

## **Amalgamation Policy Revisited: Three British Proposals toward the Indo-Burma Frontier**

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The paper probes the trajectories of colonial policy towards the Indo-Burma frontier and to what extent they affected the local population. It focuses on the Zo people, or Chin, Kuki and Lushai people, with whom the British had a long history of relations in the Indo-Burma frontier. The paper basically focuses on three British proposals for “amalgamation” of Zo inhabited areas in the Indo-Burma frontier. It argues that colonial policy towards the Chin-Lushai hills largely hinges on its larger policy in Burma, Bengal and Assam respectively. Because colonial policy was driven by an underlying objective to fulfill “administrative convenience” and local interest found no place for consideration; thus, the net result achieved was fragmentation rather than amalgamation.

**Keywords:** Chin-Lushai Hills, Zo, Frontier, Colonialism, Indo-Burma Frontier

### **Introduction**

British annexation of an “unadministered” hill tracts in the Indo-Burma frontier came in the late nineteenth century. However, colonial contact, albeit irregular, with the hill tribes in these hill tracts may be traced even before the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) particularly on the Bengal frontier. The War, however, placed the British in a position where they began to have regular contact with the hill tribes. Initially, the policy followed by the British towards the Indo-Burma frontier was non-intervention. It was largely a defensive strategy to protect the British territories from Burmese incursion, on one hand, and also a preventive measure to defend their protectorates from raids and depredations from the hill tribes, on the other. The main components of such approach include the recruitment of local military police, formation of tribal militia or irregulars, and establishment of outposts for fortification.<sup>1</sup> The formation of the Kachar levy and the Kuki levy are a case in point. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bengal government was convinced that “non-

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interference and purely defensive action is now found to be wholly inadequate to prevent".<sup>2</sup> Its new Lieutenant Governor Cecile Beadon strongly advocated for "conciliation and establishment of personal influence of European officers".<sup>3</sup> Colonial policy thus changed its trajectory after the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885-86). Having established its foothold on each sides of the Chin-Lushai hills, the British quickly resorted to an interventionist approach and sent several military expeditions to the hill tracts that resulted to the annexation of the entire hill tracts that separated Bengal, Burma and Assam. What prompted such a sequence of policy change in the colonial establishment, how far they were able to implement, and to what extent they affected the local population are pertinent questions this paper seeks to answer.

The paper reviews British policy towards the hill tribes on the Indo-Burma frontier with a particular focus on the Chin-Lushai Hills and its adjoining areas where an ethnic Zo community, or the Chin, Kuki and Lushai tribes, predominantly settled. As a background to the wider discussion on colonial policy towards the Indo-Burma frontier, the paper first tries to locate Zo 'culture area' and the representation of the Zo in colonial ethnography. This is aimed to help set a clear cultural space that the colonial rulers were going to deal with as they seek expansion in the Indo-Burma frontier. The rest of the paper focuses on the different policies proposed by colonial officers in order to 'amalgamate' either partly or wholly, the reasons behind such proposal, and more importantly the hurdles and challenges faced by them. It takes into account three British proposals beginning with Henry Hopkinson's proposal for the formation of a common administration for the Zo in the northern Arakan hills and the Chittagong hills followed by James Johnstone's proposal for amalgamation of Manipur and northern Chin Hills, both of them being an attempt to bring partial amalgamation of Zo inhabited areas. The next section deals with the Chin-Lushai Conference of 1892, which came in the aftermath of the annexation of the entire Chin-Lushai Hills and therefore aimed to "amalgamate" the hill tracts under a single administration. It examines the debates and arguments amongst colonial officers and the reason behind its failure. The paper argues that a common denominator which underlined the failure of the three proposals was "rivalry among colonial officers" on the one hand, and undermining of the interest of the local population for the sake of "administrative convenience", on the other.

### **Locating Zo in the Indo-Burma Frontier**

Before dealing with British policy, it is important to locate the Zo in the Indo-Burma frontier through the lens of a "culture area" on the one hand, and through colonial ethnography record, on the other. This will help set the present discussion in perspective to understand why colonial rulers had to come out with different policies in order to "amalgamate" the Zo inhabited areas under one administration. An interesting perspective given by A. I. Asiwaju in his study on the Africans throw light on how one should look at territories which were formerly administered by colonial rulers. According to Asiwaju, boundaries have been drawn across well-established lines of communication, very strong kinship ties, shared socio-political institutions and economic resources, common custom and practices etc. Boundaries also separated

communities of worshippers from age-old sacred groves and shrines. In some instances, water resources in a predominantly pastoral and nomadic culture area were located in one state while the pastures were in another.<sup>4</sup> In other words, boundaries fragmented, dismembered, and divided a “culture area”.

### **Zo “Culture Area”**

The concept “culture area” was initially built on the ideas of Franz Boas, who felt the need of classifying the material which was to be exhibited in the museum cases.<sup>5</sup> The applications of this concept in the study of cultural differences and likenesses were first made to the North American data, and they have been developed to the largest degree by Clark Wissler<sup>6</sup> and Alfred Louis Kroeber<sup>7</sup>, both students of Boas. According to Kroeber, “A culture area was a geographical region in which a given culture set a pattern of elements that was reflected by surrounding cultures to diminishing degrees, ascertainable by counting, as one reached the boundaries of the area where the influences of other patterns took over”.<sup>8</sup> Wissler, who was concerned only with material culture areas in his original paper, later expanded the culture content and said “culture areas were regions with relative uniformity of total culture”.<sup>9</sup> Later, Edward Sapir defines culture areas as “groups of geographically contiguous tribes that exhibit so many cultural traits in common as to contrast with other such groups”.<sup>10</sup>

Generally, there are two schools of thought on “culture area”: those who believed in horizontal transmission of culture and those on vertical transmission. Kulturkreis school and Leiden school agreed that common elements in a geographical region were the result of historical borrowing and diffusion or Horizontal transmission (borrowing across cultures). On the other hand, in vertical transmission stories are derived from a common tradition passed on by speakers of the same or related languages or transmitted down generations. In his recent study on the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Stuart Blackburn says, “If oral stories take us inside a local culture, they also point outward to other cultures”.<sup>11</sup> He found that stories in Central Arunachal have a set of substantial parallels with stories told in the Naga Hills, Chin Hills, Chittagong Hills, northern Burma, upland Southeast Asia, and Southwest China. Previous anthropological works on tribes of these region were done by Edmund Leach (Kachin), F K Lehman (Chin), Thomas Kirsch (SEA), Milton Katz (eastern Himalayas), Hans Eberhard Kauffman (tribes of Assam) etc.

In this paper I would like to take the territorial space inhabited by Zo ethnic community in the India-Burma frontier as a “culture area”. Zo people settlements are found sandwich between the plains of Manipur and the Cachar valley in the north, the Chittagong division in the southwest, and Arakan and the Kabaw-Kale valleys in the southeast and east. The cultural traits found in these hill tracts are quite distinct from those of the plains which lay adjacent to it. For instance, the practice of shifting cultivation in the hills as against wet-rice cultivation in the plain; hill polity which revolved around the village chieftainship, which also holds economic and religious powers, whereas in case of the plain polity, the raja or sawbwa was the centre of attention; a unique social system such as the *ham/sawm/zawlbuk* (bachelors’ dormitory) that existed in the hills was absent in the plain society and it goes on. Such cultural

distinctions validate the argument that the hill tracts in the Indo-Burma frontier perfectly suits to the concept of a separate “culture area” as given by Kroeber, Wissler and Sapir.

Following Stuart Blackburn’s common stories that connect Arunachal Pradesh and other regions in the Northeast and Southeast Asia, I would like to examine the shared cultural traditions that make what I call the Zo “culture area” distinct from others. This may be viewed through colonial categories of the Zo into Chin, Kuki, Lushai and the like.

Firstly, the Chin, Kuki, Lushai all believed in the Myth of origin which they variedly call Khul, Chhinlung, Sinlung or Leikhao. There are different opinions regarding the location of these places, nevertheless, these terms commonly refer to “a cave” or “hole in the earth”. *Khul suan vontawi* in Zomi<sup>12</sup> means descendants of Khul and *Chhinlung chuak* in Lushai (Mizo) refers to those who originated from Chhinlung, both implies the same meaning. All points to the origin of their forefathers from “a cave” whose location, however, remains a mystery.

Secondly, the myth of ritual journey and belief in the abode of the dead is another significant cultural marker of the Chin-Kuki-Lushai people. In Zomi tradition there are two realms of abode of the dead (*misikhua*). They are *pusi-khua* (pleasant abode) and *sasi-khua* (miserable abode). But in Mizo tradition, *pialral* is the pleasant abode and *mithikhua* is the resting place for ordinary people who could not fulfil certain sacrifices. In Zomi belief, one goes to *pusi-khua* if he dies a natural death, but he must go to *sasi-khua* if he dies by the hands of enemy; he could enter *pusi-khua* when his death was avenged. There are different routes to *misikhua*; Ramthro village in Chin Hills believed that the dead goes to his abode by climbing over the ridge of Zinghmu *tlang* (hills) but the Hualngo tribe maintains it went via Rih Lake. In Zomi tradition the dead goes beyond a river called *Guun* or the Manipur River. It thus appears that the most prominent river or mountain which are in close proximity to a particular tribe seems to be considered as the route to the abode of the dead.

The third cultural marker of the Kuki-Chin-Lushai people is the “Feasts of Merit” locally known as *Ton*, *Chon* or *Khuangcawi*. *Ton* is the greatest of all the household ceremonial rites. “These feasts”, according to H. N. C. Stevenson, “are the cornerstone of the Chin economic structures. The largest portion of the Chin surplus resources are utilized through this channel and in them the Chin finds the major portion of his psychological and spiritual satisfactions”.<sup>13</sup> According to Sing Khaw Khai, *Ton* is of two kinds: *Sialtang-sut* and *Sialkop-gawh*. While the first refers to ritual killing of one *sial* (mithun), the second means the slaughter of two *sial* (mithun).<sup>14</sup> What is quite interesting with regard to the *Ton* or Feasts of Merit is that it being a household ceremony greatly involved the *bangkua* or *inndongta* (household council). Familial relationship or household council is something which is a distinct tradition among the Chin-Kuki-Lushai people.

The fourth cultural marker is language. Chin, Kuki and Lushai have very close linguistic affinity and for these reason a colonial linguist G. A. Grierson grouped them under the Kuki-Chin linguistic group of the Tibeto-Burman family. Many researches on Kuki-Chin languages also established common features in verb stem

alternation, tone, person agreement etc.<sup>15</sup>

### **Representation of Zo in colonial ethnography<sup>16</sup>**

From the early nineteenth century onward, the British military officers, administrative officers-cum-ethnographers and surveyors slowly but truly explored and discovered the existence of numerous tribes in the Indo-Burma frontier. What is quiet interesting in the finding of several ethnographic studies on these tribes is the ethnic commonality and cultural similarity or likenesses of disparate tribes who they came into contact with in the Indo-Burma frontier. Such endeavours throw light on the existence of multiple sense of the “self”. These may be noted in the administrative reports and census records of the Northern Arakan Hill Tracts, the Chin Hills, and the Lushai Hills, Chittagong Hill Tracts and the like. A glimpse of this can be had from the following:

In the Arakan Hill Tracts R. F. St. Andrew gives the tribes of North Arakan as follows: The Rakhkaing or Chyoung-thah, Shandoo, Hkamie, commonly called Hkwaymie, Mro, Anu, or Hkoung-tso, Chin or Hkyn, Chaw.<sup>17</sup> Later, Major Gwynne Hughes in 1881 gives the ethnological composition as Kamees, Choungtha, Mroo, Chaw, Chin and Koon.<sup>18</sup> Some of the local names are Lemyo, Matu, Cho, Asho etc.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts the tribes, according to Snyed Hutchinson, include: Mru, Kuki, Khumi, Khyeng, Banjogi, Pankho.<sup>19</sup> Later, Lucien Bernot mentioned the Mro and Mrung, Pankho, Banjogi, Khyang, Khami, Lushei, Kuki.<sup>20</sup>

In the Chin Hills, Bertram Carey and Henry Tuck give the various tribes of the Chin Hills such as Sukte, Sizang, Tashon, Hakha, Thlantlang, Zokhua, Shindu and other independent tribes such as Chinbok, Chinbon, Chinme. They also mentioned the Guite, Thado, Zo, Vaiphei etc.<sup>21</sup> Other local names include: Zotung, Zophei, Lai, Hualngo, Zangiat, Khuano, Saizang, Teizang, Dim. But according to C. S. Lewis, the principal tribes in Chin Hills include the Sukte (including the Kamhau), Sizang, Taisun, Zahau, Hualngo, Lai (or Hakas), Thantlang and Zokhua which belonged to northern Chin hills. Those in the Central Chin hills includes Chinboks, Yindus, Kamis and Mros. He called the Chaungthas, Taungthas and the Saks or Thets as hybrid Chin tribes.<sup>22</sup>

In the Lushai Hills the Lusei, Hualngo, Duhlian, Ralte, Chhangte, Lai, Mara, Sailo etc. were recorded. In Manipur the Thado, Khongjai, Zou, Guite, Vaiphei, Khuangnung, Gangte, Hmar, Sukte etc. belonged to Zo ethnic group. Initially, colonial ethnographers used the term Kuki as a common nomenclature to refer to Zo people settled in the Lushai Hills, Tripura, Assam, Manipur etc. In course of time, the term Lushai and later Mizo became more popular in the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) whereas Kuki remained an official category for many tribes in India's Northeast states in the postcolonial times.

It may be mentioned that colonial ethnographers and rulers broadly categorized Zo people into Chin, Kuki and Lushai. Those who are within the jurisdiction of Chin Hills and its adjoining areas come under “Chin” category, those in the Lushai Hills are known as Lushai, and those in Assam, Tripura, and Manipur are generally referred to as “Kuki”. There are many reasons behind such categorization of the Zo into three broad categories. Perhaps, one most important reason may be the derivation of names

based on local information from early colonial “informers”. Today, numerous tribes or sub-tribes which ethnically belonged to Zo ethnic group have received government recognition in Northeast India and the process of fragmentation continues. A colonial linguist G. A. Grierson thus cautioned that “he is not responsible for the name, which is a legacy from older writers. Kuki is merely the name applied in Assam to the people that we call Chins, though a Kuki from our Chin country may, when he goes over the border, be referred to officially as a Chin, just as a Chin from over the Assam border may be called a Kuki by our officials”.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, when the British came into contact with the Zo in the Indo-Burma frontier, to the late nineteenth century when the entire territory inhabited by latter had been annexed, several accounts, either colonial or missionary, available on the hill tribes of the Indo-Burma frontier. What is commonly found in such accounts is that there is a recognition of the ethnic commonality of the disparate tribes who inhabited the hill tracts that separate Bengal and Burma. It was based on the findings of ethnographical studies that colonial rulers framed their policy towards the Indo-Burma frontier. Had it not been for military considerations that often give weigh in favour of “administrative convenience” that there had been attempts to “amalgamate” the territory inhabited by the Zo people under one administration. Proposals to somehow bring together tribes who ethnically belonged to one group under a common administration first came from Arakan followed by another one from Manipur, albeit these earlier two proposals were limited in the scope of the proposed “amalgamation”. But it was the post-annexation of the Chin-Lushai Hills that prompted the British to seriously think in terms of the future civil and military administration of the Zo people. So, the outcome was a complete “amalgamation” of all Zo inhabited areas under a single administration in late nineteenth century. These whole process of colonial policy towards the Zo in the Indo-Burma frontier was informed by ethnographical findings that they had been dealing with people of the same ethnicity who live in a “cultural space”. The following discussion will give details about how and why colonial policies had come and failed.

### **Henry Hopkinson’s proposal in the Arakan-Chittagong frontier**

Lieutenant Henry Hopkinson, principal assistant commissioner at Akyab in Arakan, was the first colonial officer to make proposal for amalgamation of the Zo inhabited areas in the Arakan-Chittagong frontier. Following the annexation of Arakan in 1824-26, Captain Ross and Lieutenant T. A. Trant of His Majesty’s 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot led the first group that successfully crossed the mountains through the Aeng Pass.<sup>24</sup> They remarked, “The Khyens nearest the plains are a quite inoffensive set, and must be distinguished from the Khyens of the further mountains...”<sup>25</sup> The Zo on that frontier were divided into two categories: one was the subjected or so-called “tamed” Zo who paid tributes to the Burman government and were considered “inoffensive” or “harmless” whereas the other group were those who remained beyond the reach of the British and marked as “wild”, “independent”, or “untamed” Zo. Later, Lieutenant T. Latter of the Arakan Battalion in 1846 found several Zo tribes on the banks of the Koladan River such as “The Khumis, the Mrus (of which there are two tribes, speaking

distinct dialects), the Anoods, the Kyaus, the Khons, the Shentoos (Shindu/Lakher/Mara/Pawi), and the Khyongthas”.<sup>26</sup>

The tribes on the Chittagong hills were, according to Francis Buchanan who visited in 1798, broadly Joomeas, Tipperahs, Chakmas and Koongkies.<sup>27</sup> This tells us that the Bengalese generally called the Zo in that area as Koongky, which Buchanan says, “we have corrupted into Kooky, or as it is written in the *Asiatic Researches*, Cuci”.<sup>28</sup> Loo-sai, Loo-she and Lang-ga or Linkta were another form of Koongky<sup>29</sup> besides Mru (Moroo-sa), Bawm (Bon-zu, Bonjoogies or Bawm-zo), the Sak (Thaek), the Mrung (Doingnak) etc.<sup>30</sup>

In the Arakan hills Lieutenant Albert Fytche of the Arakan Local Battalion and Lieutenant Arthur Purves Phayre, the senior assistant commissioner at Akyab conducted a short military campaign in January 1841. This was followed by another expedition led by Lieutenant Henry Hopkinson in December 1847.<sup>31</sup> It was after these two military adventures that Hopkinson thought that the best method for dealing with the frontier tribes should be through the amalgamation of the hill tracts of Chittagong and Arakan under a British superintendency:

My opinion therefore is that extraordinary authority must be resorted to; that if the pacification of these regions is a measure that has been seriously and earnestly determined as a thing that has got to be done, special agents must be appointed to do it; in a word that both the Kupas Mehal and the Upper Koladan should be placed in charge of European Superintendents.<sup>32</sup>

Hopkinson further said, “in the establishment of superintendency lies the last and only chance of success”. The nature of the frontier problem convinced Hopkinson even to suggest that the tribes should be left to their own devices if a policy of intervention cannot be tried, or in the event of its failure. He was fully convinced that if Bengal and the Government of India did not agree to his proposal he would rather follow a purely non-interventionist policy and have nothing further to do with the frontier tribes.<sup>33</sup>

By proposing to bring “Kupas Mehal”, as the Chittagong Hill Tract was known earlier, and “Upper Koladan” (Northern Arakan Hill Tract), Hopkinson sought to solve the problem of what he called “raids” which often comes from the “hills fastnesses” to British controlled territories. Such proposal could have inadvertently brought the Zo people in the Chittagong and Arakan frontiers under one umbrella. But the proposal did not convince the Lieutenant-Governor John Peter Grant who viewed the problem differently, thus: “In addition to the extreme unhealthiness of the climate there would be great difficulty in distinguishing between those who are in the habit of committing these periodical depredations and those who are favourable and friendly to our rule”.<sup>34</sup> Grant was only prepared to distribute arms to the frontier villages or subsidize tribal chiefs to keep the peace in their neighbourhood. To make the matter unfavourable for Hopkinson, a great revolt broke out in India in 1857 which required a huge military realignment across the country. Thus, it was only when a new lieutenant-governor, Cecile Beadon, succeeded that British frontier policy

underwent reconsideration. Under Beadon's policy of "conciliation", a separate administration called the Chittagong Hill Tracts (1860) and Northern Arakan Hill Tracts (1866) were established respectively. The proposal to amalgamate the tribes of Northern Arakan Hill Tracts and the Chittagong Hill Tracts was made based on ethnic commonality, which, however, was outweighed by military consideration.

### **James Johnstone and the Manipur-Chin Hills frontier**

Manipur-Chin Hills frontier had a long history of instability due to raids and counter-raids from both sides since the early nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century, Manipur was in constant trouble due to its "very irregular and ill defined" southern frontier.<sup>35</sup> The boundary laid down by Captain Robert Pemberton in the Treaty of 1834 mentioned, "part of the Sootie tribe at present live in Manipur and part in Burmese or independent territory".<sup>36</sup> Pemberton's boundary did not clearly show whether the Kamhau-Sukte, Thado and Zou tribes belonged to Manipur or Burma. In 1856 Colonel McCulloch rightly said "the south-eastern portion of Manipur territory had never been explored and that the Manipur authorities had never tried to bring the tribes inhabiting it into subjection".<sup>37</sup> In his *Account of the Valley of Manipur* (1859), McCulloch further remarked, "To the North-East and South, the boundary is not well defined, and would much depend upon the extent to which the Munnipore Government might spread its influence amongst the hill tribes in those directions".<sup>38</sup> It was in 1872 that Colonel Mowbray Thomson unequivocally stated, "The whole tribe seems to be practically independent and not to have been affected at all by the Treaty of 1834".<sup>39</sup> Therefore, he continued, "for all practical purposes this tribe should be considered as independent, and liable to punishment from either power (Manipur or Burmese) it raids".<sup>40</sup> Successive colonial records therefore undoubtedly got to rest the problems regarding the status of the frontier tribes mentioned above which cropped up as a result of the Treaty of 1834.

The disturbances in the not so well defined Manipur's southern frontier were a cause for serious concern when the British political agency was set up in 1835. Successive British political agents took steps to solve the Meitei-Sukte-Kamhau problem through conventional approach but to no avail. In 1881 Colonel James Johnstone, the political agent of Manipur, proposed for the annexation of the Chin Hills and amalgamates with Manipur. He argued:

Whatever may be the defects of the Maharaja's Government, it is for better than the fearful state of anarchy and barbarism in which these people live, and the subjection of the Sooties to his rule would not only seem the valleys of Manipur, Kubo and Kule from their outrages but in time would have allowed us to join hands with the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and would have thus shut in the Lushai tribes on all sides, and enabled us to take them in flank, thus conducing much to the peace of all the tract of country lying between Cachar and Chittagong.<sup>41</sup>

Nothing came out of Johnstone's proposal till the end of his tenure in 1886. However, the British annexation of Upper Burma in the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885-86)



gave another opportunity to Johnstone to revive his old proposal. He wrote to Sir Henry M Durand, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, on 27 December 1888 and proposed for the total subjugation of all the northern Zo (Chin) through and by means of Manipur.

The reason for Johnstone's proposal not cutting an ice with the higher authority was due to the strong opposition of Fitzpatrick, the chief commissioner of Assam and Robert McCabe, the former deputy commissioner of Assam. McCabe expressed his strong reservation on the Manipuri who "is not a born soldier, and has no true fighting instinct" so too was Fitzpatrick who did not have faith in the Raja of Manipur to administer the Chin Hills. This is what Fitzpatrick said:

The Government of a newly-acquired barbarous country no doubt requires no elaborate system of administration; but it needs a cool head, a true heart, and a strong hand, none of which are to be found in Manipur; and if it came choosing between the two, I would rather simply give the Chins a sound thrashing, place outposts along their frontier, and leave them to their own devices till we are ready to take them in hand, than make them over to Manipur.<sup>42</sup>

McCabe's argument, however, was "I would rather see a punitive expedition conducted and outposts placed along the frontier, leaving the Chins to their own barbarous devices, than place the country in the so-called civilizing control of the Manipuris".<sup>43</sup> It was for these reasons that His Excellency *Note* dated 29 October 1889 stated the impracticability of Sir James Johnstone's proposals.

The British set up the Manipur-Chin Hills Boundary Commission to delimitate the boundary between the two contiguous territories in 1894. The Commission demarcated a boundary in which a large territory of the Chin Hills had been awarded to Manipur. In his survey of the northern Chin Hills in 1892, Bertram Carey, political officer of Chin Hills, found four major tribes viz., Guite (13 villages), Thado (21 villages), Zou (19), Kamhau (25 villages), Sukte (9 villages), Gungal-Sukte (10 villages) and Sihzang (4 villages).<sup>44</sup> But the demarcation awarded 11 out of 21 Thado villages, 16 out of 19 Zou villages and 1 out of 13 Guite villages to Manipur.<sup>45</sup> In fact, this was done by the British to please the Maharaja of Manipur who had never exercised any control over the frontier villages in question.

### **The Chin-Lushai Conference: Colonial debate**

The larger problem that needs a close examination proposal for the amalgamation of the entire Chin-Lushai Hills at the Chin-Lushai Conference in 1892. The Conference was called in the aftermath of the annexation of the Chin-Lushai Hills to discuss the future civil and military administration. Three-pronged military assaults from Burma, Assam and Bengal led to the division of the hill tracts into three administrative units viz., Chin Hills, South Lushai Hills and North Lushai Hills. For the British government there was disadvantage in dividing the Chin-Lushai Hills into three separate civil administrations and three separate military commands.<sup>46</sup> With a view to address this problem Major General Sir Edwin Collen, the military secretary to the government

of India, suggested for a conference in September 1891.<sup>47</sup> It was endorsed by Sir Frederick Roberts, the commander-in-chief (India) who also raised the importance of the inclusion of the chief commissioner of Burma to represent the situation in the Chin Hills. When the matter was put up to the Viceroy Lord Lansdowne, he immediately noted that he too had felt that it would be necessary to put an end to the state of things under which the management of the Chin-Lushai tract fell partly to Bengal, partly to Assam and partly to Burma. He approved of the proposed conference and added that Burma's Chief Commissioner Sir Alexander Mackenzie should also be invited to attend.

The Chin-Lushai Conference was held at Fort Williams, Calcutta during 25-29 January 1892 under the presidentship of Sir Charles Alfred Elliott, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. On 29 January the Conference closed with the adoption of five Resolutions. The first stated that the majority were of the opinion that it was very desirable that the whole Chin-Lushai Hills should be brought under one administration, preferably under the Chief Commissioner of Assam. However, in view of Sir Alexander Mackenzie's determined opposition to the idea, the Conference in its second resolution decided that this step should not be taken immediately. At any rate, not before the difficulties of communications and of supplies and transport were sorted out and all operations in the Chin-Lushai hills concluded.

As stated above, Alexander Mackenzie was the man behind the failure to arrive unanimity in the conference resolution. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze Mackenzie's argument through his Minute, which was issued during the course of the Conference. He argued that there were 'insuperable difficulties' saying the "Chin tribes, which have hitherto had dealings only with Burma, have yet to be thoroughly subdued, and essential surveys and roads have yet to be made".<sup>48</sup> While he also considered that the policy to be followed in dealing with the Chin-Lushai hills should be identical, Mackenzie disagreed that local conditions were identical in the Chin and Lushai hills. Mackenzie's argument was:

Of course it is inconvenient that three different Local Governments and one Native State (i.e. Manipur) should be concerned in the management of the same great block of hills. But it is a mistake to treat the tribes inhabiting these hills as though they were one and the same people. Ethnologically they may be so, but politically they are a congeries of independent, and even hostile communities, looking out of their hills towards the plains from which they severally draw their surplus of salt and (hitherto) of slaves.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, Burma officers did not doubt the ethnic commonality of the Zo in the Chin Hills and the Lushai Hills. Nevertheless, local officers of the Chin Hills asserted their position not on ethnic differences but on the nature of the prevailing relationship between Burma and the Chin Hills. This was made very clear by Bertram Carey and McNabb of the Chin Hills.<sup>50</sup> The other views expressed in the reports of the Lushai officers (Shakespeare<sup>51</sup> and Robert Blair McCabe) on administrative problems cited by Charles Elliot cannot also be discounted. The two views on the opposite side of the border were based entirely on local administrative perspective; and not even a slightest

attention had been given on ethnical aspect. At the end of the day, the final recommendations of the Conference seemed to suggest that it was summoned only for the purpose of settling administrative (civil and military) issues and in the process colonial interest outweighed local interest.

When the ball was in the court of the Viceroy's Council in May-June 1892, opinions within the Council were divided. The Viceroy Lord Lansdowne was in favour of the recommendation. He said, "It has always seemed to me possible that eventually the new district thus created might include everything to the west of the Myittha Valley and of the valley which runs northward from it towards the frontier of Manipur".<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the Viceroy was not prepared to rush into this larger question and suggested the relatively modest proposal of attaching the North and South Lushai hills along with a part of the Arakan Hill Tracts to Assam.

The real game-changer was Sir Charles Crosthwaite, a senior member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. Being a former chief commissioner of Burma, Crosthwaite had wide knowledge about the Chin-Lushai tract and his views were understandably given due weight. This is how Crosthwaite explained why he was strongly against the idea of one administration:

I think it is seldom an advantage to separate administratively parts of a country which is by natural conditions related to, or dependent on, one another. The tract in question is so broad and extensive that there has been no through communication from Burma to Bengal. I think it is true that the tribes which raid on Burma and trade with Burmans do not make incursions into the plains on the western side and conversely. It is the interest of Burma to deal with these tribes which must visit the Burma villages on the plains, and will, if permitted, raid on Burma and harbour outlaws from that country. However loyal and zealous the officer placed in charge of the hills may be, the separation of these hills from Burma will inevitably render the Chin tribes less amenable and less disposed to obey the Burma officers to help them to pursue and recover criminals from the hills.<sup>53</sup>

Fully convinced by Crosthwaite's view three other members of the Council supported him. It is interesting that those who expressed opinions entirely in accordance with the Viceroy's were distinguished military officers. Their opinion seemed to be conditioned by the ongoing operations in the Chin-Lushai hills and its adjoining areas. Roberts once again pointed out:

Whenever we may decide to fix the boundary between the two Administrations, sometime must elapse before the semi-civilised tribes can be prevented from raiding across it, but it seems to me that the line of the Myittha Valley, as suggested by His Excellency the Viceroy, is likely to prove as satisfactory as any other from this point of view, while geographically and ethnologically it possess decided advantages.<sup>54</sup>

On 2 August 1892 the Government of India telegraphed to the chief commissioner at Rangon: "Chin Hills remains under Burma for the present".<sup>55</sup>

The final decision sealed the prospect of amalgamating the Chin Hills and the Lushai Hills. Though north and south Lushai Hills were later united under Assam in 1898, it was never with the Chin Hills. The separation of Burma and India in 1937, following the Government of India Act 1935, delineated a permanent international boundary in the middle of the Zo inhabited area.<sup>56</sup> Robert Reid's proposal for the creation of a Crown Colony in the Indo-Burma borderlands during the Second World War was in line with the spirit of the Chin-Lushai Conference of 1892, albeit in a much different and larger scale, however that too never saw the dawn of light.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it may be fairly said that British policy towards the Zo people of the Indo-Burma frontier was largely dictated by its larger interest in Burma, Assam and Bengal respectively. Moreover, in any policy formulation with regard to the frontier tribes, the British always undermined the interest of the indigenous population for the sake of "administrative convenience". A close study of colonial frontier policy has unpacked the colonial mind, where military and administrative considerations, or in other words "administrative convenience", was the catchwords or guiding spirit behind all British policies which came at the expense of the interests of the local population. It is for this reason that the idea of "amalgamation" which Hopkinson and Johnstone first proposed did not received positive response from their superior authorities. In these two cases the proposals came from the local officers but were nailed by the higher authorities. In the case of the Chin-Lushai Conference, the proposal for amalgamation came from the higher authority but it was opposed by local officers. Whatever the case maybe, the origin of the proposal is not important, but the reasons for its failure. There had been series of proposals for "amalgamation" of the Zo people under one administration, which is a proof of colonial understanding of the ethnic commonality of the different Zo tribes in the Indo-Burma frontier. However, there is no denying of the fact, as seen from the failure of all the three British proposals, that military and strategic considerations always outweighed ethnological commonality in determining colonial policy. Today, apart from the political division of the Zo in different nation-states, the existence of borders of mind, identity crisis, linguistic differences, unequal development in modern education, economy, and socio-cultural life are legacies of colonial failure to bring people of one ethnic community under a single administration. How to transcend all these borders, imagined or real, and re-create a cultural space which existed before the advent of colonialism is a big challenge for the indigenous Zo people.

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> For an indepth study of colonial policy in the North East Frontier, see Barpujari ed. *The Comprehensive history of Assam*, IV, ch. 5 and 7.

<sup>2</sup> Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>4</sup> Asiwaju, *Partitioned African*.

<sup>5</sup> Herskovits, "Culture areas of Africa", p. 62. Also see, Woods, "A criticism of Wissler's North American Culture Areas".

- <sup>6</sup> Wissler, *The American Indian*.
- <sup>7</sup> Kroeber, *Anthropology*.
- <sup>8</sup> Buckley, "Kroeber's Theory of culture areas and the ethnology of Northwestern California", p. 17.
- <sup>9</sup> Woods, "A criticism of Wissler's North American Culture Areas", p. 518.
- <sup>10</sup> Sapir, *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality*, p. 425.
- <sup>11</sup> Blackburn, "Oral stories and culture area: From Northeast India to Southwest China", p. 420.
- <sup>12</sup> The term "Zomi" here refers in a narrow sense with regard to those who claim to have spread from a place called Ciimnuai. In fact, there is no difference in the meaning and connotation of the term "Zomi" and "Zo" as the former simply implies "Zo people".
- <sup>13</sup> Stevenson, *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes*, p. 137.
- <sup>14</sup> Khai, *Zo people and their culture*, p. 176.
- <sup>15</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India* Vol. III, Part III. Also see, DeLancey, "The History of Post-Verbal agreement in Kuki-Chin"; Henderson, *Tiddim Chin: A Descriptive Analysis of Two Texts*; Thang, "A Phonological Reconstruction of Proto-Chin"; Cing, *A Descriptive Grammar of the Tedim Chin*.
- <sup>16</sup> For fuller discussion, see Pau and Mung, "Fragmented tribes of the India-Burma-Bangladesh borderlands:".
- <sup>17</sup> Andrew, "Account of the Hill Tribes of North Arakan", p. 234.
- <sup>18</sup> Hughes, *The Hill Tracts of Arakan* p. 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Hutchinson, *Chittagong Hill Tracts*.
- <sup>20</sup> Bernot, "Ethnic groups of Chittagong Hill Tracts".
- <sup>21</sup> Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*: pp. 3-4.
- <sup>22</sup> See, Lowis, *The Tribes of Burma*, pp.18-24.
- <sup>23</sup> Browns, "The Linguistic survey of India", pp. 17-18.
- <sup>24</sup> Pemberton, *Eastern frontier of India*, p. 148.
- <sup>25</sup> Trant, "Notice of the Khyen Tribe between Ava and Aracan", p. 262.
- <sup>26</sup> Latter, "A Note on some Hill Tribes on the Kuladyne river-Arakan", p.60
- <sup>27</sup> Schendel, *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal*, p. 16.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- <sup>30</sup> Schendel, "The Invention of the Jummas": pp. 98-99.
- <sup>31</sup> Mackenzie, *History of the relations*, Appendix G. Hopkinson's Expedition up the Koladyne. Extracts from Lieutenant Hopkinson's Journal of an expedition up the Koladyne in December and January 1847-48.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 533.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp.533-534.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p.340.
- <sup>35</sup> Pemberton, *Eastern frontier of India*, p. 21.
- <sup>36</sup> Mackenzie, *History of Relations*, p.172.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid*. pp.174-75.
- <sup>38</sup> McCulloch, *Valley of Manipur*, p.1.
- <sup>39</sup> Mackenzie, *History of Relations*, p.173.

- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.174.
- <sup>41</sup> *Administration Report of the Manipur Political Agency 1878-79.*
- <sup>42</sup> National Archives of India, New Delhi (NAI), Foreign Department, External-A Proceedings (FEAP), September 1893, No. 127.
- <sup>43</sup> NAI, FEAP, No 128.
- <sup>44</sup> NAI, FEAP, September 1893, Nos.80-88.
- <sup>45</sup> Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, pp. cxv, cxx, cxxv.
- <sup>46</sup> NAI, FEAP, No.12; Major-General E. H. H. Collen to the Quarter Master General, 5 November 1891.
- <sup>47</sup> NAI, FEAP, Nos.9-62; "The Military Situation in Eastern India and Burma", 4 September 1891
- <sup>48</sup> NAI, FEAP, September 1892, No. 9-62, Part VI 'Chin-Lushai'.
- <sup>49</sup> NAI, FEAP, September 1892, No.28.
- <sup>50</sup> B.S. Carey argued: "Finally, the variety of tongues, the natural dissimilitude of the mode of earning livelihood, the total absence of sympathy between the Chins and the Lushais, and the different trade routes which these tribes respectively use, coupled with the amazing difficulties of road and telegraphic communications, fully convinced me that the Chins should remain undisturbed under Burma, as an arrangement which, in my opinion, is not to the benefit of the Chin, but is imperative for the good interests of Burma". Ibid., No.45 (demi-official letter from B. S. Carey to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Burma, dated 4 February 1892.)
- <sup>51</sup> Shakespear's view, dated 4 September 1890: "The two system cannot work side by side. It is evident that peace and order cannot exist west of the Koladyne, if east of that river the old state of things is allowed to continue... This points irresistibly to the necessity of placing all officers entrusted with the control of these tribes under the orders of a single authority". (NAI, FEAP, No.36 "Chin-Lushai Conference by C. A. Elliot, dated 28 January 1892.)
- <sup>52</sup> NAI, FEAP, September 1892, No. 9-62, Part VI "His Excellency", 3 June 1892.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., Note, 8 June 1892.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., Note by Roberts, 16 June, and Note by Brackenbury, 18 June.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> See, Pau "Administrative Rivalries on a frontier: Problem of the Chin-Lushai Hills".
- <sup>57</sup> See, Syiemlieh, *On the Edge of Empire.*

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