

# British Policy towards Annexation of the Naga Hills

KETHOLESIE

Head, Department of History & Archaeology,  
Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Nagaland (India)

## Abstract

The basic aim of the British relation with the Nagas was to bring the Nagas under their control and with this end in view they adopted different kinds of policies. Of course, the British wanted to achieve this aim through peaceful relation with the Nagas. But the Nagas were not willing to oblige and made some unsuccessful attempts to ward off the British forces which indicated their love for freedom. But once they were overpowered, they succumbed gradually to the control of the British.

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

## Introduction

Assam fell into the hands of the British after the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandabo in February, 1826. Under the terms of this Treaty, the King of Ava had renounced his claim over Assam and the neighbouring kingdom like Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur. So in this situation, the Naga Hills was sandwiched between Manipur and Assam which were under the British administration. And it was under such circumstances that the history of the British occupation of the Naga Hills took place.

## The Main Idea of the Author

The Treaty of Yandabo did not clearly define the boundary of Assam and so the British Government was not sure of their newly acquired territories. And during this time, although the British had defeated the Burmese in the Anglo-Burmese war and yet the British Government thought that it was not the end of the matter and they were still afraid of another invasion of Assam by the Burmese at any moment. So, in order to prevent another Burmese invasion, the British wanted to have clear lines of demarcation between Assam and Burma on the one hand, and between Manipur and Burma on the other.

At the same time, the British wanted to have direct communication between Assam and Manipur for effective administration. So, they had decided to construct a road from Manipur to Assam which had to pass through the Naga Hills particularly in the Angami and Zeliang areas.

So in this connection, a survey team was sent in January, 1832 under Captain Jenkins and Pemberton with 700 troops and 800 coolies and they were on the march from Imphal to Nagaon. This was the first ever contact between the British and the Nagas, and it was a bitter experience for both of them. Throughout their march in the Naga territories, the survey team had to face many difficulties such as:-

1. This being their first trip to the Naga Hills, they were not familiar with the hilly terrains of the Naga Hills.
2. Throughout their march in the Naga territories they were being opposed by the Nagas.
3. And to make things worse, this survey was not well-planned and as such they did not have enough provisions.

So as a result of all these factors they had faced so many difficulties on the way. It was here in this first encounter with the British that the Nagas had seen modern guns for the first time, and also a number of Nagas were shot dead by the British. This particular tract through which the survey party came to the Naga Hills was known as "Jenkins' tract."

The next year, i.e., in 1833, Lt. Gordon together with the Raja of Manipur, Gambhir Singh came again to the Naga Hills. The route that they followed this time was a little bit away from the Jenkins tract and they reached as far as Kohima. And they faced the same experience as the previous year as they ran into difficulties with the Nagas.

Basing on these experiences, the British were convinced that communications between Manipur and Assam through the Naga Hills was not advisable and accordingly the idea was given up.

Initially, the British Government was not much interested to conquer the Naga Hills, but their main interest was simply just to protect their subjects in the plain areas from the Naga raids. As

the government was not prepared to take over the Naga Hills, the task of controlling the raids was entrusted to her neighbours, viz, Raja Gambhir Singh of Manipur, and Tulavam the chief of North Cachar. But this system did not work out effectively as they were not being able to control the raiding activities of the Nagas in the plains.

So the British had to change this policy, and in fact, the British had to change its policies time and again, depending upon the responses of the Nagas which continued till 1881 when the Naga Hills was brought under the British administrative control.

As stated earlier, the main purpose of the British policy was to prevent the Naga raids in the plain areas. So in this regard, with a view to prevent these raids it was decided to despatch some military expeditions to the Naga Hills in order to punish the Nagas. And this period has been termed by some writers, as the "period of control from outside" which extended from 1833-40. During this period, the government tried to control the raids by sending a number of expeditionary forces into the Naga Hills. But this policy did not bring the desired result, i.e., the Nagas still continued with their habit of raiding the British territories.

Then from 1847-50, another policy was experimented, i.e., the creation of outposts in certain important locations in the Naga Hills, and this period was known as "the period of control from within." Now the government believed that the creation of a strong outpost in the Naga hills was necessary so as to control the Nagas, particularly the Angamis who were in the habit of raiding the British territories at this particular time. Accordingly, Samaguting which was located at the foothills of the Angami areas was selected for the new outpost, and one Bhogchand, a Superintendent of Assam Police was appointed as the in-charge of this outpost. But shortly after his appointment, he was killed by the Angamis.

Later on, an outpost was extended at Mezoma and another one at Khonoma for a short while. But the creation of these outposts did not bring the desired results as raiding activities continued. So it was decided to discontinue the creation of outposts.

Also during particular period, the government was passing through a difficult time because its relationship with Burma was under great strain in the North-East Frontier and also the

same thing happened with Afghanistan in the North West frontier. And at this juncture, the government was also facing some financial crisis. So the government thought that, it was a waste of time and money to carry out military expeditions or to create outposts in the Naga Hills, and hence the government decided to implement the policy of non-interference with the Nagas.

Following this policy, the government withdrew all its troops from the hills. But at the same time the government continued its relationship with the Nagas and encouraged trade activities with them when they behaved well. But when the Nagas gave trouble to the British, then they were completely cut off from the neighbouring markets, i.e., they were restricted to come down in the foothills to purchase their requirements.

The non-interference policy lasted for 15 year. But the result of this policy led to the increasing of raids into the British territories. The Nagas considered this policy as a sign of weakness on the part of the British, and so taking advantage of this, they committed many more raids without any hesitation.

The government on its part, tried its best to control those increasing raids, and in this regard, (a) a chain of frontier outposts were established especially in North Cachar, (b) the government also created some Kuki colonies to fight against the Naga raids, (c) and in order to pacify the Nagas, some Naga youths were recruited into the military service. But all these measures failed to check raids into the British territories.

So these situations compelled the government to review its policies and now it had decided to adopt the "Forward Policy" i.e., the government now had decided to annex the Naga Hills. Accordingly, the Naga Hills District was created in 1866 with Samaguting as the District headquarters. Lt. Gregory became the first Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District.

As part of the programme to civilize the Nagas which the government thought was the only way to prevent raids, a school and a dispensary was opened in Samaguting. Trade was encouraged and some roads were also constructed.

Then after this, Lt. Gregory invited the Naga Chiefs to come under the British protection. And under this policy, the Naga Hills was now divided into three categories:

1. The administrative areas,
2. The Political controlled areas, and
3. Areas beyond political control.

In the administrative areas, the Nagas paid house tax as a sign of submission to the British authority and in return, they received British protection.

In the political controlled areas, the British neither collected taxes nor guaranteed protection. But as and when situation demanded, the government could interfere in these areas to control the situation.

In the areas beyond political control, these people were left free as the government did not interfere in their affairs.

During this time, as it was felt that Samaguting, the district headquarters was not located in the heart of Naga Hills, it was then decided to shift the headquarters, and accordingly, the headquarters was shifted to Kohima in 1878.

It may be noted that, after the creation of the new district, raiding activities became quite less although it was not altogether stopped. But in October, 1879, a very serious event happened, i.e., Mr. Damant, The Political Officer of the District, along with 35 of his sepoy were shot dead while they were trying to enter Khonoma village. In fact, he was the third British officer who was killed in the Naga Hills within a short span. Earlier, Captain Butler was killed in 1876 while he was surveying the Lotha area. Then Captain Carnegy was accidentally shot dead by one of his own sentries at Mezoma. So within a short span of time, three British officers lost their lives in the Naga Hills, and so the government was badly affected by the loss of these efficient and capable officers.

Shortly after the death of Mr. Damant, the government sent a strong military force against Khonoma village, and a heavy battle was fought between the two, and at last Khonoma was defeated and she was heavily punished. After the fall of khonoma, the other Angami villages fell one after another. And gradually, this process of annexation was extended to other Naga areas.

And by 1885, the Lotha areas were annexed and a British officer was posted at Wokha. Then in 1889 the Ao areas were also annexed with headquarters established at Mokokchung. Likewise more and more Naga villages in the present day Zunheboto and Phek districts were brought under

the British political control. As for the so-called trans-Dikhu tribes, i.e., the Eastern Nagas among which the Konyaks were the biggest tribe, remained unadministered throughout the British rule.

## References

- [1] Allen, B.C., Gazetteers of Naga Hills and Manipur, Shillong, Vol IX, 1905
- [2] Alemchiba, M., A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland, Jorhart, 1970
- [3] Ao, T., A History of Anglo-Naga Affairs, Gauhati, 1958
- [4] Chasie, S.K., The Emergence of Naga Identity, New Delhi 1981
- [5] Clark, M.M., A Corner in India, Philadelphia, 1907
- [6] Furer- Heimendorf, C.V., The Naked Nagas, London, 1939
- [7] Ghosh, B.B., Gazetteers of Nagaland, Mokokchung District, Kohima, 1979
- [8] Johnstone, Sir J., Manipur and the Naga Hills, Delhi, 1971
- [9] Sema, P., British Policy and Administration in Nagaland 1881-1947, New Delhi, 1991