INTRODUCTION

The North-East Frontier, or Assam, lies roughly between the twenty-second and twenty-ninth degrees north latitude and between the eighty-ninth and ninety-seventh degrees east longitude. It comprises of two main divisions: the valleys of the rivers Brahmaputra and Barak or Surma and the hill tracts. The Brahmaputra valley, or Assam proper, is an alluvial plain about four hundred and fifty miles in length with an average breadth of fifty miles. It is girded on all sides, except the west, by hills which form the abode of numerous warlike and virile tribes. The northern hills are the eastern section of the Himalayan range and rise to a considerable height. On the extreme east, after the ninety-sixth east longitude, the hills sweep round the head of the Brahmaputra valley to form the Patkai ranges. These hills, rising in successive and parallel ranges to an average height of little more than 6,000 feet above sea level, form the natural boundary between Assam and Burma. Between the ninety-third and ninety-fourth longitude and between the twenty-fifth and twenty-seventh parallels of north latitude a branch projects to the west, almost at right angles to the Burmese mountain system, called the Assam range. This range, comprising the Garo, Khasi and Jayantia hills, separate the two valleys. At its extreme end in the Garo hills, they reach an elevation of about 4,600 feet.
but are higher towards the west. At the south-east corner of the Jayantia hills, the Darail range begins and merges with the Naga hills to the east. From here a continuous wall of mountains moves south to from the Bhutan and Siscesar hills.

The chief characteristics of the northern hills are the extreme rugged and precipitous nature of their slopes. The Bhutan hills are almost devoid of any space of level ground. One Military Officer wrote that the mountain tracts on the North-West Frontier were 'highways when compared with the mere ledges that were met in the hills of Bhutan'. The having or plains at the foot of the hills were a vast and virtually impenetrable jungle such as are hardly to be encountered elsewhere in India. At times the hills are so steep and so densely covered with forests that pathways through them are one of abnormal difficulty. The hills both on the north and on the south are drained by numerous rivers which empty their waters in the Brahmaputra. Although this river formed the highway of communication navigation before the advent of steam was always uncertain and at times extremely hazardous.

The Brahmaputra and Barak valleys are dotted with numerous beela and swamps. Thick forests alternate with swamps and stretches of grass and reeds, thick and dense, the home of the rhinoceros, buffaloes, elephants, tigers and a bewildering variety of wild life. Movements in such a country was one of extreme difficulty. E.C. Young, in his journey from Burma to Assam across the Patkai, writes:

"We marched westwards through dense, gloomy and uninhabited forest, where we followed the tracks of rhinoceros, elephant, buffalo, tiger, and other wild beasts, and where our only guides were the compass and a faint trail or 'blaze' with which the trees were marked at intervals. It rained the whole time, and we were attacked by incredible quantities of leeches and poisonous insects".

The North-East Frontier has a sub-tropical climate. Extreme humidity, the natural result of an expansive water surface and contiguity to the forest-clad hills, is its chief characteristic. Rainfall is abundant though it is not evenly distributed. The average annual rainfall in the Brahmaputra valley and adjoining hills is between 80 to 100 inches. In the Barak valley the figure is around 120 inches. The southern slopes of the Khali hills receives the highest rainfall; Cherrapunjee receives an average

of over 450 inches annually. Rainfall occurs between March and October, and is heaviest during the first three months. During this season the rivers become flooded and a movement into the hills becomes impossible. The tribes also do not come down to the plains at this time of the year. Frontier raids do not occur and the outposts are usually withdrawn. From the beginning of November to the end of February the climate is cool and pleasant, and is the proper season for military operations.

The swamps and jungles were a veritable breeding ground for disease. Malaria, small-pox, dysentery and kalasar were once endemic. The Bhutan duars and the lower ranges of the Garo and Khasi hills were notorious for malaria, particularly during the rains. Aiding the persistence of these dreadful diseases was a poor sanitary condition. Drinking water was available only from the stagnant pools and muddy rivers.

To the hill tribes, the swamps, jungles and rain and pestilence were resources rather than obstacles. They proved to be a formidable defence against outsiders. Intimate acquaintance with the ground and with every tract used by the wild animals enabled them to move at will through a country much of

* In 1861 the station recorded 905 inches, of which 503 was recorded in the months of June and July.
which was a hopeless labyrinth to almost all others. 'The Magas travel', as H.S. Bivar, Officer in Charge of North Cachar, writes,

"through the forests, which line our frontier, as stealthily and safely as tigers .... a wily enemy who avoid beaten paths when bent on outrage. On such occasions they travel through the forests on the tracts of wild animals, elephants, buffaloes and the like, their movements are rapid, they detach scouts and make sure of their prey before they pounce upon it".

What is said of the Magas also applies to the other hill tribes. Their modus operandi was through surprises and ambushes and rarely in pitched battles and in the open. Unperceived and when least expected, a band could sneak within gun-shot of a military post, cut up a village and then vanish into the jungles as quickly as they came.

It was the absence of fire-arms among the hill tribes

1. B.J.P. 8 March 1855: No. 158; Bivar to Jenkins, 4 January 'to surprise and destroy', writes W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam Pp. 391 ff. 'is the greatest merit of a commander, and the highest pride of his followers. If no straggling parties can be intercepted they advance towards the villages; and, if so fortunate as to remain unobserved, they set fire on the enemy's nute in the dead of night, and massacre the inhabitants ...... when the enemy is caught unprepared, they rush upon them with utmost ferocity and tearing off the scalps of all those who fall victims to their rage, they carry home those strange trophies of their triumph'. See also Reynolds, C.S.: A Narrative of our connections with the Dussenne and Cheenne Garrows, J.A.S.B., 1849, Pp. 45-60.

2. See Robinson, W.; Op. Cit. It has been recognised that this was due to the fact that the number of men in each tribe was so small, the difficulties of rearing new numbers amidst hardships and dangers so great that the life of an individual was extremely precious and its preservation a capital object of policy.
that made them vulnerable to punitive expeditions by the British. Only the Khamtis, Singphoes and the Bhutias used matchlocks. The last also used bows and arrows, slings and daos; they even handled catapults and indulged in various kinds of booby traps. Most writers have, however, given a very unfavourable picture of the military character of the Bhutia soldier. The Singphoes and Khamtis, in addition to their matchlocks, used cross-bows and daos. The latter, a small curved weapon sharpened on one side and whose shape and size varied considerably, was common to all the tribes. It was a handy weapon not only for offence but also for making paths through jungles and erecting stockades. It served the Naga 'to fell the forest, to dig the ground for his rice, to cut food for his dinner and to take off the heads of his enemies'. Bows and arrows were confined to the Khasis and Jayantias, the Abors, the Akas and the Mishmis; the last tribe frequently used poisoned-tipped arrows. Swords were used by the Khasis, the Jayantias, Abors, Mishmis and the Daflas. The Jathse, or the spear, formed the national weapon of the Nagas and at

2. Ibid. See also Pemberton, R.B.; Report on Bootan.
* The Eastern Nagas, living next to the Singphoes, probably picked up the use of the cross-bow from the latter. See Report of a visit by Captain Vetch to the Singphoes and Naga Frontier of Luckimpore, 1842; vide Selection papers etc., section 8.
close quarters, or when thrown from an ambuscade was a formidable
weapon well-calculated to inflict a dangerous wound. Some of
the Eastern Nagas also handled the tomahawk. Of the military
organisation and arms of the Lushais, Captain F.G. Lister,
Commandant of the Sylhet Light Infantry, gives the following
interesting account:

"The fighting part of the Lushai population are
composed, first of Lushais .... Secondly of a certain
number of true Burmese entertained for the purposes
warfare; and thirdly, of refugees and outlaws from
Manipur and our own frontier .... the Burmese portion
remainder with spears and dows."2

For purposes of defence some of the hill tribes used a shield
made from hide. When firearms were first used against them, the
tribes, ignorant of their exact nature, thinking that a bullet
was a 'piece of fire' whose effect could be counteracted by
causing it to pass through a wet substance, fastened pieces of
the moisture - laden banana trunks to their shields.' How fatal
this error several stalwart Nagas and Garos proved. The defences
of some of the tribal villages were very strong and complete.
The Bhutias, Singphos and the Nagas, in particular, erected well-
contrived fortifications a top mountain peaks commanding the

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2. B.J.P. 27 February 1850; No. 36.
surrounding areas. The approaches to a position and in the pathways, short sharp bamboo spikes called **panjies**, a devise common to all hill tribes, were planted. The use of these **panjies** by the Khasis gave considerable difficulty to British operations in 1829. The Akas too, excelled in the construction of bamboo stockades. Behind these they piled up large stones which they hurled at an advancing enemy.

The causes that led to tribal inroads upon the settled districts in the plains were several. Tribal customs and usages have often been at the root of these raids. A very common and conspicuous feature of the hill tribes was their custom of taking heads, either in regular warfare, raids, or in casual surprises. Sometimes the scalps were gathered in order to give a departed chief a funeral worthy of his merits, and sometimes for the object of acquiring a 'certificate of Manhood'. Among the Nagas and the Garos no man could ever hope to win the admiration of his society or the hand of a fair damsel unless he had

1. White, A.: A Memoir of the late David Scott, Footnote, P.45, see also Butler, J.; Op. Cit, who describes its use among the Angamis thus, 'In wartime, the hill sides and approaches are escarped and thickly studded with panjies .... varying from six inches to three and four feet in length, some of them as thin as a pencil others as thick and round as a good-sized cane, and although very insignificant things to look at, they gave a nasty and a most painful wound, often causing complete lameness in a few hours. Deep pit-falls and small holes covered over with a light layer of earth and leaves, concealing the panjies within, are also skillfully placed along the paths, by which an enemy is expected to approach ...'

the required number of scalps to his credit. Not unoften there was the object of acquiring plunder and slaves. The Siamese, for instance, thoroughly ravaged the frontier and carried off thousands of defenceless inhabitants into slavery. Of this bundle as C.E. Buckland, writes:

"A private quarrel with a neighbouring clan, a scarcity of women and domestic servants, and the consequent necessity of procuring a requisite number of captives to supply the wants of the tribe, the simple desire for plunder, and of obtaining heads to grace the obsequies of some departed chieftain, were the principal causes of (these) raids."

The official records give tribal movements in these hills, the pressure of population behind pushing the tribes on the outer ridges into British territory, as the most important factor behind the Lushai raids. Inter-tribal feuds sometimes had the effect of generating unrest on the frontier. It was not unusual to find tribes and clans in arms against one another.


3. It is thus stated that 'a general movement would seem to take place from time to time amongst these people, apparently as if swarms were thrown off from the more crowded villages in the higher central hills, such swarms forming new communities all around the outer fringe of the tract, and in doing so driving before them the villages, which had previously inhabited this fringe. The inhabitants of these are compelled, in consequence of the pressure, to take refuge in our territory or in Tippuwa or Manipur where they are often followed and killed or taken captive and their villages plundered or burnt. This seems to have been the origin of that raid the Lushai rising of 1849 and 1850, as it continued to be a great series of raids in 1860-61.' Quoted by Burnell, H.

27th Oct. 1848.
Since these tribes differed widely from one another ethnically, linguistically, in customs and usages, no uniform policy, but one dictated by the exigencies of the time and with innumerable local variations, was followed towards them. In the beginning the political uncertainties of the North-East Frontier, even after the treaty of Yandabo, 1826, and the bogey of a Burmese war had forced the authorities to pursue a policy of conciliation. The rights and privileges enjoyed by the tribes during the Ahom Government were conceded to them. Many of them were left entirely to themselves while others were even paid the Posa or Black-mail. Political relations were established with the Khansis, Mogamas and the Singphos whose territories occupied a strategic position between Upper Assam and Burma. Towards the middle of the 1830s, when the state of the North-East Frontier became somewhat settled, conciliation was replaced by a policy which deliberately aimed at the extension of the British frontier. In early 1835 Jayantia was annexed; while on the South-East Frontier a policy of peaceful penetration was followed. For raids made into British territory the tribes were vigorously punished not unoften by the burning of villages and the

destruction of granaries. As this repressive policy failed in its immediate objectives, the authorities in Calcutta directed, in early 1840, a policy which was conciliatory as well as humane. The Governor-General in Council found military expeditions, which involved the innocent along with the guilty in one indiscriminate slaughter, arson and rape, objectionable. Instead, it was felt expedient to bring the tribes to reason by friendly intercourse and by the removal of the causes which occasioned raids. This policy was generally followed towards the hill tribes since then, but against the Nagas it was soon replaced by one of coercion. Repeated punitive expeditions were directed against them from 1844, but the Nagas remained unsubdued. In 1851 Lord Dalhousie determined upon a policy of absolute non-intervention, allowing these tribes to 'cut each other's throats to their heart's content'. As a result the Nagas ran riot. Innumerable people were killed or taken into captivity. Unable to prevent these outrages, the local authorities even wanted to withdraw from the neighbourhood of these tribes. With the disappearance of the Burmese threat and the growing intensity of tribal inroads, particularly of the Abors, Nagas and Garos, the concept of the frontier underwent a radical change in 1865. It was then recognised that there was 'no frontier properly so called' between the tribal tracts and British territory, or in other wards that the hill tribes had no indepen-
dent status but were subjects of the Government. To curb their lawlessness it determined, towards the middle of 1866, 'to reassert British authority over these tribes and bring them under a system suited to circumstances'. Throughout these years, the people in the plains proved incapable of defending themselves against the incursions of the hill tribes. It is not unreasonable to assert, therefore, that had the British not arrived in time, driving the Burmese out of the Province in its own defence, the two valleys would probably have been parcelled out between the numerous frontier tribes and its inhabitants reduced to the position of slaves.