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The Buffer Zone: British Perception of the Khamti and Singpho in the early 19th Century.

Rubu Tani

*Assistant Professor, History, Dera Natung Government College, Itanagar
E-mail – obingtani@gmail.com*

Abstract

In the frontier history of British India, the Khamti and the Singpho tribes of Arunachal Pradesh occupy a very prominent place, as these two tribes were the first frontier tribes which came into a limelight after the expulsion of Burmese from Assam (1824-26 AD). The areas occupied by these tribes were strategically important from the military as well as from the commercial point of view. The Khamti and the Singpho tribes being amongst the last migrant tribes from the other side of patkai hills and who still had connection with their brethren inhabiting in the Burma. Therefore, British who had driven away the Burmese from Assam, wanted to use both the tribes as screen against the Burmese and their area as a buffer zone between Assam and Burma; the expulsion of Burmese from Assam did not only halted the imperial ambition of the Burmese but also hurt the national prestige of Burmese people. Therefore, the British were anxious and anticipating another reinvasion of Burmese in Assam. But in due course of time when British tried to encroach and invade in their ancestral domains; they undertook arms rebellion against the British respectively in 1839 and 1843 A.D.

Key words: *Frontier, British India, Anglo- Burmese War (1824-26), Khamti, Singpho, Screen and Buffer Zone.*

The frontier history of British-India would be incomplete without touching the history of the erstwhile known as North East Frontier Tract, now Arunachal Pradesh. The genesis of the present political map of Arunachal Pradesh can be traced back to the period of colonial administration in Assam (1826-1947 AD). The North East Frontier Tract had been strategically very important for the colonial ruler from military as well as from the commercial (trans-border trade) point of view after the Anglo-Burmese war. This strategic location proved to be buffer between Assam and Burma in the first phase of colonial policy in Assam, later on with Russia and then China, therefore, owing to its importance till today it has been a source of conflict between India and China. Being a strategically important area, the tribes inhabiting in this state also played a very significant role in shaping the frontier history of India but due to lack of documentation their role has been undermined, which need to be researched and maintained so that present generation could know the role of their ancestors in shaping the frontier history of India. So, an attempt has been made in this paper to retrace the role and contribution of two important tribes

of the Eastern Arunachal Pradesh during the British period and how Britisher tried to use them as screen against the Burmese, who later on undertook arms rebellion, when the former tried to encroach in the ancestral domains of the khamti and the singpho. So, before going into details let's have a glimpse of Arunachal Pradesh and the khamti and singpho tribes.

Arunachal Pradesh is an ethnic state inhabited by tribes of diverse culture and lifestyle. It is the north eastern most state of India and largest state in North-East region of India which covers a total area of 83,743 sq km and shares its international border with Bhutan to the west, China to the north and north-east and Myanmar to the east. It has also shares a common boundary with Nagaland in south-east and Assam in the south.

As per 2001 Census, Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by 26 major tribes and more than 110 minor tribes with their colorful tradition and culture practices. Of all these tribes the Khamptis and the Singphos are two important tribes inhabiting the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Tai-Khamptis are a Theravada Buddhist tribe settled in the lower region drained by the Tengapani and Nao Dihang river and covers some sixteen villages in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. Some are also settled in the present Dibrugarh district of Assam. According to Census of India 2001 their total population is 12,890. The word Khampti means, a land full of gold (kham=gold: Ti=place) . Their society is patriarchal in its nature and they mostly live in nuclear family called as Hong Huinleu. They have a traditional political organization called Mokchup and the head of the political organization is called as ChaoFa. Regarding the economic pattern sedentary agriculture is mainstay of their livelihood. Khamtis are among a few tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who have their own script, originally derived from the 'Tai' language and they maintain chronicles which are known as Chyatuie. They have their own law book called Thamasat.

The Khamptis migrated from Bar-Khamti area near the sources of the Irrawaddy by crossing the Patkai hills. They were allowed to settle on the bank of Tengapani river in 1751 A.D during the reign of Rajeswar Singha . However in the later part of the eighteenth century they were dislodged by the Singphos from the bank of river Tengapani and pushed into the region of the Buri-Dehing river. And when the Moamaria Rebellion broke out during the reign of Ahom king Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795 AD) the Khamptis ousted the Assam Frontier Governor the Sadiya Khowa Gohain taking control over the Sadiya region. The Khampti chief assumed the office of the Sadiya Khowa Gohain in 1794. Finally during the course of Burmese invasion of Assam (1816-1824) the entire Sadiya tract was brought under their control .

The Singphos, presently inhabit the areas around Bordumsa, Diyum and Miao of Changlang district, while another group live on the bank of river Tengapani in Namsai and Chokham circle of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. There are many Singphos settlements around the Margherita town in Tinsukia district of Assam and some are also settled in Sibsagar and Karbi Anglong district of Assam. According to Census of India of 2001 total population of the Singphos is 7200.

The word 'Singpho', in their indigenous language means 'man'. The society is patriarchal in its nature and they live in joint families. The society is organized into a number of patrilineal descent groups or fan (clans). They follow both Theravada Buddhism and their old shamanistic belief and practices. The political system is based on Chieftainship system and their chiefs are known as Agi or Mireng. There is a village council known as the Tsa Tangdai or Siphang Tangdai. It consists of the village Chief and the elder members who have merit of personal knowledge and experience of the village community. Their economy is solely based on sedentary and jhum agriculture, supported by forest activities as well as hunting and fishing.

The Singphos belonged to the Tsan clan of the Kachin or Jingphaw speaking people of highland Burma. They migrated from a tract of land on the eastern bank of river Irrawady in the later part of eighteenth century. In 1794 Singphos drove out Khamti from the lowlands under the Patkai hills and settled on the banks of the Tengapani, east of Sadiya and gradually they spread out and occupied the whole level tract of the country watered by Buri-Dehing, the Nao-Dihang and the Tengapani rivers .

The aim of this paper is to analyze the colonization of Assam under British and how they used the Khamptis and Singphos hills tribes as a screen against the Burmese, who later on resisted the British rule to minimize their interference in all spheres of life. The current body of knowledge regarding the Khamtis and Singphos is defined by an account of their attacks on the colonial state and the consequent policies to suppress them through expeditions. Their resistance to British rule has been represented as an attack of the 'wild tribes' on the benevolent colonial rulers. The tribes and their resistance to interventions in their social set-up in the form of removal of slavery, restriction of rights over taxing peasants as well as selectively playing one tribe against the other has nowhere been profiled. The 'savage' and 'barbaric' attacks and the British military expeditions coupled with policies of playing-off one group against another to suit colonial needs have been profiled from the hegemonic standpoint of the state. Therefore an attempt would be made to find out how these heroic tribes were used for serving the British commercial and strategic interest and response of the tribes to the colonial intervention.

In order to understand the British policies against the Khamptis and Singphos, a background of colonialism in India its operation through various instruments has to be understood:

The English East India Company came to India as a merchant company whose sole motive was to make profit. In this mercantile competition many European states like Dutch, Spain Portuguese and France also joined. On the other hand, the decline of Mughal state provided an opportunity to the Europeans commercial companies and their officials to monopolize India's wealth. These European Companies had benefited from state patronage, superior economic systems and were in competition among themselves to acquire more and more colonies for their mother country and they began to eliminate one another from India. Finally by 1740s the British and France were only two arch rival fighting to eliminate one another from the lucrative trade in India. Hence, English emerged successful in India, by winning over their main rivals the French East India Company (1763). The internal dissensions within the Indian states helped direct an-

nexation of territories, coupled with system of treaties.

After defeating the arch rival France, the English captured Bengal (1764) defeating the combined force of Siraj-ud-Daula, Shah Alam II and Shuja-ud-Daula in the battle of Buxar. This victory was achieved through its naval and military strength. As rulers capital was accumulated through structures of an extractive land tax regime and that of a military-bureaucratic empire. It was through creation of knowledge like surveys, mapping, creation of law codes etc., that the East India Company sustained its control over India. It was from Bengal, English carried out their policy of expansion and accumulated huge amount by exploiting the resources of Bengal, which was used for its imperialist policy and development of the mother country. Therefore, province of Bengal was like a jewel for English. Hence, it became imperative to secure the unsettled state of the east of Bengal. The quest for a natural frontier to the east of Bengal had troubled the British authority ever since the days of the Plassey .

Hence from very early period English were looking to gather the information of Bengal's neighbor Ahom kingdom. No doubt English had knowledge of trade relation between the ruler of Assam and Bengal but English had no sound information about Assam. Therefore in order to gather complete information of Assam, English initiated in 1787 by instructing Captain Hugh Baillie (Superintendent of the Assam trade and collector of Rangmati and Golpara) by Governor-General to report on the resources of Assam and the customs of the inhabitant. Baillie sent various letter from Golpara to Governor General but could not compile a systematic survey of Assam due to the outbreak of the Maomaria rebellion. The second attempt was made when Captain Welesh was deputed to Assam in 1792 to assist the Ahom ruler against the Maomarias. While carrying out the expedition, Captain Welesh replied various question of Governor General through letter about the affairs of Assam. And the third attempt was started in 1807 under the instruction of English East India Company and at the instance of the Governor- General-in-Council that a wide survey of Eastern India and of territory lying adjacent to it was conducted by Mr. Hamilton during the period from 1808 to 1814 . It was a deliberate and a serious attempt to compile an account of Assam of which there was a regrettable lack of information.

It shows that how British authority was anxious to know the condition of Assam. They knew that unless Assam was safe, Bengal would always have danger from external aggression especially Burmese and being imperialist country were aware about lucrative trade, concomitant with the possibility of exploring the inland trade routes through Assam to Tibet to China. Therefore, from very beginning they tried on many occasion in the past for interfering into the affairs of the Government of Assam to some extant because of the failing of the Ahom administration set up and into the commercial activities of the inhabitant of the place . The earliest encounter of the Ahom state with the East India Company was in the form of Captain Welsh's Mission (1792) which helped restore order in the wake of the Moamaria rebellion. Their engagement extended to very minimal trade contacts in the succeeding years. But the real British intervention started when Assam faced the political instability and Ahom feudal crises invited the Burmese (1818-1824) who had brought under their control the Ahom state and also controlled the Dimasa state and Manipur too.

The British being an imperialist ruler were apprehensive that a chaotic northeast under the expansionist Ava state would jeopardize the Bengal frontier and commercial interests. Consequently the British involved themselves in First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) which came to end by the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826). After the Treaty of Yandaboo, the Burmese monarch gave up his claim on the province of Assam, Manipur, Cachar and Jayantia. During the course of war itself the British came in active contact with the Khamtis and Singphos of the North East Frontier of Assam and thenceforth began the colonial maneuvers in the region .

It is evident that Burmese defeated in the hand of British was not only death-blow to the imperialist design of Burmese but greater still was her national pride. Therefore following the expulsion of the Burmese and consequent treaty there remained the possibility of fresh incursion from the Burmese side. There was an apprehension that such attempts were possible by allying with and instigating the hills tribe in their immediate vicinity. Hence, this situation brought into focus the position of the Khamtis and Singphos as strategically located hill tribes straddling Burma. Alaxender Mackenzie states, "What was wanted was a cheap and effective barrier against future invasion from Burma" . The British had witnessed that during the Anglo-Burmese both the khamti and the singpho took advantage of the chaotic situation carried out plunder in the vicinity of Assam and even there were incidents where the singphos rendered their support to Burmese against the British. Therefore, just after expelling the Burmese from Assam, the colonial administrator began to look out for strategy to defend the newly acquired area. On the other hand being an imperialist ruler they during the course of the war itself British engaged their energies towards unearthing the rich sources of the region. Hence, it was visible that, strategic factors played important role in bringing the Khamptis and Singphos tribes in lime light but it go in hand and hand with the commercial interest of the British in the North East and beyond, also triggered the idea of bringing these tribes under British dominance. As they found that the area inhabited by these tribes was very fertile valley, suitable for tea plantation as it was home to wild tea plants, timber, rubber and elephants etc. Also the English were aware of the existence of trans-border trade between the Burma and India where these tribes played an important role . Hence, they were keen to reopen the commercial intercourse with northern Burma and then to China.

However, the immediate need of the colonial ruler was not the commercial policy but military strategy. As the colonial administration had yet to stabilize in the region and the military stations were not spread along the strategic areas along the frontier which was accentuated by lack of proper infrastructure for rapid troop movements. Therefore, English very cleverly wanted to use the area inhabited by these tribes as buffer zone against the ruler of Ava. The British Government knew very well that these tribes had close relation with the ruler of Ava, therefore, these tribes were the only person of consequence, who would be of use in maintaining tranquility on the border of Assam. The existing body of knowledge on the Khamptis chronicles, the early British attempts to maintain an effective relationship by paying them stipends and supplying arms for protecting the frontiers . They were also assigned the task of keeping a watch over movements of both the Burmese and the Singphos and to report any connivance among

these powers. Not only was the political position of their chief the Sadiya Khowa Gohain given recognition, but also was their right to collect tax over the Assamese peasants but in return chief had to maintain a contingent of 200 men to be armed by the British Government .

However, British never completely trusted the Sadiya Khamptis as they were having relation with their brethren in Bor-Khamptis which created much uneasiness and doubts as to loyalty of the former. Despite reports of complicity of the Khamptis with the border disturbances caused by fresh Singpho migrants a façade of good relationship continued. Conflict of interests began when the British in order to weaken the power of Khamptis, forced them to freeing their slaves and over interfered into Mataks and Sadiya Khowa Gohain contested for an area of land at Saikhowa in 1835 . The British sided with Mataks and Sadiya Khowa Gohain was removed from power for a limited period. Though reinstated later he was without complete political powers. Apparently the Khamtis did not show their disaffection, but their latent disaffection manifested itself in a full-fledge resistance during a friendly mission under the command of Colonel White in January 1839. On the evening of the 19th of January, a body of 500 Khamptis under their Sadiya Chiefs made sudden attacked at Colonel White's quarter and killed Colonel White and many others . In return British carried out severe expedition against the Khamptis population but till December 1843 many Khamptis group remained in arms and carried out their rebellion against the British. However, finally in December 1843 remnant Khamptis came in and submitted to British authority. The entire population was dispersed into four parts and settled in Chunpora, Saikhowaghat, Dhemaji and Dikrang-Narayanpur along the region from Sadiya to Lakhimpur in 1844 to prevent any serious resistance. The community settled in the vicinity of Sadiya was exempted from paying tax, while rest of the community had to pay land revenue at rate par with the peasant in the plains .

Within the imperative of a buffer zone the British turned also focused on maintaining friendship with the Singphos too. The Singphos were a very warlike, veril and vigorous people and according to Robinson, "they were by far the most powerful tribe bordering on the valley" . Therefore English could not easily win this tribe who were under different Chiefs but in 1826 out of twenty eight Singpho chiefs, sixteen chief under the leadership of Beesa Gam signed agreements with the British to assist the British troops if called for in future. No revenue was demanded from the Singphos, but the Bisa Gam was to provide a contingent of eighty men, if needed and to convey immediate information to the British authority of any alarming development that might take place near the Patkai pass . The principal object of this engagement were to detach the singphos from all connection with the Burmese Governement . However, a group of the Singpho chiefs under the leadership of Duffa Gam did not acquiesce to the terms with rivalry brewing against the Beesa Gam as collaborators of the British. Therefore the British very cleverly exploited the intra-tribal feuds by declaring, Bisa Gam as the head of all the Singphos tribes . Not only this even submitted singphos chiefs were forced to release their Assamese slaves and accordingly Lt. Neufville released altogether 6000 Assamese captives from the singphos . However this release of Assamese slaves were not done on humanitarian ground but was done with the objective of establishing a local militia of ex-slaves and obtaining laborers for military

establishment and road making on the one hand and weakening the chiefs on the other. The anti-slavery drive was an important cause for discontent among the Singphos because possession of slaves was the source of economic power. The abolition of slavery therefore regarded as a severe assault on the power of the chiefs and as a result many discontent chiefs had been waiting for an opportunity to strike which. In 1835 the rebels' chiefs aligning with Duffa Gam fiercely attacked the rival chief Beesa Gam. As their rivals were aligned with the British they were unable to resist against the advanced weaponry of the British. Duffa Gam fled to Burma and resuming attacks on colonial positions in 1843 particularly on the outpost at Ningroo. Alongside multiple Singphos chiefs of Assam and the Khamtis too took part in the rebellion. The operation which dragged for a month ended in the surrender of all rebels Chiefs and in the complete submission of the Singphos as a whole in 1843 .

One cannot draw conclusion very easily rather can suggest the importance of going beyond the hitherto believed "the resistance of Khamptis and Singphos as attack on the benevolent colonial rule and the military expedition of colonial rule against the tribes as the hegemonic standpoint of the state" has to be seen from different approach with analytical and synthesis the information. From the above discussion point and a close study of various reports and events suggest that the British colonial intervention took place in the Khamptis and Singphos areas due to the interest of British in trade and market, raw material, effective and strong political screen against future Burmese aggression and to strengthening state power but when the freedom loving tribes resisted against the colonial ruler to protect their ancestral domain, colonial ruler brand them as rude tribes' attack upon the civilized state .

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