

## 1857 REVOLT IN NORTH-EAST BRITISH INDIA AND TACTFUL POLICIES OF THE GOVERNMENT

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### **Abstract**

The Revolt of 1857 in North-East British India was a unique event since the marching Chittagong rebels called out many times to the Hindustani sepoy of the British army to join hands after killing the latter's Commandant Major Byng. Indeed the great mutiny turned mass uprising spread over many parts of the region like the Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley and Jaintia resulting to the execution of Maniram Deewan and Peali Barua at Jorhat, Assam. Manipuri Prince Sana Chahi Ahum was also deported to the Andaman Island. As the unrest in the region became very serious, the British Government took up various tactful steps to contain it. The steps were to disseminate those rebellious Hindustani sepoy at different outposts, send British seamen in army uniform under British Officers and maintain secrecy in sending the army lest it precipitate to a premature explosion of the Revolt when the group was on its way. The Government also diplomatically possessed the army of independent Manipur to side with the British. In this way, the British Indian Government could control and suppress the rebels with careful handling and diplomatic policies.

**Keywords:** Swept over, join, secret letters, executed, Tactful.

The Revolt of 1857 was a remarkable event in the history of India as it inspired the Indians in nation building processes which had culminated to the struggle for India's independence. After the first spark of mutiny at Meerut on 10 May 1857, with the support of common people, the Revolt spread to Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Jhansi, Ruhelkh and, Jagadishpur and also to many frontier regions of British North-East including Chittagong. To control the serious crisis, the Governor General asked even his Excellency the Governor of Mauritius to send any available British soldier to suppress the mutiny and rebellion. His letter expressed:

'The present state of affairs in India renders it urgently necessary that every British soldier who can be made available in the suppression of the mutiny and rebellion which have spread over a large portion of the country, carrying in their train, rapine, murder and unspeakable atrocities, should be brought to Calcutta without delay.'<sup>1</sup>

Since the crisis spread even to North-East India, the Government took it very seriously. On it, C E Buckland expressed:

'In short, had not the Sylhet Light Infantry (loyal British army) displayed an almost unhoped-for loyalty, and, moreover, a very distinguished gallantry, the eastern districts would have been utterly disorganized for an indefinite time, and, even supposing troops to be available, there would have been most serious difficulty in restoring matters to their original state of tranquility.'<sup>2</sup>

But history textbooks rarely mention it. Of late, a few historians have unfolded some primary sources dealing with the events of the Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley/Cachar (in lower Assam), Chittagong and independent Manipur. But so far, no scholar has done any good work on how the logic of the Revolt swept over to such a distant region and how did the British Government handle it successfully. This work is a humble attempt to fill in the existing gap on this area of study.

### **Historical background**

After the Battle of Plassey (1757), the English East India Company owned most of the territories covered by today's Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and independent Bangladesh. Chittagong, in this way, became a part of British India. Later, with the end of the First Anglo Burmese War (1824-26), almost all the territories of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam also became a part of British India. South Cachar and Jaintia were also

annexed to it in 1832 and 1835 respectively. The administration of this vast region was done by the Government of Bengal headed by a Lt. Governor. At that time, Tripura and Manipur were independent principalities.

The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam was acquired by the British fraudulently. This Ahom state ceased to exist after the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826. Of the two Ahom princes who had taken refuge under the British, Chandra Kanta was pensioned and removed to Kaliabor. Purandar Singha was not provided with any pension as it was believed that he had considerable wealth. But in 1833, Upper Assam was restored to Purandar Singha for five years (1833-1838), and after this, the Company resumed its administration again. At the time of the Revolt, there were two battalions in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam - the First Assam Light Infantry Battalion, Dibrugarh, under the command of Mr. Hanny and the Second Assam Light Infantry Battalion, Gauhati, under Major Richardson.

A glaring cause of the plots and conspiracies of the Brahmaputra Valley, in 1857, was that of the destitute condition of those erstwhile princes and nobles after the British occupation of the valley. Therefore, the erstwhile Assamese prince and nobles intended to restore the old Ahom Government. Relatively, the mindset of the Assamese masses was also against the British. On it, a Judicial Index, highlights the report of the Magistrate of Durrang: 'Reports that there is no excitement at present in the district, he has every reason to believe that if a disturbance took place the people would side against the Government. States that the jail native Doctor had been heard using seditious language.'<sup>3</sup> The cases of the princes and the nobles was taken up by Maniram Dewan (an erstwhile Assamese noble), and he moved it up to the level of the Lt. Governor's office in Calcutta. While staying in Calcutta, his demand being rejected, Maniram joined the Revolt. The Dewan, therefore, sent many letters to Raja Kandarpeswar Singha and Assamese nobles to make plots of the Revolt and expel the British from the Brahmaputra Valley.

While the Revolt was unfolding, the people of Jaintia also became disaffected. The low lying plain areas of it was annexed to the British territory in 1835. But Raja Rajendra Singh and his people were not satisfied with the treatment meted out by the British Government. When the ex-Raja heard about the fall of the British Empire in 1857, he hatched plots with his Dolois (leaders) and also with the Raja of Cherrapunji. Because of this seditious act, the British Government ordered for the Raja's arrest and also to send him to Calcutta. But, owing to the failure of Rajendra's conspiracy with the Raja of Cherrapunji, there was no serious event worth mentioning.

Chittagong was also one of the known villages of the Revolt of 1857. At that place, three British companies of the 34<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry Regiment were deployed. In the beginning of the Revolt, the sepoys of the said companies remained loyal to the British Indian Government. But when the wave of the Revolt reached Jagadishpur (Bihar), the sepoys of Chittagong became restless and, all of a sudden, rose against the Government on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1857. Initially, they intended to march to North India in collusion with the 73<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Dacca and fight a united war against the British along with all the rebels of North India. But circumstances rendered them to march in the direction of North-East with a misconception to reach North India via Manipur.

The Barak Valley was under the Kachari rulers when its people started commercial relationship with the British. But the kingdom became very weak under its Raja Govindchandra (1813-30). During this period, Manipuri princes who took shelter in the region expelled him to Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and ruled over the southern part of the valley (South Cachar) for about six years (1818-1823). Consequently, thousands of Manipuris became permanent citizens of Cachar having sound economy. But when South Cachar was annexed by the British in 1832, the latter's colonial economy made the people of the region frustrated. In fact, the Manipuris living in Cachar no longer liked to be under the British. By the time when the people of Cachar joined the Revolt, the districts of Sylhet and Cachar were under the control of the Sylhet Light Infantry.

#### **Logical diffusion and unrest**

There was, obviously, a logical diffusion of the Revolt in North-East British India. The main causes of that ideological spread were - presence of Maniram Dewan in Calcutta who had imported the ideas of 1857 Revolt in the Brahmaputra Valley; secondly, incriminating letters, mendicants and agents from North India which had effected to the spread of rebel ideas; thirdly, the mutiny of three companies of the 34<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry Regiment, Chittagong and their march to North-East India and fourthly, spreading of the news of the fall of British rule in India with the completion of the latter's one-hundred years rule (i.e., 100 years after the Battle of Plassey, 23 June 1757).

In fact, after the rebels' occupation of Delhi and Lucknow, they decided to incite the sepoys and the people of Bengal (it includes North-East people) for a united war against the British. In this connection, a rebel proclamation expressed:

'A proclamation should be issued both to the troops and people of Bengal if possible, or if otherwise, as far as possible at present, to the effect that the people of every city, whether Hindus or Muslims, should be unanimous in attacking simultaneously this accursed nation (by the appointment of a leader in each city).'<sup>4</sup> Another appeal, which had a far reaching logical impact, was also issued by the Mughal Emperor. It expressed:

'Hook or by crook, the Feringis must be driven out from Hindusthan. Must they be cleared out, even, at the cost of your life. All Hindusthan, must regain independence. But we must have the leader who shall be honest, sincere and have the command over the disintegrated people. He shall have to be courageous too.'<sup>5</sup>

Maniram, being in Calcutta, was influenced by such appeals and, thereafter, imported the logic of the Revolt in the Brahmaputra Valley sending secret letters. Besides, the people of the valley also felt the idea of the Revolt from the sepoy lines since the latter belonged mostly to Bihar and other regions of North India. These sepoys also had secret meetings with Raja Kandarpeswar to expel the British from the valley. Besides, the agents from North India also entered secretly into many places of British North-East and, in that process, aroused the sepoys in Assam to rise under the leadership of Raja Kandarpeswar Singha. Hannay told Carter on 17<sup>th</sup> August, 1857 that agents from Northern India were in Gauhati and "trying to arrange a rising amongst our Sepoys in connection with the Assam Raja."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Raja Kandarpeswar Singha, who was supported by a large number of Assamese and the sepoys deployed in Assam, hatched many conspiracies to expel the British from the Brahmaputra Valley. Here, a report expressed:

'Many of the men of the First Assam Light Infantry are from the Arrah District (in Bihar) ... Some of them are from the estates of Koar Singh and an uneasy spirit has lately been perceived to prevail among them. From information collected from independent quarters, the men of the regiment above mentioned appear to have been in communication with the Jorehat Rajah, Sarang Kunderpesswar Singh (nominal Ahom King of Assam), and to have offered to retake the province and hold it for him, pending the receipt of final instruction, it is believed from Delhi.'<sup>7</sup>

The culminating point of the conspiracy was a meeting of the sepoys at Golaghat on 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1857. But the meeting failed to spark the flame of the Revolt. Major Hannay, after hearing the proceedings of Sepoys at Golaghat, got Shaikh Bhikan and other leaders arrested and brought them to Dibrugarh. In the mean time, at Dibrugarh too, Major Hannay arrested other mutinous sepoys of the Regiment. After such acts of removing those armed elements from the body of conspirators, Raja Kandarpeswar Singha was arrested on 9<sup>th</sup> September, 1857. Following it, important leaders who had been arrested were Peali Barua, Madhu Mallik, the Marangikhowa Gohain, Mayaram Nazir, Dutiram Barua, Bahadur Gaonburah, Shaikh Farmud and several others- all alleged to have been participated, directly and indirectly, in the plot. Maniram was also arrested in Calcutta sometime in September 1857.

The British Government then held a chain of Court Martials and other trials under Act No. XIV of 1857. Consequently, rebel sepoys viz. Balavant Singh, Ramtahol Singh, Kripa Ram, Seshwai Singh, Chandra Singh, Aly Khan, Shaikh Oogni (Gani?), Chandar Singh and Hidayat Ali- all of them were sentenced to transportation for life; some had to suffer long terms of rigorous imprisonment while a large number, including the sepoys of Golaghat, were discharged from duties.'<sup>8</sup> Maniram Dewan and his associate Peali Barua were executed at Jorhat on the 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1858. Two weeks later, on March 12, Narayan Barbora, Umakanta Sarma and Ganesh Barua were sentenced to three years imprisonment and were committed to the Sibsagar gaol. Nilakanta Sholadhara Phukan, Mayaram Nazir, Kamala Charingia Barua and Luki Senchoa Barua were sentenced to transportation for a term of fourteen years each on March 16, 1858, and were deported to the Andaman isle. Marangikhowa Gohain, Dutiram Barua and Sheik Bahadur Gaonbura received life-long transportation to the same isle. Kandarpeswar was not brought to trial; he was excused on the ground of his tender age. On their trial, a Special Narrative of the Government of Bengal expressed:

'Five persons were tried under Act XIV of 1857 in the District of Sibsagar during the month of February (1858) of whom two (one being Muniram Dutta formerly the Raja's Dewan) were sentenced to death, one to transportation for life, and two to transportation for 14 years each. These individuals were convicted of having instigated the Rajah of Jorehat to rebel and wage war against the state.'<sup>9</sup>

Hence, the people of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam played a great role in the freedom struggle of India under their Raja Kandarpeswar Singha and Dewan Maniram.

At Chittagong, the sepoys were logically influenced by mendicants and agents from North India. On it, a report expressed:

‘Two up-countrymen were apprehended at Bograh, who, from their own accounts had been at Moorshedabad at the time of the expected disturbances and the disarming of the troops at that place, and had proceeded then via Dacca to Chittagong, and then returned to Dacca, being present at both places when the troops mutinied.... They described themselves to be natives of Tirhoot.’<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, those three companies of the 34<sup>th</sup> N.I. mutinied on 18 November 1857. They intended to march to North India. But since the British army had already deployed along the road to Delhi, they had to march towards North-East hopping to reach Manipur. When they passed through the territory of the Raja of Tripura, the latter did his best to check and arrest them. On his role, Dr. Jagadis Gan-Chaudhuri wrote:

‘They (Chittagong sepoys) moved northwards, crossed the river Feni on 22 November 1857 and entered into the Raja’s territory (Tripura). The Raja issued orders for the arrest and delivery to the British authorities of all mutineers found wandering within the limits of Hill Tipperah. Some of them escaped by entering into the deep hills northeastward: some of them were arrested and handed over to the British authorities in Comilla where they were executed. Babu Golak Chandra Singha, the father of Kailash Chandra Singh (1851-1914) was appointed political officer for the purpose.’<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the Raja of Tripura did his best to contain the design of the mutineers from Chittagong.

When the rebels reached Lata (Karimganj District, Assam) on 18 December 1857, the Sylhet Light Infantry under Major R.P.V. Byng charged the rebels with a thundering volley. In the ensuing gun battle, twenty-six sepoys made their supreme sacrifice. On the British side, they lost their commander Major Byng and other 5 sepoys. Depicting the real picture of the Battle of Lata, a source from the British army accounts: ‘... the Regiment attacked the mutineers on the Cachua river. During the crossing Major Byng, leading his men under heavy fire, was killed. Seeing him fall, the mutineers called out, “Now we have killed the Sahib come and join us.”’<sup>12</sup>

Battle of Lata was the greatest event of the Revolt of 1857 in North East India. The battlefield cries of the mutineers show that their first target was to kill the British Officers and, then, to unite the Indian sepoys of the two belligerent camps. Indeed, their intention was not to shed blood among Indians but to popularize the idea of unity among Indian sepoys (who represent every section of Indians) and expel the British from the soil of India.

After the Battle of Lata, those Chittagong mutineers entered into the Cachar Valley and they were, subsequently, joined by the people of the place under the leadership of Manipuri Prince Sana Chahi Ahum/Narendrajit Singh. Hence, the mutiny obviously turned into a revolt in Cachar. The joint rebels then fought the Battle of Binnacandy against the British army on 12<sup>th</sup> January, 1858, but they were defeated. Later, Prince Sana Chahi Ahum was arrested and sent to the Andaman Isles. For the great role Sana Chahi Ahum played in the Revolt, the prince is recorded as one of the great leaders of 1857 Revolt giving the remark: ‘He joined the Chittagong mutineers with his followers.’<sup>13</sup>

The presence of Chittagong sepoys and their union with Manipuri Princes of Cachar, who usually aimed at the throne of Manipur, generated a great unrest to Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh of Manipur. Therefore, the Raja sent 400 Manipuri warriors on the Cachar border to check entry of the rebels into Manipur.

Under the fourth current, places like Khasi and Jaintia Hills (in Meghalaya state) were aroused as Dr. Syiemlieh expressed on the report of Mr. Allen: ‘He (Allen) reported that “exaggerated rumours” of the fall of the British power had caused some excitement among the Khasi chiefs. Mention is specially made of the former Jaintia raja, Rajendra Singh and his intrigues with the Cherra *Syiem* (king) to recover his lost possession.’<sup>14</sup> The Cherra Raja had already expressed his loyal disposition to the British Government. Therefore, the conspiracy of Raja Rajendra Singh with Cherra Raja failed.

#### **Tactful British policies**

With the Revolt spreading fast, there was a serious danger of getting its impact in North-East India too. Therefore, the Government took up various tactful steps to contain it.

**Diplomacy to control the Brahamaputra Valley and Chittagong:** In the Brahamaputra Valley of Assam, as the native sepoys were hatching a conspiracy for the Revolt in connection with the Assam Raja, the Government took up a prompt action as a report expressed: ‘Precautionary measures were taken to prevent mutiny at Debroogarh by calling in all from out posts, all Nepalese, Muneepoorees, Rabha and Cacharee sepoys of the 1<sup>st</sup> Assam Light Infantry. They were placed as guards over the fortified square, in which is the treasury of Debroogarh.’<sup>15</sup> In order to prevent subversive acts on the part of the sepoys, the Gurkhas were mixed up particularly in the artillery wing which was the mainstay of the Hindustanis (Indians in revolt).

Piquets were also posted at all strategic positions. In order to check any anti-Government activities among the sepoys, Col. Jenkins also built up a force of Military Police. Above this, even if the British had known the Raja's involvement in the conspiracy in the month of July, they did not arrest him thinking that, by doing so, they might face a sudden outbreak with the help of the sepoys and common Assamese. The Government, therefore, arrested those mutinous sepoys first. After it, with great care, Raja Kandarpeswar was arrested from the palace at Jorhat without much bloodshed. What they had planned not to provoke common people was tactfully fulfilled. Hence the British, though less in number, were far superior to the rebel.

Another very tactful step was the psychological warfare of the British in sending 100 British Army (mostly untrained seamen) to Dibrugarh on the steamer Haroonghatta. As the journey from Calcutta to Upper Assam was a long one, there was a high possibility of a premature explosion of the revolt while the British army was on the way. Here also, the Government wanted to hide the real objective of the steamer telling that it was to go to Dacca only. That was why those seamen on the Haroonghatta mutinied when they were to proceed further from Dacca. In this connection, the Court of Directors was reported:

'The utmost care was taken to dispatch the force to Assam and the secrecy necessary to prevent its destination being known- but it is feared that this intention has been frustrated by the ill-judged publication of the departure of the steamer and the notification of its objects by the Calcutta papers. It is hoped that this injudicious proceeding may not be attended with the serious results that would ensue from a revolt in the province in its present unprotected state. Such an... contingency was feared by the officers in Assam, who pointed out the urgent necessity of extreme care being observed preventing the promulgation of transmission, before its arrival, of any European force that might be sent, lest the knowledge of the approach of aid should cause a premature explosion of the expected revolt.'<sup>16</sup>

In the mean time, the mutiny of the 34<sup>th</sup> N.I. Chittagong and that of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Dacca Regiment had created much havoc in North-East India. To tide over the crisis in that valley, the Governor-General in Council issued orders to send another party of 100 seamen with three officers on board the steamer Koladyne. Hence, the presence of more Europeans in uniform was a great setback to Assamese mind though most of them were untrained seamen.

At Chittagong, in order to control any unrest, Mr. Chapman, the Officiating Commissioner, recruited a new force of 90 men to strengthen the Company's force. He also engaged a good instructor for the new recruit. When the mutineers of Chittagong marched towards North-East, the British Army, under Major R. P. V. Byng, tactfully collected an intelligence report relating to the destination and design of the mutineers through two Manipuri scouts whom the British paid a reward of 100 Rupees each. Hence, the British could handle the situation and tried its best to suppress the Revolt.

**Deputation of Mr. Allen:** The British Government, in order to contain the spread of the Revolt in North-East India, deputed Mr. W.J. Allen, Officiating Member of the Board of Revenue, at Cherrapunji in the last part of August 1857. Districts of Sylhet and Cachar were placed under the Officer. On the role played by him, it is expressed: 'At Sylhet Mr. Allen had taken every precaution for the protection of the district. He had also written to Capt. McCulloch at Munipoor to warn the Munipoor Government to be prepared to attack the fugitives should they find their way into the territory.'<sup>17</sup> In fact, had the Sylhet Light Infantry not taken a prompt action under the directives of Mr. Allen, the Eastern frontiers of British India would have been under a serious political deadlock.

**Diplomatic possession of Manipur Army:** The serious condition in North India resulted to the concentration of thousands of British army on that front. Therefore, the number of security forces was much less in North-East India. Consequently, in the first week of August 1857, the Government decided to establish a Manipuri corps consisting mainly of native Manipuris as they were considered brave. Therefore, it was reported: 'Orders were issued to the Pol. Agent at Munipoor and the officer commanding the S.L.I. (Sylhet Light Infantry) to raise a corps each of 1500 Munipooreans to be drilled at Cherrapunji.'<sup>18</sup> But the people of Manipur remained indifferent mainly because- earlier, the Government greedily ceded Kabaw Valley of Manipur to Burma (1834); secondly, the Government also delinked the Manipur Levy from the British army thinking that Burma would no longer aggress to the British territory after the secession of Kabaw Valley to Burma.

Therefore, the Superintendent of Cachar seriously applied to the Government for more troops. But the Government directed: 'There were none at present available which could be sent to his assistance, but that the Lt. Governor would be glad to consider any plan he might propose for strengthening his frontier.'<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the Superintendent decided to tactfully possess the army of Manipur by provoking Maharaja Chandrakirti of Manipur. He wrote: 'With so many ambitious Monipooree princes in the country (Cachar)

who have their eye upon Manipoor \* \* \* I think some movement on their part imminent and trust that His Honour will agree with me, and put into my possession the means of arresting (?) it.’<sup>20</sup> The supreme government then intimated that ‘the arrangement made by the superintendent for opposing the Mutineers of the 34<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry, if they attempt to pass through the district approved.’<sup>21</sup> When the Chittagong rebels were joined by Prince Sana Chahi Ahum and his party, on the basis of R. Stewart’s intimation, McCulloch, the Agent at Manipur, expressed to Raja Chandrakirti Singh: ‘Munniporees who might guide them to this country were with the Mutineers.’<sup>22</sup> On hearing this intelligence report, Maharaja Chandrakirti sent 400 sepoy under a Major to Jiri, the boundary between Cachar and Manipur, to check the rebels and McCulloch also informed the Superintendent ‘of the despatch of those troops to the boundary and that they were placed at his orders.’<sup>23</sup> Thus, the Superintendent of Cachar successfully formulated this diplomacy to possess the Manipur army for the cause of the British Government.

Hence, in the Revolt of 1857, the people of North-East India were not silent observers. There were many conspiracies and great events to overthrow the British administration. But the Government could control and suppress the rebels with careful handling and tactful policies.

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23. *Ibid.*

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