

CACHAR IN THE BRITISH POLITICS TOWARDS MANIPUR AND BURMA (1823-1834)

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Abstract: In the second half of the eighteenth century, Ava/Burma became very powerful and it repeatedly threatened the North Eastern Frontier of the English East India Company. When the said power invaded Cachar (a region in the neighborhood of British Sylhet now in Lower Assam) after conquering Manipur in 1823, the Company could not remain silent and declared war against Burma (1824) making an alliance with Manipur. But the Company, being a mercantile body did not like to exhaust its treasury for the first war against Burma. Therefore, after 1830 the plains of Cachar, which lies between British Sylhet and Manipur was designed to improve its economy to supply the needs of Manipur to make the latter kingdom a powerful buffer country against Burma. Above this politics oriented economy of Cachar, its Jiri Barak Tract was also relinquished by the British to the Raja of Manipur so that Manipur remain silent in the event of its Kabow valley being ceded to Burma in order to avert another expensive war against the Burmese empire. Therefore, Cachar became a very important region in the British politics towards Manipur and Burma.

Keywords: projected, economic activities, *Tuccavi*, appeasement, delicate.

The politics of the East India Company towards Manipur and Burma in the first half of the 19th century was an interesting development in the history of South Asia. In this political development, Cachar (mainly the Barak Valley of Assam neighboring with Manipur) played a great role in the executing the British design. By improving the revenue of Cachar, the British calculated to support Manipur and make it a powerful buffer kingdom against Ava (Burma). On this policy, George Swinton, C.S. to Government, expressed on 30 May 1829, 'By the improvement of Cachar Country, therefore, it is to be hoped that our means might be facilitated of assisting Mannipore against Ava, and of contributing to the prosperity and resources of the Mannipore Rajah and his almost depopulated country which forms our best barrier against Burmese encroachment in that quarter.'¹ But so far, no scholar had done any

good work relating to the steps taken up by the British in Cachar so as to fulfill its political objectives towards Manipur and Burma. This work is to fill up the missing part of the history of South Asia. The sources of the study are mainly archival, royal chronicles and secondary source books.

Cachar Kingdom, which was annexed to the British territory on 1832, had been a good trading partner of the English East India Company from the second half of the eighteenth century. The long reign of Raja Krishnachandra of Cachar (1780-1813) experienced the test of different British Collectors at Sylhet (British territory now in Bangladesh) and the two countries had a flourishing bilateral trade on the border of Cachar. But, sometimes there were disputes between the two countries as the British traders surpassed limits in their exactions and monopolies in the trade. In 1790, Raja Krishnachandra addressed a letter to Lord Cornwallis which expressed:

Since the beginning of the Company's administration in Bengal under the successive Collectors of Sylhet, viz. Messers Sumer, Thackery, Holland, Lindsay and Willies, the relation between his Government and the East India Company were cordial; but the sixth Collector, Henry Lodge, wanted a monopoly in the trade in tusks, wax, cane, and bamboos, and with this intention he posted Sepoys on the borders to prevent all transactions...²

It shows that Cachar had already evoked the interest of the British. Politically, until the second decade of the 19th century, the East Indian Company remained aloof from active politics in the area now called Northeast Bharat. Yet this policy of non-interference became impracticable when their frontier was threatened by the Burmese occupation of Manipur (1819) and Cachar (1823). A.C. Banerjee expressed, "... Burmese occupation of Cachar would give them 'a position which placed the richest portion of the district of Sylhet and the Suddar Station itself completely at their mercy.'"³In order to detain this Burmese aggression, the Company decided to possess a powerful ally for the war against Burma. On it, G. Swinton again expressed, 'The Munneepore country, which is inhabited by a brave and hardy race, who have frequently opposed a noble resistance to their Burmese invaders would thereby accrue to the security and tranquility of our North.E. Frontier.'⁴The British authorities in Calcutta also considered the statement of David Scott (Agent N.E. Frontier) and accordingly

reported to the Court of Directors, 'Under such an emergency it was natural that every resource, however trifling, should be sought after and the re-establishment of the Munnipore dynasty seems to have been a scheme peculiarly favored by the late agent Mr. Scott...'⁵Consequently, Gambhir Singh (a Manipuri Prince) who was then at Sylhet, was induced to expel the Burmese from Manipur as it was stated, 'Manipur would be placed under him if he could liberate it.'⁶Gambhir Singh accepted the proposal and joined the British camp at Badarpur with his Manipuri followers known as 'Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy' in April 1824. They were given with arms, equipments and even money as it was reported, 'With the aid which Raja Gumbhir Singh, the Chief of Munnipore, has already received from us in Arms and Money it may be presumed that he is better able than men to oppose resistance to any future attempt of the Burmese to subjugate or pass through the frontiers.'⁷In this way, Manipur was projected seriously for the war against Burma and also to defend the eastern frontier from the latter's aggression thereafter.⁸

During the Burmese war the credit of expelling the Burmese from Manipur went entirely on the irregular 'Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy' which consisted of 500 infantry and 40 cavalrymen. The levy successfully captured Kangla (the capital of Manipur) on 12th June 1825, expelling the entire Burmese force from Manipur.⁹ Gambhir Singh then left Manipur for Sylhet to procure provisions for the levy and also to discuss on policy matters. Returning from Sylhet with provisions and equipments and reaching Kangla on 23 December 1825, Gambhir Singh declared:

That the title 'Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy' would be denominated as 'Manipur Levy'; the British Government had accepted to increase its strength to 1500 infantry and 150 cavalry; the pay, provision and all equipments of the Manipur Levy would be borne by the British Government and the same would be collected from the Magazine at Chandrapur (place at the western foot hills of the Bhuban Mountain, Cachar); Cap. F.J. Grant and Lt. R.B. Pemberton would be the commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner of Manipur Levy with Lt. George Gordon as Adjutant (who had not arrived at Imphal that time).¹⁰

Later, the Manipur Levy was increased to 3000 fighting men. On it, J.B. Bhattacharjee writes, 'Haunted by the fear of the repetition of the Burmese catastrophe, the British Government had not only raised Gambhir Singh as the sovereign ruler of Manipur but

allowed him to maintain an army 3000 strong to be trained and equipped by the Company.^{'11}Therefore, after the treaty of Yandaboo (1826), Manipur became a powerfully of the company in its eastern frontier. Yet the company, being a mercantile body, did not like to exhaust its treasury on the expenditure of Manipur. Consequently, Cachar became the projected area of the British political economy as it was intimated by G. Swinton on 23 November 1827, 'Under present circumstances His Lordship is disposed to the believed that the plain of Cachar which have so long run to waste from scanty population and the state of anarchy consequent on the frequent usurpation of it by the Munnipore Brothers Chourjeet, Marjeet and Gumbheer Sing would, under British management yield a considerable revenue, and facilitate the means of our communication with Munnipore.'¹² As early as 1827, when the Government of India accepted the remission of two years tribute from the Raja of Cachar, the former induced the Raja to improve the condition of road between Sylhet and Manipur as it was reported, 'that in return for the Boon thus conferred on him, His Lordship in Cl. expects that no exertions will be spared by the Rajah in making and maintaining a good road through his country, and thus keeping open an easy communication between Sylhet and Munnipore.'¹³As Cachar became a tributary kingdom after the Treaty of Badarpur(1824)the British Government had always been trying to impose an economic policy in conformity with its political design. Seeing its economic productivity the Company as early as 1827 had a strong intention of annexing it as George Swinton wrote to the Commissioner, Sylhet that 'you will also be pleased to consult with the Agent to the Governor General and report on the expediency of endeavoring to make some arrangement with the Raja relative to his transferring Cachar to the British Government...'¹⁴After the assassination of Raja Govindachandra (1830), Cachar was placed under Lt. Fisher, and it was annexed to British territory in 1832 leaving behind its mountainous northern part. Thereafter, the Company started its uninterrupted economic activities in Cachar.

The Company made its target first on Cachar trade. In 1831 the value of rice in Cachar was five times less than that in Sylhet. C. Tucker, Commissioner at Sylhet, reported:

paddy was selling last year in Cachar for 16,17, and 18 Mounds for the Rupee, whilst in our own district the same description of grain sold at the rate of 3 Mounds for

the Rupee whole sale and 2 ½ in the Bazar. The district of Sylhet exports annually a large quantity of grain to Naraingunge and Dacca.¹⁵

Knowing this sizeable difference in paddy price, and in order to extract its maximum benefit, the supreme Government lifted the duties in the export of all the agricultural products and in the import of agricultural implements in South Cachar by an order that 'the duties on export of grain and other agricultural produce, and on the import of iron and agricultural implements and cattle be abolished with all interior customs.'¹⁶Hence, the British Government tried to improve its income through Cachar trade.

On the other hand, the settlement of agricultural land in Cachar was made at par with that of Sylhet as Lt. Fisher reported, 'A declaration has been made to the effect that the assessment will be made on the principles adopted for new settled lands in Sylhet.'¹⁷Besides, the British Government started taxation from the tax free lands given to Brahamins and Temples of Cachar as Cracraft reported, 'I look upon all Brumottur and Deourettur land and those said to be applied to religious purposes, fair object of taxation and that this principle should be enforced... but I don't think it desirable any general rule should be promulgated on this subject.'¹⁸Hence, the Company's economic policy on Cachar made a thrust on the maximization of revenue from the said territory.

The British Government, thirdly, tried to bring the waste lands of Cachar under cultivation by inviting settlers from other districts of British India as it was expressed, 'The want of people is obviously the difficulty to be overcome in improving the revenue here, and with this view ample encouragement should be given to settlers possessed of capital from other districts.'¹⁹There was no problem at all for cultivable land and on it, a statement was made, 'The Superintendent (Fisher) had great hopes about the revenue prospects of Cachar, and estimated the cultivable lands in the province at 120, 160 *Kulbahs*, roughly 480, 640 acres, assessable at the average of Rs. 2-8-0 per *Kulbah*, yielding a revenue of Rs. 300, 400 a year.'²⁰ As a means of inviting settlers from beyond Cachar, letters were issued as it was mentioned by J.B. Bhattacharjee:

To attract settlers from Sylhet, Dacca, Tripura and Mymensing, circular letters were issued through their respective district officers to the effect that the country of Cachar has been

permanently annexed to the British dominion, that the tax there will be levied at the rates analogous to such as have been adopted in recent assessment, that they may get good jungle lands rent-free for 1,000 days, at the end of which a settlement will be concluded for the portion brought under cultivation to which the holder will acquire a proprietary right as a Talukdar or Zamindar...²¹

Under this policy of land settlement, Lt. Fisher also introduced a very effective economic policy. By this time, the Kukis living in the neighboring Lushai Hills made repeated predatory and head hunting expeditions in the territory of Cachar resulting in boundless trouble to its settlers and cultivators. On it, a report expressed, 'The Kookies are commonly made suddenly in the night, not so much with a view to plunder, as to kill the inhabitants and carry off their heads to be employed in religious ceremonies.'²² If these frontiers were to be protected, many posts of Sepoys were to be established incurring heavy expenditure to the Company. In order to solve this problem Lt. Fisher invented a method of giving an advance called *Tuccavi*, mainly to the gallant Manipuris living in South Cachar. The objective of Lt. Fisher behind this advance was 'to bring under cultivation those Pergunahs which suffered in an extraordinary degree during the Burmese war, as also those lands... to the Kooky frontiers.'²³ He cleverly planned to issue this advance to the Manipuris for cultivation on the most exposed area so that they could protect the area without incurring any expenditure from the Company's treasury. In 1832 Fisher reported:

'The sum of one thousand rupees which I wish to devote to this specific purpose, I propose to advance to Purbitta Sing Rajkoomar (the brother of Ranee Induprabha) who undertakes to establish one thousand Ryuts on the most exposed part of the frontier, and defend the neighborhood of his settlement.'²⁴

After three years, when the advance was very successful, Fisher again expressed, 'No outrages have been committed on this part of the frontier during the last three years and Several Munnipoorie Chiefs and others have recently offered to take advance for the establishment of villages similar to that of Purbitta Sing.'²⁵ Another hidden motive of Lt. Fisher behind it can be understood from his statement, 'A great extension of cultivation and consequent increase of revenue may be expected from it not merely from the land which will be cleared by the Munnipoorees but from much large tracks which will be protected by them

and which in their present state of insecurity our unwarlike Ryuts are afraid to occupy.²⁶Hence, the policy of giving advance through *Tuccavi* had not only improved the cultivation in Cachar but also solved the problem of head hunting raids from the territory of Lushai Kukis. Here, the view of Jenkins and Pemberton is worthy to remember as it accounted, '... it (Cachar) was likely to produce in course of a few years a revenue nearly equal to that of Sylhet and would become a granary capable of supporting any number of troops to be stationed in Cachar in case of the renewal of wars with Ava.'²⁷Therefore, the economic improvement of Cachar was entirely politics oriented.

Above this agricultural policy in Cachar, the British Government also relinquished the eastern portion of Cachar known as the Jiri-Barak tract to the Raja of Manipur by the Treaty of 1833. The agreement says, 'With regard to the two ranges of Hills, the one called the Kalanaga Range, and the other called the Noonjai Range, which are situated between the eastern bend of the Barak and the western bend of the Barak, we will give up all claim on the part of the Honourable Company thereunto, and we will make these Hills over in possession to the Rajah (Manipur), and give him the line of the Jeeree and the western bend of the Barak as a boundary...'²⁸. The following are three political designs of the Company behind this secession.

Manipur to control the Nagas

Various hill tribes living in the North-East Frontier always disturbed the British territories resulting in the loss of men and wealth. Therefore, the Company intended Manipur to control the Nagas inhabited in this Jiri-Barak Tract as Pemberton is said to have advocated 'the cession of the tract east of Jiri to Gambhir Singh on the ground that it would provide the Government with an authority sufficiently strong to control the various Naga clans that inhabited the area.'²⁹

Appeasement policy

Earlier the southern part of Cachar was under the rule of Manipuri princes mainly Gambhir Singh from 1818 to 1823. Besides, the expulsion of the Burmese from the soil of Cachar was, to a great extent, due to the active participation of Manipuris under Gambhir Singh. Therefore, after the Treaty of Yandaboo Gambhir Singh interfered into the territory of Cachar and

establishes his outpost at Chandrapur (near Bhuban Hill). After the assassination of Govindachandra (last king of Cachar), the apprehension of the Company on Gambhir Singh's aggression in Cachar was so high that at one time David Scott wrote:

In the event of any hostile movement on the part of Gambhir Singh you will be pleased to consider it ..., to preserve your force complete for the eventual defence of Sylhet, and not expose yourself to considerable loss of a risk of defeat for the mere purpose of preventing the occupation of Cachar.³⁰

But after this secession with the signing of the Treaty of 1833, there was no event of aggression in the territory of Cachar by the Raja of Manipur.

Kabaw Valley ceded to Burma

For ages Kabaw valley had been a part of Manipur. On this valley, it was stated, 'For the greater part of the century (18th century) the Kubo valley unquestionably belonged to Manipur and it was never in any sense a Burmese province, being, when not under Manipur, a feudatory of the great shan kingdom of Pong.'³¹ Later, it was given to Burma by Raja Marjit Singh (1813-19) when he was assisted by the king of Burma in securing the throne of Manipur. During the First Anglo-Burmese War Gambhir Singh defeated and expelled the Burmese not only from the valley of Manipur but also from Kabaw Valley planting the flag of Manipur on the bank of the Chindwin River (now in Burma). When the prince became the Raja of Manipur after the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, Kabaw valley became the thrust area of political dialogue between Burma and the British Government (ally of Manipur). Within a few weeks of the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandaboo some Burmese troops crossed the river Ningthi (Chindwin) and entered into the disputed valley, but they soon retired into the Burmese territory of their own accord. Instead of renewing hostilities Gambhir Singh submitted the matter to the decision of the British Government. In June, 1826 Major General Archibald Campbell was informed that 'the Government should maintain the right of Gambhir Singh over northern and middle portion of Kabow Valley (Samjok and Khampat) but the southern portion (Kule) had to become a subject of negotiation.'³²

In 1830, the British Commissioner met the Burmese counterparts and fixed the Chindwin River as the future boundary between Burma and Manipur and planted flags

accordingly; but the Burmese refused their witness. The latter's court was greatly agitated over the step of Grant and Pemberton and accordingly sent two Burmese envoys at Calcutta in 1830. The envoys' first and the foremost demand was "the restoration of the Kabow Valley."³³ They also demanded the removal of British residence from Ava. Before their arrival, the British Indian Government also sent Major Burney as the British Resident at Ava in April, 1830. He was instructed that 'your attention should be given to the trade of Ava with a view to reporting to his Lordship-in-Council the practicability of extending and facilitating British commerce and the consumption of British manufactures.'³⁴ In the previous letter from Burney it was stated that the importation of British goods in Burma was on the rise, but in December, 1830 he stated, 'Some of my former reports expressed an opinion that the present king of Ava will take the first favorable opportunity of engaging in another contest with us.'³⁵ The Burmese Government also appointed their Governors of Prome, Bassein, and other cities in the delta as military chiefs (Bo) who had the power to call out the inhabitants of their districts to meet armed at any point of time.³⁶ Hence, the Government of Ava was in a state of war against the British Government. The latter also felt the huge loss of resources in the form of money and men in the First Anglo-Burmese war as it was stated by the Commander-in-Chief:

When I consider the enormous expenditure of treasure and the great sacrifice of British blood, when I contemplate the obstacles of difficulties which still present themselves to our views.....; when I bear in mind the extraordinary hardships and deprivations to which our troops have been already subjected and which they must still be prepared to encounter; when, above all, I recollect the insalubrity of the climate....., I cannot disguise my anxiety that, consistently with our honour, this contest may be brought to the speediest conclusion.³⁷

Thus the British Commander of the First Anglo-Burmese War expressed his bitter feelings and difficulties faced during the said war in this region of South-Asia.

Above all, the authorities of Calcutta were also looking enviously on the profitable Burma trade which they could develop when they possess a good relationship with Ava (Burma). The Burmese mainly exported vegetable oil, petroleum and teak-wood. About the latter, A.C. Banerjee wrote, 'It is found also in Bombay, but in small quantities, and is

excessively dear; whereas in Pegu and Ava there are such immense forests of it, that it can be sold to as many ships as arrive, at a moderate price.³⁸ By 1830, keeping in view of the above circumstances, the Company felt the need of ceding Kabaw Valley to Burma. Therefore, the Company cleverly took up this delicate matter as it was mentioned, that on Tuesday (24 December 1833), the *Sahib* of Calcutta requested repeatedly that the Burmese were facing scarcity of land for cultivation. Therefore, the Raja of Manipur was requested to allow the Burmese to cultivate in the Kabaw Valley on annual payment of 6000 Tangkhas (Sicca Rupees). The Raja accepted.³⁹ The British Government then declared its final decision which accounted,

..... the Supreme Government still adheres to the opinion that the Ningthee formed the proper boundary between Ava and Manipur; but that in consideration for this Majesty's (i.e. of the king of Burma) feeling and wishes and in the spirit of amity and good will subsisting between the countries, the Supreme Government consents to the restoration of the Kabo Valley to Ava, and to the establishment of the boundary at the foot of the Yoomadoung hills.⁴⁰

Accordingly, Major Grant and Captain Pemberton handed over the Kabaw Valley to Burma on the 9 January 1834. The British Government paid 6000 Tangkhas (6000 Sicca Rupees) annually to Manipur Government for lending Kabaw Valley to Burma. It is stated that no consent of the king of Manipur was taken in making the treaty for the transfer of Kabow.⁴¹ In this way, the British Government intentionally executed this delicate issue of Kabaw Valley as one India Dispatch from Court of Directors expressed in 1836:

We are glad to find that the transfer of the Kuboo Valley to the Burmese authorities took place so satisfactorily, and that the boundary was amicably settled. Major Grant and Captain Pemberton, the Commissioners and Lt. Macleod, deputed by the Resident to accompany the Burmese officers are entitled to commendations for the manner in which they executed their rather delicate duty.⁴²

Indeed, the British Government had already calculated that, in near future, the government was to cede the said valley to fulfill its multifarious greedy objectives. The Company's Government, therefore, signed the Treaty of 1833 with Manipur and relinquished

the Jiri-Barak tract to Manipur as A. Mackenzie mentioned, 'the British Government agreed to give to the Rajah of Manipur the line of the Jeeree River and the western bend of the Barah as a boundary....'⁴³On it, H.K. Barpujari also expressed a clear view, 'Probably it took into consideration the possibility of Gambhir Singh being asked in the near future to surrender the Kabaw valley to the Burmese; it would have been too hard to ask him to retreat from occupied territory on the east as also on the west.'⁴⁴Indeed, the secession of Kabaw Valley to Burma was a pre-determined policy of the British Government as early as 1830.

Hence, in order to project the gallant Manipuris against another possible Anglo-Burmese War, the British Government improved the economic resources of Cachar to support Manipur, and, on the other side, the eastern territory beyond the line of the Jiri and western bend of the Barak was also relinquished to Manipur so that the Manipuris may remain silent in the event of their Kabaw Valley being ceded to Burma to avert another expensive Anglo-Burmese War. Indeed the British policy in Cachar had a close relationship with the British politics towards Manipur and Burma.

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