold over resources. Towards the last decade of the eighteenth century, the Company fought several wars and it pursued an offensive strategy in order to secure the subcontinent from Napoleon Bonaparte and Russia. Expansionists like Richard Wellesley convinced the Company authorities of the need of an aggressive policy. The Company successfully implemented the infantry system in India by recruiting indigenous people in its army. The soldiers were well trained, regularly paid and

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Randall G. Bowdich *Military Strategy: Theory and Concepts*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nebraska. 2011, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Richards, John F. *The Finance of the East India Company in India, c. 1766-1859*, London School of Economics, 2011, p. 15.

effectively controlled by European officers. The British established a chain of arsenals to keep the supply line active. Back in 1758, Robert Clive established a monopoly of the Company over the trade of saltpeter (an essential ingredient for producing gunpowder) in order to ensure a stable supply of raw materials.<sup>3</sup>

The North-East Frontier of India was considered as an unknown territory by the Company in the initial years of its rule. The *Moamariya* Rebellion and the consequent political turmoil in the kingdom prompted the Ahom monarch Gaurinath Singha to call for the Company's help. In 1793, Captain Welsh led a troop of six companies to assist the Ahom king in repelling the Rebellion. The Burmese invasion of Assam ultimately led to a conflict between the Company and the Burmese. Both the powers wanted to expand its territorial limits and ultimately a war ensued. The Burmese were defeated and signed the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 with the Company. The exit of the Burmese from the North East created a political vacuum and the Company took it as an opportunity to expand its political dominion.

Unlike other parts of India, the Company did not annex the North East immediately. The first two decades of the nineteenth century was a crucial period for the colonial power. France and Russia posed a threat for the security of India from the North-Western Frontier. The Company had already fought an expensive war against Burma. More importantly, the North East had numerous political principalities and independent hill communities and their strength was yet to be assessed. The British realized the economic potentiality of the region and understood its importance as a connecting link with China and Burma. The policy was framed after calculating these

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<sup>3</sup> Roy, Kaushik *From Hydaspes to Kargil A History of Warfare in India from 326 BC to AD 1999*, New Delhi, 2004, p. 140.

factors. The British at first made the general population including the influential class like the Ahom nobles, *satradhikars* and chiefs of the political principalities believe that the British were their saviors.<sup>4</sup> The climate and the hilly terrain of the North East made it difficult for the Company soldiers to continue fighting. Therefore the Company pursued the strategy of exhaustion. It was a process of delaying military actions. The chief objective of the Company was to repulse any further invasion of the Burmese. For that purpose, the eastern frontier was defended by stationing troops in strategic locations. The military headquarter was established at Biswanath on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra as it was navigable through waterways and was suitable for maintaining a huge arsenal.

On the eastern front, Sadiya was chosen as the location for the military base. Sadiya was the meeting point of several hill communities and the market attracted traders from Tibet. Moreover the Company officials speculated that the Burmese might attack through the Patkai Hills. Sadiya therefore was strengthened with a bricked fort with a strong artillery force. These measures required money and therefore, the Company brought a large tract of western Assam under its revenue jurisdiction. The neighboring communities of Sadiya like the Singphos, Matak and Khamtis were befriended. These communities provided grains and men-power to the Company and in return the Company allowed them to retain their political system. However the Matak kingdom was annexed in 1839 as there was a strategic need for that territory.

The Company adopted the strategy of subversion to achieve its political ambitions. This strategy included a process of identifying the important and powerful persons within a political system and then to influence them to assist the Company. The

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<sup>4</sup> Baruah S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 2007, p. 457.

events before the Battle of Plassey (1757) demonstrated the implementation of the strategy of subversion. However, the North East Frontier of India had never come under one common political system prior to the colonial rule. There were several kingdoms, chieftains and independent and semi-independent communities during the early nineteenth century. The Company identified the influential Ahom nobles and favored the ones who were supportive to the British. The British interfered in the internal clashes of the kingdoms like Cachar and Jayantia and played the role of king-maker in order to ensure the Company's profit. The policy shown towards Gambhir Singh, the king of Manipur was an example of the strategy of subversion. The Company authorities had a plan of annexing a large part of south-east Asia and Manipur was identified as the centre of that. However, that plan did not work out as Burma attacked the North East. After 1826, it was assumed by some of the Company officials that Burma might invade Manipur. To defend the Burmese frontier, Gambhir Singh was afforded western ammunitions and artillery. His atrocities upon the Nagas inhabiting the Manipur-Naga Hills border regions were ignored by the Company. He was kept under the Company's control. Gambhir Singh was trying to capture the Kabaw Valley situated in the Manipur-Burma frontier. But the Company ceded the Valley to the Burmese king in an attempt to avoid further war. Gambhir Singh's involvement in the assassination of Govinda Chandra, the king of Cachar was also overlooked by the Company. Govinda Chandra had already accepted British suzerainty he thought he was a 'protected' king under the British. However the strategic importance of Manipur and the prospect of revenue from Cachar ultimately led to the annexation of the kingdom in 1834. On the other hand, the common mass of the plains and the hill people were made to remain loyal to the British by supplying opium to them. Especially a section of the hill

population assisted the colonial surveyors and troops by carrying their goods in exchange of free opium. The state controlled the cultivation and distribution of opium and the addicts became dependent on the state for the supply of this intoxicant.

When diplomacy failed, the Company adopted the strategy of intimidation in the North East. This strategy is basically used by the stronger side. The indigenous communities were skeptical towards the Company's growing influence. Sometimes they rose in arms and the Company sent punitive expeditions in such situations. These expeditions were not full scale wars and the aim of the British troops was to create terror. The methods included the burning of granaries, houses and villages. Moreover the communities had a fear for fire-arms. Gradually they also learnt to use guns, but during the time of the Company's rule, fire-arms were not commonly used by the communities of the North East. The Angami Nagas and the Sinhpohs were intimidated by the Company's army several times. The kingdom of Jayantia was annexed by the Company by intimidating the minor king Ram Singha in 1835.

The East India Company wanted to use the hills of the Frontier as buffer zones and seldom did the British interfere in the clashes among the hill communities. No major battles were fought in the hills under the Company's rule. However the transfer of power to the British Crown in 1858 changed a lot of things. By that time, tea and other trades in the North East became very important for the British. The expansion of tea gardens and coal fields into the hills was considered as colonial invasion by the hill dwellers. They often raided and attacked the territories under British rule and the government considered that the frontier was in a state of lawlessness. Some of the officials were of the opinion that the unstoppable raids by the hill people might lead to the end of their rule in the region. The government was pressurized by the European

planters to provide safety to the tea business. As a result, the authorities initiated the strategy of annihilation against the hill communities in order to maintain their supremacy. The victory over Burma in the Second and Third Anglo-Burmese Wars encouraged the military department to commence offensive warfare in the hills of the North East Frontier.

The British army could adapt to local condition. As a result of the Military Revolution in Europe, the European armies dominated the armies of the other continents. The British army too, became a superior fighting force. In the North East the British troops initially could not get used to with the climate and geographical variations. However, this problem was solved by recruiting indigenous people who were accustomed with local conditions as infantry-men. The hill communities fought in an unpredictable manner. They built stockades and held the higher grounds. The traditional European tactic of volley-fire was answered with a continuous shooting of arrows. The British army realized that these types of defence could be broken by the artillery, detonators and stinkpots. Three major expeditions against the Lushais, Nagas and Abors in 1871-72, 1879-80 and 1893-94 respectively, demonstrated the war tactics of the British forces in the hills of the North East Frontier.

The Lushai Expedition of 1871-72 was the largest expedition in terms of men-power employed in the region. It was basically a retaliatory expedition and the main cause of the Expedition was the raids and attacks on British subjects and tea gardens in Cachar by the Lushais, a community living in the southern hill tracts on the Cachar-Burma frontier. The Lushais were divided into clans and each clan was under a headmen. They used fire-arms and they trained their warriors, which made them a formidable fighting force. They preferred the guerilla method of warfare and generally

attacked their enemies in the night. They constructed systematic forts called *jowlbook* which had small holes to fire bullets from the inside.

On the other hand the Naga Hills Expedition of 1879-80 was an immediate response to the attack and siege of the headquarters of Kohima in 1879. In an attempt to bring the Naga Hills under colonial rule, the British government gradually introduced certain administrative measures. Modern schools and hospitals were established and the western part of the Naga Hills was formed as a district in 1871. But the Nagas on the Sivasagar frontier remained undeterred in their raids and plunders. A surveyors' party of 80 men were massacred near Jaipur. To end these disturbances, the government shifted the headquarters to Kohima. But the Nagas, especially the Angamis took it as an attack on their independence and started preparations for a large scale war.

The Nagas fought in large numbers in their attacks. In 1879 approximately 6000 Naga warriors attacked the headquarters at Kohima. They used guns like the Snider and Enfield rifles and shot arrows with fire on the tip. They had an elaborate defence tactic. The main fort of Khonoma, which was the main target of the British troops, was situated on the top of a hill. The road to the fort passed through several villages. The houses in those villages were constructed like small forts and protected with stones. The Nagas abandoned the villages and concentrated their full force at the main fort. They put *panjies* (sharp edged bamboo fence) in the jungles surrounding the fort, stored large rocks on the hill top to push down and sent out scouts to prevent the British troops from finding proper spots to install the artillery guns.

The Abors considered themselves as the strongest community of the whole region to the north of Sadiya. Their favorite weapons were Tibetan manufactured long



*daos* (sword) and bows with poisoned arrows. They used the common aconite to poison the arrows. The British troops had to take down several long (up to one mile), thick and well defended stockades during the Expedition of 1893-94. These stockades were built on the roads in order to save their villages. The enemy found it difficult to navigate because of the stockades. The Abors did not prefer fighting in the open; they rather fought from inside the stockades. These stockades were difficult to approach as they were defended with *panjies*. The Abors used another tactic of attacking the supply line of the colonial troops that was generally left behind in the march. They utilized the hilly environment and set up booby-traps to slow down the progress of the enemy. These traps were deadly as huge rocks were rolled down to crush the forwarding enemy troops.

During these three expeditions, the British troops had to fight in adverse conditions. The most persistent difficulty was in moving through the jungles. For example, in the Naga Hills Expedition, the Rockets fell down while carrying them on the hills and later they could not fire. However, the indigenous armies faced defeat because their colonial opponents were better skilled and armed. Their strongholds, i.e., the stockades could not stand against the fire power of British artillery. The British troops were large in number and they carried provisions that could sustain the soldiers for many days. The civil administration cooperated with the military department and released the necessary fund without any delay. On the other hand, the hill people, who hid inside the stockades, could not get supply from outside as they were under siege. This made it impossible for them to keep fighting for a longer period. The soldiers of the British troops were trained to observe the situation and act swiftly. While fighting the Abors, they learnt the mechanism of the booby traps and thus got away without

being harmed. Moreover the officers had planned the expeditions after collecting all the necessary information. The hill communities made sudden attacks and apart from defensive maneuvers, they lacked a proper offensive tactic against the British forces. Apart from the Lushais, the other communities did not train their men before the battles. Their strategy did not include the components like economy of forces and maintenance of supply line. Most importantly the traditional weapons of the aboriginal people could not outscore the modern fire arms of the colonial armies.

The three expeditions mentioned above resulted in the total destruction of many Lushai, Naga and Abor villages. The British targeted the village associated with the raids, attacks and other disturbances and after defeating the armies burnt down the villages completely to warn the whole community. The objective was to create terror in the minds of the people and to make them realize that the British army could reach their villages and they were not safe even in their own villages. The three expeditions did not have any political objective, however, in the long run, these expeditions helped in administering the concerned communities. The surveyors and cartographers who went with the expeditions collected valuable information that helped the government. For example, the boundary between Cachar, Lushai Hills and the Chittagong Hill Tracts was demarcated as suggested by the surveyors of the expeditionary force.

While the British followed a multi-faceted strategy in the North East Frontier of India, they were concerned about establishing trade relations with Tibet, a country situated to the north of the North East Frontier. Since the 1840s, trade with China occupied an important place in the policies of the British government. However, the ports of China were not exclusively availed by the British as other European powers had trade relations with China. The British policy makers in India learnt about the land route

to Tibet through the North East. Tibet was bordering China and it was under China's political influence which was visible in the 'close-door policy' towards the British. Throughout the nineteenth century, the British made several attempts to open Tibet's frontier but could not succeed. In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was change in the British policy. This change in the policy was attributed to a real or constructed Russo-phobia. It was noticed that the Russians had good relations with Tibet, but the nature of that relations was not confirmed. However, Curzon, the then Viceroy of India concluded that the Russians were conspiring with Tibet to attack India and he hastily sent an armed Mission to Tibet under Colonel Younghusband in 1903.

The Younghusband Mission procured trade rights for the British in Tibet but antagonized China, a growing imperial power of that time. China occupied Tibet and put the country under China's military control. The British made a mistake of recognizing China's suzerainty over Tibet in two treaties signed with China (1906) and Russia (1907). China was emboldened by this recognition from the British government and ultimately China's expansionist designs became a threat for India in general and the North East in particular when Chinese troops reached up to Rima in the Mishimi Hills. The hills of present day Arunachal Pradesh were treated as buffer zone by the British. They did not intervene in the hills and maintained a safe distance. The Inner and Outer Line created according to the Inner Line Regulations of 1873 were used to keep the hill communities under colonial supervision.

Frontier officers travelled in the hills to survey the lands. The government encouraged such travels due to the growing Chinese expansion. Noel Williamson, the Assistant Political Officer of Sadiya, crossed the Outer Line and reached up to the Tibetan border in 1910. His reports confirmed the presence of Chinese army in the hills

of the North East. But he was murdered by the Abors as they considered the presence of colonial surveyors as a threat. The murder of Williamson provided the government with an opportunity to counter China's expansion. An expedition against the Abors was sanctioned, but the real objective of the expedition was to survey the hills on the Tibetan border and to collect information to formulate further strategy.

The Abor Expedition of 1911-12 was not important from military point of view, but it initiated a long process of surveys and conciliatory missions to different hill communities. The main objective of these surveys and missions was to find a proper boundary line between India and Tibet. The boundary line, it was hoped, would be able to defend India from Chinese aggression. It is evident that the British revived the strategy of defence in the North East Frontier. Most of the areas inhabited by the Abors, Mishimis, Hill Miris, Akas and Dafalas were surveyed. Military officers met the headmen of several villages and it was understood that the hill people considered the British friendlier than the Chinese. Based on the reports of these surveys, the government decided to expand political control beyond the Inner Line. Several military outposts and trade posts were established and the hill people were assured of equal trade rights. The northern hill tract was divided into three administrative divisions which later formed the North East Frontier Agency.

In the meantime the situation changed drastically in Tibet. Following the Revolution of 1911 in China and the consequent fall of the Manchu Dynasty, Tibet tried to get rid of China's yoke. But the new Republic of China wanted to annex Tibet, which if happened would further threaten India's security. The British wanted Tibet as a buffer zone between India and China. Already a war was developing in Europe and the British did not prefer another war in Asia. In order to weaken China, Bhutan was brought under

British influence in 1910. Captain G.A. Nevill's report on Tawang attracted the attention of the military high command. Tawang could be used by China as a launch pad to attack Bhutan and the adjoining territories of the North East. Tawang was virtually under the influence of Tibet and it would not be difficult for the British to acquire political right over Tawang. Military officers opined that the proposed boundary line between India and Tibet should start in the neighborhood of Tawang.

On the other hand China was adamant in her claim of suzerainty over Tibet, whereas Tibet claimed to be a sovereign country. The British intervened and proposed a tripartite conference to settle the issue. However the main objective of the British government was to finalize the Indo-Tibetan boundary. China and Tibet sent Chen I-fan and Lonchen Shatra respectively as their representatives. The British government was represented by Henry McMahon, Foreign Secretary of the Government of India. The Conference was started on 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1913 in Simla. McMahon delayed the proceedings as the reports of the survey parties were yet to reach. Chen claimed that Tibet was an integral part of China since the time of Chengis Khan. Shatra also produced some old documents to assert Tibet's sovereignty. He refused to accept the terms of the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of 1906 which recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet. The British were not favorable to either party. They wanted to restore Tibet to the pre-Younghusband Mission status so that Tibet remained a buffer zone.

McMahon presented a draft according to which Tibet would be divided into Inner and Outer Tibet. Outer Tibet would be an autonomous body whereas China would have the right to control the government in Inner Tibet. He included a map showing the boundary between India and Tibet in the draft. The Chinese and Tibetan representatives signed the draft but later the Chinese refused to accept the division of Tibet and the

boundary line. Chen abstained from finalizing the draft. The British made a *quid pro quo* deal with Tibet and convinced Shatra to surrender Tawang and assured him of full British assistance to repulse Chinese aggression in the future. On 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1914, the British government and Tibet finalized the draft proposed by McMahon. China at that time did not oppose the bilateral agreement.

The Simla Conference could not solve the issue of Tibet's autonomy, but demarcated a boundary line between Tibet and India. This boundary line, known as the McMahon Line marked the extreme limit of the British rule in the North-East Frontier of India. The 890 kilometers long Line was prepared as suggested by the military authority and it was based on the legworks done by the surveyors. It began in the junction of Tibet, Bhutan and India in the west and extended up to the junction of Tibet, Burma and India near the Lohit River in the east. Thus the Simla Conference strengthened the position of the British by making Tibet a buffer zone and securing the North East through the McMahon Line. Chinese expansion in the Frontier was expected to be repulsed by establishing military outposts in strategic locations near the boundary line. The First World War shifted the attention of the British government from the North East. The British changed their strategy in the North-East Frontier of India from time to time as demanded by different situations. The military strength of the British was instrumental in the expansion of their rule in the hills of the North-East Frontier of India.