

The Crown Colony That Never Was

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Abstract

As India was inching towards freedom, the idea of a Crown Colony for the hills of North East (NE) India germinated in the minds of the departing colonial rulers. This article outlines the secret proposal of a British-administrated Crown Colony and the circumstances prevailing in the remote borderlands of India at that point. This Crown Colony would have included all tribal areas of NE India as well as the contagious tribal areas of Burma. As such, most of the tribal areas of the NE, mainly the hills of the province of Assam, were classified as 'Excluded' or 'Partially Excluded Areas' and the British administrators, having developed an admiration for the tribal people due to their long association, were reluctant to put them under far-away Delhi. Therefore, a Crown Colony, like Singapore, Hong Kong, Aden or Gibraltar, on the eastern periphery of India, consisting of tribal areas from Indian and Burma, ruled by benign and tribal-loving British administrators, was achievable. The idea gained considerable traction in the British bureaucracy, from Delhi to Whitehall, and some support among the tribal people. The plan finally did not succeed but was a near miss. It would have significantly changed the map of India and Burma, and challenged the very idea of a diverse India. The article is a narration of this Crown Colony that never was.

Introduction

There is an old Oriental expression denoting the peripheral areas having their own way; *The mountains are high and the emperor is far*. NE India in British era was one such periphery where the connection between the ruler and the subjects was tenuous, enticing them with possibility of a separate nation. The ravages of the Second

World War and tides of anti-colonialism had changed the fortunes of the British Empire, on whom, once upon a time, the sunset did not occur. As India, the 'Jewel in the Crown', was inching towards freedom, the idea of a Crown Colony for the hills of North East India germinated in the minds of the colonial rulers. It was to be a unique colony; populated by war-like tribes of India and Burma who were 'slowly civilising' and converting to Christianity, ruled by benign tribal-loving British administrators in bush-shirts and hats; a misty, forested and isolated Shangri La, away from the heat, poverty and opinionated crowds of the vast Indian plains. The idea was initially kept secret but soon it gained popularity and a degree of acceptance – both among the tribals as well in the British bureaucracy. The way maps were being redrawn across the world, anything was possible. Singapore, Bermuda, Aden and Gibraltar were already British crown colonies, and so was the 'fragrant harbour' Hong Kong. Circumstances narrowly prevented the creation of another entity on the Indian subcontinent.

Love for Natives

Typically, the crown colonies were dependent territories under the administration of United Kingdom (UK) that were controlled by the British Government. In such territories, residents did not elect members of the British parliament. Instead, a governor who directly controlled the executive, and was appointed by the Crown, usually administered the colony. In practice, this meant the UK government, acting on behalf of the monarch. In British opinion, the hill tracts of NE India were an ideal location for such a Crown Colony. The region was isolated, there were no significant trade links, the tribes scarcely shared any of their customs and traditions with mainland India, they were largely animist or Christians, and had minimal political consciousness.

The British administrators, many having spent years in the misty hills, knew the tribals well. They did not interfere in the local traditions and customary practices, and left the village chiefs to decide upon the tribal affairs. The typical British administrator adored the tribals. Often they shared a bond - accepting exotic presents, sharing rice-beer, adjudicating over inter-tribal disputes that the headmen could not resolve, and exploring the area – drawing sketches, observing tribal customs and noting their observations in diaries. Some tribes

had fought fiercely with the British, but over the time, the two sides had come to view each other with mutual respect.

A British official commented on the Nagas circa 1840, "These tribes not only defend themselves with obstinate resolution, but attack their enemies with the most daring courage. They possess fortitude of mind superior to the sense of danger or the fear of death".¹ The admiration was evident. There are also traces of certain paternalism, wishing to protect their wards from the corrosive corruptions of the modern world. Resultantly, the British administrators were reluctant to let the tribes be under a far-away Delhi in an independent India. The admiration for the tribals persisted across the boundary in Burma. In Brigadier Bernard Fergusson's memoir of World War II in Burma, he writes, *"I can do no more than commend that gallant race of Kachins to my countrymen, who are mostly unaware of its heroics and unsupported war against the Japanese. To carry on their own, independent way of life, they will need our protection like the other splendid race the Karens"*.²

The Idea Germinates

Throughout the colonial period, the NE was treated differently from the rest of India. Writers like Kyoko Inoue have observed that separation and isolation formed the core of the British policy. With the Eastern Bengal Frontier Regulation of 1873, a Line System was introduced on the pretext of protecting the minority indigenous groups in the hill areas of Assam. Similarly, in 1935, the hill areas were demarcated and divided into 'Excluded Areas' and 'Partially Excluded Areas'.

The initial idea was of a separate province for the tribals populating the hills. The British thinking was that since most of the Assam hill districts were still very backward and placed in 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas, the hill people would not be able to catch up with the national mainstream if they were left to stay with India. They were of the opinion that these backward areas of Assam could be merged into a separate administration outside India and Burma so that they would become politically advanced within a short time under their extended regime. The British mooted these plans to perpetuate their rule as well as to protect the educationally and economically backward tribals from sudden assimilation by the more advanced Indians.

The originator of the idea for a separate NE Province or Agency was Nevill Edward Parry, earlier the Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills (1924-1928) and later the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills. In a memorandum to the Indian Statuary Commission (commonly known as Simon Commission) in 1930, Parry envisaged that the hills should be included in the proposed scheme with the object of safeguarding their future existence because they still remained backward. He opined that the tribals were not fit to govern themselves. Though some form of education existed among the tribals, it was superficial and unstable. They had no knowledge of abstract political ideas and were pursuing things without any understanding. He further pointed out that industrially the hills like the Lushai District had no future.³

Another proponent of a separate administration was Dr John Henry Hutton, an anthropologist and the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, who outlined the idea in a memorandum to the Indian Statuary Commission. Hutton argued that the hill people were racially, historically, culturally and linguistically different from the people of the plains of Assam, while their administration was on wholly different lines. Hutton and Perry suggested to the Commission, the formation of a North Eastern Frontier Province to comprise of as many of the backward tracts of Assam and Burma as would be conveniently included in it.⁴

The Idea Gains Ground

The idea of a separate province by Hutton and Perry gradually mutated into the concept of a Crown Colony. Broadly, the plan was to constitute a 'North Eastern Frontier Protectorate' to include Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the other Hill Areas of Assam including the Naga and Lushai Hills, Manipur and Trans-Frontier Tracts up to Burma. According to David R. Syiemlieh in his book, *'On the Edge of Empire: Four British Plans for North East India, 1941-1947'*, this secret plan was discussed at the highest levels of the colonial administration. The tribal areas of Burma were to form part of it.⁵ Actually, instead of one, there were four separate but loosely connected plans, of Reid, Clow, Mills and Adams, all from the Indian Civil Service (ICS).⁶ All had served in various capacities in the region. These four protagonists were Sir Robert Neil Reid, Governor of Assam (1937-1942), his successor Sir Andrew Gourlay Clow (1942-1947), James

Philip Mills, Advisor to the Government of Assam for Tribal Areas and States, and his successor Philip F Adams.

The plans were deliberate and voluminous. These British officials put their mind in studying the conditions of inhabitants of hill areas in an organised manner. Every possible reaction from officialdom, political and social strata was answered in a coherent manner. The theme of all four notes was to preserve the culture, language and traditions of the tribals and allow them to look after their needs by self-administration of their villages.⁷ The first formal proposal for a Crown Colony was mooted in 1941. Robert Reid, the then Governor of Assam, in November 1941 wrote a confidential note titled, '*A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam*'.⁸ Governor Reid drew heavily from the ideas of Hutton and Parry while formulating the proposal. Reid believed that the boundary between India and Burma, which only in 1935 was separated from an Indian administration, was "*artificial as it is imperceptible*".⁹

Robert Reid revived Hutton's idea of a NE Province embracing the entire hill fringe from the Lushai Hills and Lakher land in the south in a crescent shape round to the hills of present day Arunachal Pradesh. He included in this administration the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the area occupied by the Nagas and Chins of Burma and the Shan states. The 25 Khasi states, Manipur and the un-administrated territory were also considered for inclusion. Reid estimated that the population of the Agency, excluding areas of Burma, would be 2.5 million. Most importantly, Reid visualised that the form of polity would be on the self-governing lines. It was feasible since, "Elders or Chiefs with their advisors settle the vast majority of disputes, villages have their own funds and village roads and bridges are kept by communal unpaid labour".¹⁰

Separation from India was inherent in the plan. The plan noted that the amount of control would undoubtedly have to be "very considerable for a time, but it is essential that it should come from Whitehall and not from India to which the hill tracts are entirely alien".¹¹ The Agency would draw finance from Imperial sources for which there were precedents. An expanded Burma Frontier Service would man the province.¹² The Burma connection was strong and the British plan was to create a common Crown Colony incorporating the hill tribes of neighbouring Burma. By then, in a classic case of divide

and rule, they favoured the hill tribes in Burma with local autonomy, and recruited Karens, Shans, Kachins, and other ethnics into the local army and the police, even as they exerted direct and repressive control over the numerically dominant Burman in the plains.

The confidential note by Governor Reid reached the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow and LS Amery, the Secretary of State for India. Leo Amery was so impressed with the plan that he gave a copy to Professor Reginald Coupland who used it in his third and final volume on the constitutional problem in India.¹³ Reginald Coupland thus is sometimes, but quite inaccurately, credited with masterminding the Crown Colony Scheme as the 'Coupland Plan'. The plan of Governor Reid was followed by that of his successor Andrew G Clow in 1942, who updated the plan with the latest political developments. His advisor, Philp P Adams, who was the Secretary to Government of Assam also followed suit, albeit with his own vision added.

James P Mills, who was an ethnographer and an ICS officer, in his plan quoted the example of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland in Africa to protect the inhabitants against exploitation and in furthering their progress. After the plan was discussed in the Whitehall, there were slight differences of opinion. In particular, from 1943 to 1946, the discussion mainly centred on the question of amalgamation of the Burma and the Assam tribal areas into one entity - the Crown Colony. Representatives of the Burma administration viewed that distinct tribes should generally not be divided between the two administrations.

Support and Turmoil

The plan had considerable support among the British but due to its secrecy and delayed disclosure, it could only garner intermittent tribal support. The idea of a direct link with Britain appealed to many tribal leaders, particularly from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and Lushai Hills. A clergyman, Reverend L Gatphoh, representing the Jaintia Hills hoped that his hills would come into the Protectorate.¹⁴ Another key supporter from the Khasi-Jaintia Hills was Macdonald Kongar. In the opinion of a number of hill leaders, the 'White devil' will be somewhat better to rule over them than the 'Brown devil'.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Naga Hills were slipping into turmoil.

The *Nagas* have remained the most politically conscious tribal group, forming clubs, political organisations and insurgent groups. The Second World War witnessed heavy militarisation of the area and proliferation of weapons. *Nagas* also made weapons from the scattered parts of the crashed planes. Kohima was in ruins, and smouldering. However, the *Nagas* earned the gratitude of the British for support in the war as also for increasingly being a Christian community. While the Crown Colony idea was being discussed, the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District, Sir Charles Ridley Pawsey, established the Naga Hills District Tribal Council (NHDTTC) in April 1945 as a forum of the various Naga groups in the district. This body replaced an earlier organisation called Naga Club. The Naga Club had met in Kohima in early 1945 and asked to remain under the British Crown with their own Legislative Council.

The Crown Colony idea gained ground and there were hopes raised of Naga Hills and Lushai Hills becoming crown colonies, like Singapore, once the British departed. This stoked the fire for secession. While Crown Colony proposal was inching ahead, in February 1946, the NHDTTC was reorganised as a political organisation called Naga National Council (NNC). NNC's objective was to work out the terms of relationship with the Government of India after the British withdrawal, with maximum autonomy for the Nagas. The proposal of Crown Colony, meanwhile, collapsed just before the Indian independence. This prompted Angami Zhapu Phizo to seize the agenda of NNC towards secession and the Naga Hills plunged into a long insurgency.

British Opinion Differs

By the middle of 1946, the plan was tottering. In Shillong, Andrew Clow replaced Reid as the Governor of Assam. He was to be the last British governor, later replaced by Sir Muhammad Saleh Akbar Hydari. In 1945, Governor Clow published a '*Memorandum on the Future Government of Assam Tribal People*'. He demolished the proposals by his predecessor and made it clear that the time was not ripe for such a proposal.¹⁶ The wording was strong, "It seems most unlikely that a British Government which is prepared to set India and Burma on a self-governing footing should now undertake the administrative and financial responsibility for a patchwork of sparsely populated hills lying where these hills do. Indian opinion would be equally strongly opposed to the constitution of a foreign territory with

its natural borders'. Governor Clow was right about the Indian opinion. The proposal for a Crown Colony alarmed Jawaharlal Nehru and Assam Premier Gopinath Bordoloi, and they fought back.

Further deliberations took place, particularly in light of the growing independence movement in Burma. Reginald Dorman-Smith, an ex-Colonel and the second Governor of Burma from May 1941 to August 1946, was in office when the Japanese invaded Burma and expelled him to Shimla for few years. Despite the advice of his officers who were pushing for Crown Colony, he noted that with discussion beginning for Burma's independence, he could see "nothing, but trouble ahead in Burma if we attempt to pursue the separate Agency Scheme and I would like this matter now to be considered closed".¹⁷ Finally, a bureaucratic noting concluded the issue. In a '*Minute on Backward Track*' dated 06 May 1946, the Secretary of State for India recorded, "At the present stage of proceedings agreement had been reached by the Secretary of State and the Viceroy of the impracticability of transferring responsibility for the Backward Tracks from the Provinces to any outside authority whether that should be a British High Commissioner or a United Nation's Mandate".¹⁸

It Never Was

The plan did not materialise due to a few slips and unexpected opposition. **Firstly**, unlike the idea of Pakistan that was in making for many years, this plan came suddenly. It could not be implemented because it came up for discussion in the closing years of the British rule. The British realised that it was ill timed and conceived too late to shape up a protectorate of their own.¹⁹

Secondly, many leaders of the NE believed in the idea of India, and some leaders like Reverend JJM Nichols Roy from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills had been convinced by Pandit Nehru to opt for India. Reverend Nichols sent a Memorandum to the British Parliamentary delegation on 29 January 1946 in which he openly expressed his disagreement with the proposed Crown Colony. Among his reasons for disagreement were the many oppressive and unjust rules of the British officers, especially the administrative styles of the Political Officers in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. He categorically stated that the Protectorate would not be economically viable, apart from arguing, "The hill people of Assam should get their own share of

independence and they should be connected to the province of Assam".²⁰

Thirdly, in the Lushai Hills (later Mizoram), the opposition to the proposal came from a powerful organisation called the Mizo Union formed by the emerging middle class. The Mizo Union had always been, from its very inception, against the existence of chiefship and wanted to see its departure. A Crown Colony would only mean the perpetuation of chiefship.²¹ The *Mizos* while voicing their disapproval of the plan favoured autonomous status for the Lushai Hills within the Province of Assam.²² In the Garo Hills (now in Meghalaya), few *Garos* wrote to the British Parliamentary delegation in February 1946 saying that they had heard rumours that a plan was considering to exclude the Garo Hills from Assam and India, and opposed the plan.²³

Fourthly, in the Naga Hills, the NNC was convinced to join India with the promise of granting enormous autonomy. NNC passed a resolution, in June 1946 at Wokha, demanding autonomy within Assam and opposing the Crown Colony. Gopinath Bordoloi visited the Naga Hills district in November 1946 and Sir Andrew Clow, the Governor of Assam, early in 1947. Both advised the *Nagas* that their future lay with India and with Assam. Sir Akbar Hydari, the next Governor of Assam, visited the Naga Hills and the result was the nine-point Hydari Agreement which recognised the traditional rights, land and natural resources of the *Nagas*.

Lastly, it was politics. The coming of Clement Attlee in Great Britain changed things as his Labour government was committed to India's freedom, without any London-ruled enclaves. Similar thing happened for Burma. Had the Tory leader Winston Churchill won the 1945 elections, the hill people might have become independent principalities of their own, as a reward for defending the British Empire against the Burmans who had become Japanese sympathisers. However, the Labour Party candidate Clement Attlee won the elections and decided to give all of Burma independence as a single unit.²⁴

Conclusion

The Crown Colony in the NE India was a near miss. Once it did not materialise, many colonial administrators were disappointed. ARH

Macdonald, Superintendent of the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram), wrote in March 1947, apparently with a heavy heart and philosophical tone,

*My advice to the Lushais, since the very beginning of Lushai politics at the end of the War, has been until very recently not to trouble themselves yet about the problem of their future relationship to the rest of India; nobody can possibly foretell what India will be like even two years from now, or even whether there will be an India in the unitary political sense. I would not encourage my small daughter to commit herself to vows of lifelong spinsterhood; but I would regard it as an even worse crime to betroth her in infancy to a boy who was himself still undeveloped.*²⁵

The 'divide-and-rule' was deeply ingrained in the British. It was even evident in their withdrawal from India in form of creation of Pakistan. A Crown Colony in the NE was very much a possibility - a small nation sharing borders with India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Tibet and Myanmar. It would have been financially unviable, fractured on tribal lines, and poorly administered once the British administrators left for greener pastures. Just imagine Naga, Mizo, Kuki, Meitei, Garo, Kachin and Chin insurgencies raging in small land-locked country. A relapse into India and Burma was eventually possible, albeit with much turmoil and a setback to the idea of a plural India. Thankfully, the borders remained where they were. All Crown Colonies were renamed as British Dependent Territories in 1981 and since 2002, Crown Colonies have been known officially as British Overseas Territories. India just missed having one British Overseas Territory on its eastern periphery.

Endnotes

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