



THE FIRST MAJOR CHALLENGE AGAINST THE BRITISH COLONIALISM BY THE NAGAS: 1879-1880 A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Mr. Talichuba Walling

Head of Department & Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Immanuel College, Lengrijan: Dimapur, Nagaland, India, 797112.

ABSTRACT The Nagas since time immemorial were never under any foreign powers. They lived in a state of nature where any principality that ever encompassed them was rudimentary, unscathed and the purest that nature could provide them. Their primordial worlds had endured for generations until the modern century without being bothered and unaware of what was happening around them. British Colonialism had shaken the world entirely right to its core; altering every fundamental structures in it. Nagas however continued to live in a state of perpetual bliss on this side of the 'promised land'. Not before long, the ray of the British Empire infiltrated into the Naga territory and disturbed their ethnic environment. What another considered as a convenient expansion of power; turn out to be the abrogation of existence for the other. In the light of this argument, we shall pursue in studying and observing the underlying factors that led to the Nagas challenging the powerful British authority over the Naga Hills, and the consequences that followed.

KEYWORDS : Nagas, British, Colonialism, Kohima, Khonoma, Asia

INTRODUCTION

The passage into the source of history of the early period of the Nagas and their contact with the outside-developed societies especially the Europeans has been depended largely on the written records of the British. As for the Nagas, they handed down every knowledge and information acquired by them from one generation to another through oral traditions. As a result, study of the Naga insurrections against the British are accounts from the British perspective owing to their systematic and voluminous record maintenance. However, this does not summarily mean the conclusions thus arrived are biased and unidirectional. In fact, the records and observations made by the early British writers and scholars about the Nagas were in tune with the oral information communicated down to the younger generations by their older folks. Assam Census report says, "the Nagas showed extraordinary persistence in their resistance to our arms, and no less than three political officers came to a violent end, two being killed by the hillmen and one being accidentally shot by his own sentry, and it was not till 1881 that the district was finally pacified." (Report on Census of Assam, 1901, p-2).

Genesis of British-Naga Relation

The first time that the Naga country encountered the British was in January 1832. It was under Captain Jenkins and Lieut. Pemberton, who were to force a passage through the Angami Naga territory on their way to the Assam plain from Manipur. They escorted a force of 700 Manipuri troops and 800 coolies. Firstly, the main purpose of the mission was to find a communication route between Manipur and Assam through the Naga Hills. Secondly, to counteract the Naga aggression against the Company's dominion.¹ The Nagas had every reason to feel agitated to witness the movement of foreign forces in huge number across their territory for the first time. The first Naga expedition by the British took place in January 1839 into the Angami territory led by Mr. Grange, the Sub Assistant to the Commissioner at Nowgong. The British conducted ten expeditions in the Naga Hills during 1839 – 1850. Initially, the British followed a policy of non-interference towards the Nagas. The Nagas were practising raids within their villages, and frequently conducted insurrections towards the tea estates in the plains. Thus, the British experimented a policy of creating a buffer between their outpost in North Cachar and the Angami Nagas by creating a Kuki colony. The Angamis were experimented into the military police. However, the outcome of these policies were ineffective in establishing control over the Naga Hills.²

In 1866, The Sub Divisional headquarters in North Cachar was abolished, and the portion lying to the west of the Dhansiri, and the region on both banks of the Doyang River were formed into a new district with its headquarters at Chumukedima.³ Lieut. Gregory was appointed as the first deputy commissioner of the new district. This was the beginning of the British colonialization over the Naga Hills. However, the first step to the formal annexation of the Naga Hills took place in 1874 under Captain Johnstone. He took three villages under his control and collected revenue from them.⁴

In 1877, the Governor-General-in-Council proposed to shift the headquarters of the Naga Hill District into the interior part of the hills.

The proposal was assented by the Secretary of the State.⁵ In 1878, The Chief Commissioner considered Kohima to be the best site for the headquarters of the Political Officer.⁶ Kohima was occupied, without opposition on 14 November 1878.⁷ Mr. G.H. Damant was appointed as the new Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District.⁸

Angami Revolt

The revolt of the Angami Nagas was the result of a plethora of discontentment and hatred towards the British extremism that had started to question the traditional hierarchy of the Nagas. The *modus operandi* among the stronger Angami villages that occupied the mountainous terrains was as such, due to the limited agricultural productivity, they had to rely on raids and trade. On this basis, they collected tribute in the form of money, goods and recruits for their raids in return for providing protection and guardianship over the weaker dependent villages. For the stronger villages, raids and head-hunting was considered appropriate and legitimate mean to enforce their authority over the weaker villages. Now with the interference of the British authority to extend their control over the Naga Hills, the Angami Nagas construed their moral adjudication over these issues in the light of abrogation of established system and challenge to their hierarchical order. Thus, the powerful Angami villages inflicted hostile deterrence against the British officers and Indian counterparts. The subsequent events that contributed to the increasing discontent among the Angami Nagas that burst forth into a mighty popular revolt may be discussed below.

In May 1879, news reached Mr. Damant that the stronger Angami villages were acquiring ammunitions from Manipur.⁹ Meanwhile, the Raja of Manipur claimed protective authority over the main Angami villages and resented the British's extension of authority over these villages. While the Raja claimed to have no knowledge of arms supply to the Naga villages, Dr. Brown Political Agent in Manipur reported that he has information pertaining to sale of arms and ammunition to the Angamis by Manipur.¹⁰

It may be recalled that in 1874, sixteen Naga villages had accepted British protection and thirteen of these villages paid revenue at the rate of ₹2 per house per annum, which in 1878 the total revenue stood at ₹1,032. However, the revenue generated from these villages did not meet the anticipation of the officials to cover the increasing cost of maintenance and providing them protection.¹¹

Mr. Damant decided to carry out an enquiry expedition to Khonoma village after knowing that they were acquiring arms. He took a force of 86 men comprising of 21 infantry and 65 Native police on 13 October 1879 from Kohima. When his troops reached Jotsoma, a Jotsoma *dobashi* warned him of "mischief" planned in Khonoma. Mr. Damant dismissed the warning even after repeated plea. On 14 October 1879, the expedition group reached Khonoma, a heavily fortified village. Mr. Damant may have anticipated negotiating his intentions to the village leaders, but he never had a chance to explain himself as a rifle shot on the head instantly killed him. The Nagas captured 250 rifles, killed 35 men, and wounded 14 who were later killed, while the remaining were dispersed into the jungle. By October 28 1879, 18 survivors of

Damant's guard had succeeded in returning to the Kohima station stockade.¹²

British Preparation to Retaliate – Siege of Kohima

Damant's death and defeat of the British forces by the Nagas reached the Kohima station on the late afternoon of 14 October 1879. Mr. Cawley, Deputy Superintendent of Police, took charge of immediate preparations for an anticipated attack on the station by the Nagas. He sent letters requesting for relief enforcement to the nearby military bases at Samaguting, Wokha and Manipur. The Nagas intercepted the letters addressed to Samaguting, while the messages sent to Wokha and Imphal managed to reach their destination. The Nagas made hostile demonstration against the Kohima stockade on the 16th and 17th October, but did not commence any serious attack until 21 October.¹³ By 22 October, a large reinforcement of Naga warriors estimated to be 6000, among which 500 warriors with rifles representing five or six powerful Angami villages had assembled for a massive attack against the stockade.¹⁴

Mr. Hinde who was the incharge of the Wokha station received the letter from Kohima and immediately sent message to Golaghat informing the Commissioner of Assam about the grave situation in Kohima station. He ordered his entire force comprising of 40 Sepoys and 22 police to march towards Kohima on 17 October. The Nagas have already set blockade of 50 riflemen to stop any reinforcement from Wokha. The contingent led by Mr. Hinde managed to reach close to Kohima where they were safely escorted through the neutral villages with the help of two *dobashis* from friendly khels of Kohima to the stockade on October 19. (Gordon Means, (2013), 188-189).

The situation at the Kohima stockade by October 24 had worsened and desperate with limited supplies and rations, which compelled the British officers to open negotiations with the hostile Nagas for the evacuation of the stockade and safe retreat of the government forces to Samaguting under a ceasefire agreement. However, this was supposed to be a fatal arrangement given the unpredictable circumstances, for which Mr. Hinde rather made use of the negotiations to buy some time until more reinforcement arrived.¹⁵

In Manipur, the news have reached Colonel J. Johnstone, Political Agent on October 21.¹⁶ He writes, "Immediately after this, the Maharaja himself came and placed his whole resources at my disposal, and asked me what I would have. I said two thousand men, and he replied that that was the number he himself thought necessary."¹⁷ He led the forces towards Kohima expecting to reach by 26 October. He sent a messenger to Kohima on 26 October to spread dissension among the clans and prevent their unified forces against him and to deliver the news of their arrival to Mr. Cawley. Meanwhile, an emissary was sent to Visewema a powerful Naga village threatening them of extermination if they made any opposition towards the contingent.¹⁸ The Manipur troops however arrived Kohima on October 28. The arrival of Colonel Johnstone and his forces immediately neutralised the situation thus ended the siege of Kohima. Col. Johnstone swiftly carried out punitive attacks upon the hostile Naga villages by attacking them and burning down their villages. The Nagas were astounded, as they never expected an attack from the side of Manipur that Col. Johnstone skilfully already managed to enter into negotiations with them.

Col. Johnstone estimated that this was the perfect time to necessitate immediate advances towards the agitated Nagas. He observed that the Nagas would not be in a position to retaliate against a well-directed attack if not for their natural topography. He writes, "All the villages were without any but the most rudimentary defences, in addition to those which nature had given them from their position; not one of them could have stood against a well-directed attack" and "Khonoma was still unfortified, and a few days would have sufficed to capture it, and place the Naga Hills at our feet."¹⁹ However, message of the arrival of General Nation by November 9 arrived and there were standing orders not to engage in any active operations until his arrival.²⁰ However, the arrival of General Nation delayed to November 22. As per the following conjectures, it added to the delay of a possible and successful occupation of the Naga Hills by the British and provided sufficient time to the Nagas to make necessary preparation to face their imminent adversary.

While Col. Johnstone was preparing to attack Khonoma, a party of 43 Assam Light Infantry under Major Evans dispatched from Dibrugarh on 23 October, joined by Lieutenant Maxwell and his Frontier Police in

Samaguting, and arrived Kohima on 30 October.²¹

On November 14 under the command of Colonel Nuthall the 44 Sylhet Light Infantry captured Suchema village which was only six miles away from Khonoma. By November 20, General Nation arrived Suchema where the 43 and 44 Assam Light Infantry and two seven pound mountain guns from the Royal Artillery under Lieut. Mansel along with them Lieut. Raban (Deputy Surgeon), Dr. De Renzy of the Medical Department and Major cook, Brigade Major were stationed. Col. Johnstone and Captain Williamson also joined the force. On November 21, arms and ammunitions arrived their station.

Courses Of The Revolt Of Khonoma

Khonoma was situated on a very steep conical hill and was built with heavy stone walls and revetments, it was extremely difficult for the British officers to bring the troops and mountain guns into position and initiate direct attack. Col. Johnstone narrates, "...and when we tardily appeared before Khonoma, we found a scientifically defended fortress, whose capture cost us many valuable lives."²²

At the early hours of November 22, the first party comprising of two companies of the 43 Assam Light Infantry and 28 Naga Hill Police under Major Evans and Lieut. Barrett guided by Captain Williamson proceeded towards the rear of Khonoma village near Mezoma Hill. While the remaining forces under Brigadier General J.L. Nation marched from Suchema leading 551 officers and men under their command to face the fortifications of Khonoma. Around two hundred men positioned in a valley between Jotsoma and Khonoma to intercept fugitives from reaching Jotsoma. Lieut. Ridgeway led a company of 44 Assam Light Infantry to skirmish up to the Khonoma hills. Another party of the 44 Assam Infantry led by Lieut. Henderson deployed to climb the hill close to the village. The remaining forces under Col. Nuttall formed the frontline attack.

The attack began with rocket barrage, but failed to reach the target as the rockets were damaged in transit. The mountain guns followed their attack dealt little damage due to the mountainous terrain that reduced their capability. The Khonoma defenders did not retaliate at this point due to lack of effective gun-fire. The mountain guns did little damage to the strong fortifications.

By afternoon, the British troops captured one third of the first line of defence incurring huge casualties. As the infantry arrived at the spot where Damant was killed, they tried to break the second line of defence on two attempts, first led by Col. Nuttall and second was fiercely repelled by the Naga defenders with their rifles and spears hurled from the higher ground inflicting considerable loss to the attackers. By nightfall during this heavy encounter, Major Cock lost his life, while Lieut. Ridgeway and Forbes got serious injury. Another Major of the 44 Infantry and 17 sepoy lost their lives in action and inflicting injury to 24 others.

Khonoma village was on fire at the night of November 22 followed by a dead silence. The British troops had to contemplate the enemy's attack the following day or even assume that the villagers have retreated from their village.

On November 23, Khonoma village was found to be deserted by the British troop and the defenders had moved to the Chakka Forts which was on the higher slope of Mt. Japfu about eight miles from Khonoma. The British decided to block the site for it was difficult for them to attack as the defenders had already reached an altitude of about 8500 feet and proven fighting capabilities of the Khonoma warriors. Khonoma was burn down and 200 men from 44 Infantry under Major Walker was garrison. The British further carried punitive attacks on those villages that had participated in the siege of Kohima. They destroyed Jotsoma followed by Cheswejuma, Chadema, Kekrima and Visewema.

From January to March 1880 the British enforced blockade of the Chakka Forts by stationing forces in Angami villages around them and cut off all supplies to the forts. However, much to the surprise of the British forces, in January a contingent of 55 Nagas from the Chakka forts attacked and raided the Baladhun tea estates in North Cachar and killed Mr. Blythe and 16 workers. Following the attack, the Manipur forces stationed at Chekwema and occupied Paplongmai by British forces under Major Abbott. The Nagas of Chakka Forts were place under tremendous pressure from all sides denying sufficient supplies for food and arms.

Finally, on March 26 1880, the brave Naga warriors of the Chakka Forts ultimately accepted the terms of surrender offered to them by the British. Captain Williamson initiated the process of awarding punishments and terms of reparation to each village, that was part of the insurgent confederacy based on their degree of participation and their capacity to undertake the reparation procedure.

Aftermath: Terms And Condition

1. Surrender all firearms.
2. Rebuild villages on new sites without fortifications.
3. Pay one rupee per house and one maund of rice and fifteen days labour to the State per year.
4. Elect a headman to collect revenue and to be responsible for the conduct of the village.
5. An extra fine of rice and labour will be exacted from those villages that took part in the Siege of Kohima. The principal leader of the insurrection was the Merima Khel of Khonoma and it will be offered to locate permanently in Manipur territory or be split up and located in the Naga Hills among several different villages.

In the process of the agreement between the British and the Nagas, the man who shot Mr. Damant was identified as Tepuchacha and a reward of rupees two hundred fifty was offered for his capture. However, there is no record available as to what had become him.

CONCLUSION

We may lay in peace the irrefutable fact that the revolt of Khonoma was no doubt the first Naga gallantry movement to challenge the alien rule of the British in their territory that ended in 1880. Though the resistant movement was not much of a success, even for the British they scarified a number of abled officers for the cause. However, it is important to indulge into the factors that were responsible for the failures of the resistance movement.

The Angami Nagas known to follow a form of pure democracy did not have a village chief. Hutton observed that they remain united in times of war, but jealousy and suspicion of one clan with another was inevitably a source of weakness. Even in times of peace, the villages would break into riots and incessantly troubled by internal bickering.²³ There was no national consciousness and lack of spirit of nationalism among the Nagas during the course of the revolt. The revolt was concentrated only within insignificant number of Angami villages and the whole of Nagas were either unaware or unwilling to support. Johnstone mentioned an incident where Mezoma village supplied food and coolies on their way to Khonoma.²⁴ Similarly, Mr. Hinde was assisted by two *dobashis* of friendly village to guide them from Wokha to Kohima in the midst of the revolt (Gordon Means, (2013), p.188-189). The Naga warriors had no sophisticated weapons in their possession yet they dared to face the colonial rulers with ancient weapons like spear and dao. The limited source of modern arms and ammunitions that they captured from the British was insufficient. Moreover, it was a faceoff of primitive guerrilla tactics and modernised warfare. Naga Warriors were mostly on their own without 'proper leadership and direction', which was in stark contrast to the highly disciplined and trained military led by efficient and skilled British officers.

However, the Nagas' undaunted challenge to the British over these hills has been inspirational in harnessing patriotic aspirations, which were consequent in spreading throughout the Naga country. The revolt of Khonoma, if its historical event is not limited to its immediate achievements, it was not a historical tragedy of how the Nagas lost their ground over to the British. Considering it as a failure, yet it standouts to serve a higher purpose - the beginning of the Naga national consciousness.

REFERENCES:

1. N. Venuh, *British Colonialization of Naga Polity*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 30-31
2. N. Venuh, *op. cit.*, p.35
3. Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, Home Department Press, 1884, p.119, N. Venuh, *op. cit.*, p.36
4. B. C. Allen, *Gazetteer of Naga Hills and Manipur*, 1905, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, Reprint 2002, p.20
5. Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.130
6. *Ibid.*, p.132
7. M. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, Naga Institute of Culture, Kohima, 1970, p.85
8. Gordon P. Means, *Tribal Transformation, The Early History of the Naga Hills*, ed. Achilla Imlong Erdican, Prestige Books International, New Delhi, 2013, p.183
9. Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.134

10. Gordon P. Means, *op. cit.*, p.186
11. *Ibid.*, p.184, Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.127, p.132
12. Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.135, Gordon P. Means, *op. cit.*, p. 186, From Chief Commissioner, Assam to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 27th October 1879, enclosure No.12, Report to Viscount Cranbrook on Measures to Relieve Kohima Siege, 30th October 1879, Foreign Department, Political, No. 128 of 1870, L/P&S/7/23
13. Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.136
14. Gordon P. Means, *op. cit.*, p.187
15. *Ibid.*, p.189
16. James Johnstone, *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills*, Sampson Low, Marston and Company Ltd., London, 1896, pp.149-150
17. *Ibid.*, p.150
18. *Ibid.*
19. James, Johnstone, *op. cit.*, pp.162-163
20. *Ibid.*
21. Alexander Mackenzie, *op. cit.*
22. James, Johnstone, *op. cit.*, p.163
23. J. H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas*, Directorate of Art and Culture, Government of Nagaland, Kohima, 2003, p.109
24. James, Johnstone, *op. cit.*, p.167

Foot Note:

- * In another source, the person who shot G.H. Damant was Zakiesielie (age: 25). Zhanuo, Thakro, *Culture Change Among the Angami Naga*, Ph.D. Thesis, (<http://hdl.handle.net/10603/65768>), NEHU, 2002 p.44
- † Alexander Mackenzie records that, "Though wild, bold and ruthless the savages we know were very intelligent and exceedingly anxious for traffic and gain." – M. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland*, Naga Institute of Culture, Kohima, 1970, p.57.
- ‡ The Angami maintained that they never had a strict system of chieftanship. Only in time of war or aggression, a commander-in-chief was chosen by the villager to lead the village. – N. Venuh, *British Colonialization of Naga Polity*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2005, p.18.