

# British Administrative Policy in the Naga Hills

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## Abstract

The British administrative policy towards the Nagas was essentially to protect their interests in the administered areas of Assam. The prolonged period of Anglo-Naga relations approximately from the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 to 1880 reveals the British reluctance to extend their administration to the Naga Hills. However, during the period of effective administration (1881-1947), the Nagas who were fighting in defence of their freedom were in the end subdued, and since then the Nagas had gradually accepted the unavoidable situation and became by and large loyal subjects of the British.

**Keywords:** *Naga Hills, British Administrative.*

## Introduction

The British Administrative Policy or the main target of British Government was to gain the support of the people for the government and also to maintain law and order in the Naga Hills. The British Government knew that the Naga Hills was not economically viable and the government had nothing much to gain from the Naga Hills. Even then, the government could not just ignore the Nagas, because the government had to protect its economic interests in the plains of Assam from the Naga raids. So the government had decided to introduce a very simple form of administration in the Naga Hills.

Why it was so? Because the government believed that the Nagas at this particular stage were still very ignorant and primitive, and as such the complicated system of administration which were being followed in the plain areas wouldn't be suitable in the Naga Hills. And so the government adopted a policy of least interference with the local customs and traditions, i.e., there was minimum interference with the powers and functions of the chiefs, the priests and other village organisations. So it was a policy of keeping the Nagas just as they were without bringing much changes or it was a policy of keeping the Nagas in isolation, especially because their contact with the plainsmen so often led to serious law and order problems.

## Inner Line Regulation

In this connection, one very important Regulation was passed in 1873 which was known as the Inner line Regulation. This Regulation restricted the entry of the plainsmen into the hill areas. So this Regulation minimised the contact between the plainsmen and the hill men. Not only that, but this measure was taken so as to reduce the administrative responsibility of the government to settle the disputes between the plainsmen and the hill men. Now in the case of the Nagas, the Government had a real concern to have such a Regulation, because the relationship between the Nagas and plainsmen was going from bad to worse because of certain factors like:-

1. The traders in the plain areas were more advanced and very cunning, and as such when the Nagas went down to Assam for trade, quite often the Nagas were being exploited by these dishonest traders while dealing in the barter trade.
2. And likewise, many Nagas were being cheated when they went to work in the tea gardens in Assam as wage earners, i.e., the Nagas got very upset when they were not given enough wages by the tea gardeners.
3. At times, the tea planters of Assam had extended their tea plantations in some of the Naga inhabited areas, and so often, the Nagas retaliated by killing some of them.

It was because of all these reasons that the Inner line was framed so as to avoid confrontations between the Nagas and the plainsmen. And this Inner line was drawn at Samaguting, i.e., the present Chümukedima area.

Now, with the implementation of this policy, the British subjects were not allowed to enter beyond the Inner line without special permission from the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills and also the Nagas were restricted to visit Assam and Cachar without permits granted by the Deputy Commissioner. And also, not more than 10 permits were issued at a time. These permits indicated the routes for journey to be undertaken while going down to the plain areas.

## Gaonburas

Another important institution which was introduced by the British administration was the Gaonbura system for the purpose of village administration, i.e., the government used to appoint a Gaonbura to represent his village. Thus, he was an agent of the government and accordingly he acted on behalf of the government. And as such he was responsible for the village administration and in this capacity he was entrusted with the tasks to settle all the petty crimes in the village, and he could even impose a fine up to Rs. 50. Apart from that, he was also given other responsibilities like, whenever the Deputy Commissioner was on tour it was the duty of the Gaonburas to make all the arrangements so that these tours were conducted smoothly by the Deputy Commissioner.

Then it was the responsibility of the villages headed by the Gaonbura to repair the bridle paths. These bridle paths were the small tracts which were being used by the Deputy Commissioner on horseback while inspecting the villages.

It was also the duty of the villagers headed by the Gaonbura to supply the raw materials for repairing and renovating the Inspection Bungalow. This Inspection Bungalow was the resting house, constructed particularly for the Deputy Commissioner while on inspection duty.

All these types of works were provided by the villages through the Gaonburas. And in recognition of his services, he was given a red blanket once in every three years. He was also exempted from the payment of annual house tax. In addition to this, he was given a commission of 12 ½ percent of the house tax that he had collected for the government.

In this way, the position of the Gaonburas became very influential during the colonial rule, and the powers that he exercised in the village level had greatly reduced the burden of administration for the government.

## Dobashi

Another important institution which played a key role during the British rule was the Dobashi system. Dobashi means, a man of two languages, i.e., the ability to translate one's tribal language into English and vice versa, which was a requisite qualification for a Dobashi. Thus, he was supposed to be an interpreter, but in actual practice, he enjoyed much more powers and privileges and thus this office became a very important institution during the British rule in Naga Hills.

The Dobashi system was first introduced in 1842 when they were officially known as "Residentary delegates". They were the representatives of the important villages and they resided in the district headquarters and also accompanied the Deputy Commissioner in his tours around the district. As the government had been convinced of the usefulness of these interpreters, the system was made permanent in 1881 and the Dobashis were paid Rs. 10/- per month.

As for their appointment, the Dobashis were simply nominated by the people, basing on their knowledge in English and Assamese, which was approved by the government.

Initially, these Dobashis acted as interpreters, but gradually they were given more powers and they became the custodians of the traditional customs, and even the government sought their help on matters relating to ancient customs. For example, whenever a problem developed between two villages, at once the Dobashis were despatched by the government for timely intervention. And the Dobashis settled these disputes by applying the customary laws. So in this way, all the petty crimes were decided by the Dobashis, but those cases which could not be settled from the Dobashi level were referred to the Administrative officer. And also all the government's orders were communicated to the people through these Dobashis.

## Deputy Commissioner

The Deputy Commissioner was at the highest level of the administration, and in this capacity, he was the in-charge of the overall administration of the district. One of the most important duties as a Deputy Commissioner was to undertake tours, i.e., he used to visit all the different areas of his jurisdiction. And by making these tours, he tried to get acquainted with the people who were under his jurisdiction and also, it was a part of his duty to learn the customs and traditions and also the activities of the tribals, and at the end of the year he had to submit an annual report to the government.

While on tours, the Deputy Commissioner had to stay in the Inspection Bungalow which was constructed specifically for this purpose. His jobs involved instructing the Gaonburas properly about the government's rule which were to be obeyed by the people. Apart from this, the Deputy Commissioner had wide ranging activities such as carrying out survey operations, construction of roads and bridges, collection of house tax, improvement of agriculture, supply of medicines to the dispensaries, inspection of schools etc. So his

life was full of activities throughout the year and in this regard, N. Rustomji calls the Deputy Commissioner as “Jack of all trades” and he was responsible for anything that happened in his district.

### **Action against Violation of Rules**

When the tribal raids in the British areas began to increase, the government established some outposts in a number of places which were mostly being used by the tribals. And these outposts were meant to check the movements of the tribals, but the creation of these outposts failed to combat raiding activities.

Then after that, the government made a series of peace agreements with the tribals so as to prevent raids. And whenever these agreements were violated by the tribals, then the government usually imposed a “blockade”. Here, blockade means the closure of all market facilities in the foothills for those who had committed raids. And in that case, the government issued an order in which the offending community was prohibited to come down to the market areas to buy their necessities. And in order to enforce this rule, police forces were detailed to patrol in the areas so as to restrict the movements of the offending community.

In case of any serious offence like murder or kidnapping of British subjects, the government usually insisted on the immediate arrest of the culprit so as to give him a befitting punishment. But when the villages were not co-operating with the government by refusing to identify the culprit, then in that case, the entire village would be penalised and a very common punishment was to burn down the whole village.

In spite of all these punishments given to a particular village, if that village continued to give trouble, then sometimes the whole inhabitants were chased out from their original site and they were forbidden to return to their village again.

### **Fairs and European Goods**

During this time, the government had created some trade fairs, i.e., periodical markets in the foothills especially for the tribals, and these fairs played a great role in transforming the economic life of the people. Actually through these markets, the government was trying to promote its finished goods to the tribal population. And so, with this intention sometimes the tribal chiefs were offered small attractive items as free gifts like wine bottle, a packet of cigarettes, tobacco pipes, knives etc. And slowly these foreign items had attracted the

chiefs and their people. In this way, there was steady increase in the demand for foreign goods.

We can also say that the British trade policy was not altogether good for the tribals. For instance, salt was an indigenous commodity, i.e., it was locally available, and which was even exported to the neighbouring areas, but with the arrival of the British salt, the indigenous salt had lost its value in the competitive market.

So also is weaving of Naga cloths by women folks. Earlier, weaving was an important occupation for the Naga women, but with the influx of mill-made cloths from England at cheaper rates, this had seriously affected weaving of cloths by the tribal women.

### **Increasing British Influence**

As the government policy was to gain the support of the people for the British, the Government had adopted a tribal friendly policy. And in this connection, when we go through the Annual Reports of the district, they reflected the growing popularity of the government in the Hill areas. Many of the Deputy Commissioners were quite comfortable in working with the tribals, especially in those areas where Christianity had penetrated like the Naga Hills, the Lushai Hills, Khasi Hills and Garo Hills. The conversion of the tribals to Christianity together with the reforms introduced by the British, gave these tribals a feeling of attachment with the white foreigners and they began to look upon the plainsmen as people whom they could not trust much because they thought that these people were too cunning and too exploitative in nature.

So in this regard, when the Simon Commission visited Kohima in 1929, the Nagas submitted a memorandum, saying that they should not be clubbed together with the Indians, but they would rather be under direct administration of the British. So also when the same team visited Shillong, there was anti-congress riot in Shillong.

### **Crown Colony Scheme**

During the 1940's it became quite clear that one day or the other, India was going to get her own independence, and then the British would go away from the Indian soil. But even then, some of the British officials, especially those from the North-East, wanted to retain this part of the region including the Naga Hills, and make it as a British

colony. And so they formulated a plan to retain the tribal areas, which came to be known as the Crown Colony Scheme.

But during this particular time, India was passing through a period of political turmoil, i.e., India was in a State of great confusion and there were disturbances everywhere to chase out the British. So the Prime Minister of England had enough headache with India, and as such, he did not want to add any more problem by trying to certain any part of India as a British Colony. As a result, the idea of "crown colony scheme" was not materialised.

### **Christianity**

The Charter Act of 1813 says that it should be the duty of the administration to provide useful knowledge i.e., to educate the local people. The same Act also mentioned that Christianity should be introduced in India.

Coming back to North-East in general and the Nagas in particular, we can say that, though the British Government and the Christian Missions came here with different objectives, yet each of them found the other useful to serve its own purpose. The government found out that the Christian Missions were quite helpful in pacifying the primitive tribes and also in educating the tribals. On the other hand, the Christian missions were also aware that the government was helpful in providing educational funds and also in providing security to those missionaries who were working out here in these dangerous zones. And so the government had encouraged missionary activities in the region. And with the arrival of Christianity, a section of the tribal population was converted and with that a new community (a new class) had emerged in the Naga society.

### **Education**

Under the Governor Generalship of William Bentinck, a number of reforms were introduced, and one among them was higher education. And this new educational system had played a great role in changing the society. And as a result of this, a new batch of students and a class of teachers

emerged and they enjoyed a privileged status in the society which we call them as "Middle Class".

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the nature of the colonial administration in the Naga Hills District was founded on a convenient basis, suitable both to the ruler and the ruled. The British made no attempt to impose a European model of administration. So long as the interests of the Colonial were served, they left the existing native institutions undisturbed. This had also made British rule more acceptable to the Nagas. The British confined its administrative role to the essential limit of maintaining law and order, leaving the detailed local administration to the native leaders. So the Nagas continued to administer their villages according to their respective customs with minimum interference.

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