

# The British policy towards the Lushai Hills: A case study of the Lushai Expedition 1871–1872 in light of colonial historiography

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**Abstract:** This paper studies the lesser-known British expedition into Mizoram during the late nineteenth century on the eastern frontiers of British India. The Lushai country lies between the Bengal province and Burma. The article seeks to counter the misconception that the Lushai Expedition of 1871–1872 was primarily meant as punishment for a few Lushai chiefs who had participated in recent raids into the British protectorate. It argues that the expedition had to happen for a number of reasons and was a reflection of the colonial government's astute politics. It makes an effort to shed as much light as possible on the colonial government's covert objectives. It spans the early years of Lushai-British relations up till the country's annexation.

**Keywords:** Lushai; Expedition; Tea; Trade route; Annexation

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## 1. Introduction

After the First Anglo-Burmese war, the British East India Company's government continues their annexation policy towards the east to secure their position in the region driven by commercial interests and expansionist. That is how they had their first contact with the Lushais due to the later infamous raids in the Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT) and the plains of Tipperah, Cachar and Sylhet which was under the Company's protectorate. Raiding and marauding has been practised by the Lushai traditionally, since time immemorial and politically and economically, since the early 19th century [1,2]. The Lushais appear to have been increasingly aggressive since the 1840s, when the company's interest in the region became obvious.

This article employs an exploratory and descriptive methodology, utilising literature reviews and secondary source analysis. The descriptive research design forms the basis of the proposed research. Although it was mostly restricted to secondary sources for analysis, the data was acquired from a range of sources, including books, theses, journals, archive materials, etc. The archival data were gathered from many state archives, including Mizoram, Assam and West Bengal, etc. It was collected as part of the research project 'Role of tribal freedom fighters during Indian Independence' under the Tribal Research Institute, Gujarat. Secondary data were already available in the form of books, articles, theses, and other publications. All data, including field notes and selected documents, was examined using a qualitative content analysis.

Most reviews of the literature have just skimmed the surface of expedition events, causes, and effects. The history of the Lushai is a subject that has never been thoroughly studied and has always been shunned. The British invasion of Lushai is seen as a chapter in colonial history in which the rebellious chiefs who had raided the British protectorate were punished.

In the Lushai Hills, the expedition of 1871-72 had far more clever objectives than merely punishing people. Discovering the main covert purpose of the mission will provoke a fresh viewpoint that may be able to resolve the uncertainty caused by the colonial government's planning for their administrative convenience and economic interest. The objective of this paper is to examine the complexities of the colonial expedition and comprehend the factors that drove the colonial powers to conquer the area. The article aims to provide a more thorough analysis of the colonial strategy towards the Lushai, who were essentially a piece in the colonisers' greater scheme of geopolitical and financial gain. The goal of the paper is to clarify the ambitions of the colonial authority as much as possible. It covers the initial years of contact between Lushai and the British up until the annexation of the nation.

## **2. The Common Narratives**

The first preventive measure ensured by the British was to safeguard against Lushai infiltration, the colonial authority needs to gather information about the Lushai and related groups that persistently assaulted colonial subjects within the British protectorate state [3]. Furthermore, the only ways to obtain information were through rumours circulated by nearby residents or escapee slaves. In June 1850, Kuki Levy was soon raised in order to learn more about the Lushais and to survey their land. The British initially made financial offers to the Lushai chiefs in exchange for maintaining peace. However, for the Lushai, guns were a major motivator for the raids and, they never stopped their practice of raiding. From the start of their relations with the Lushais, the British had a variety of policies. Instead of invading the Lushai Hills, it was first decided to maintain a series of outposts along the frontier. One of the Cachar officers was also expected to travel to the hills annually and utilise his position to arbitrate conflicts between villages and cultivate a cordial relationship with the leading chiefs. This may be characterised as essentially a non-interventionist strategy, rejecting any intention for annexation while yet trying to introduce a small amount of British influence into the Lushai's administrations [4].

The initial expedition into the Lushai Hills was sent out in 1844 under the command of Captain Blackwood, aimed at punishing Lalchokla for the raids in Sylhet. Following the attack in Tippera in 1849, Colonel Lister dispatched a second expedition in 1850. Furthermore, in 1861, Major Raban was dispatched on an expedition after the Lushai assaulted Demagiri [5]. The expedition was attempted again in December 1865, but was cancelled because of the wet season. A series of attacks on villages in Manipur and Tripura occurred towards the end of 1868, and in January 1869 there was an attack on the tea-gardens of Loharbund and Monierkhal. Following speculation that Sookpilal and Voupilal were responsible for the attacks on the tea estates, General Nuthall launched a massive punitive expedition. Unfortunately, the operation was a failure because it was conducted during a season that was too late to be beneficial. On the other hand, the results of the expedition greatly undermined British prestige among the Lushais, and the subsequent strategy of conciliation and concessions only reinforced their perception that the British were no longer capable of inflicting harm upon them[6].

Beginning in 1870, a string of attacks (raids by the Lushai) had started that were more extensive and violent than any that had come before. On December 31, 1870, in the village of Gulungea, located in the Sungoo sub-division of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a little over a day's journey from the Chima outpost, the initial raid occurred, which Lord Ulick Browne, the

Commissioner of Chittagong, referred to as ‘the first raid of the season.’ [7] Subsequently, John Edgar undertook a significant journey through the northern Lushai Hills from 1870 to 1871, during which he is said to have reached an agreement with Sookpial regarding the boundary conflict between Cachar and Lushai country. Nonetheless, the subsequent events suggest that the Lushais were not in accord with the established boundary line, which effectively removed their ‘hunting ground.’ A series of raids were conducted in the plains with a level of organisation and determination that surpassed any prior incursions of this nature, all while Edgar remained in the hills [8].

The intense outrages of 1871 were directed only towards the tea gardens and their establishments in Cachari Punjee, Alexandrapur , Katlichera , Monierkhal, Darnierkhal , Nundigram , Sylhet , Cacharipara , Manipur , and Jalnacherra . The southern portion of Cachar was nearly completely wiped out in a short period of time due to these relentless and severe attacks. Although the attack on Jhalnachera marked the end of the district’s violent outburst in Cachar, similar atrocities persisted until late March in Manipur, Sylhet, and Tripura. It was evident from the summary above that the raiders’ audacity was, in many situations, unprecedented in British history. Their fighting style at Monierkhal had demonstrated that they possessed certain fighting skills that were not entirely despised, and that they could rely on strategies other than surprise attacks at night and swift escape. The attackers also targeted the police patrolling party, the police outposts, the coolies, and the road construction crew [9]. The targets were obvious: the local representations of British authority and presence. In contrast to previous raids, this one was executed ‘in concert’ by the southern Lushais and the Lushais of the north Lushai Hills [10].

The raids also showed that, when heads and booty were readily gained, long-standing clan rivalries were set aside, and a potent coalition was created to launch a series of well-planned assaults into the plains [11]. According to Rohmingmawii (2010), these chiefs must have had a strong enough sense of unity against their perceived common enemy to unite in the midst of an inter-village quarrel and wage a united war. But in terms of the Lushai chiefs’ unity in the years that followed, their unity on the battlefield did not appear to mean much [12]. Nunthara (1996) argued that no attempt had been made to capture the hill and that the entire Lushai Expedition of 1871–1872 was a kind of retaliation against the chiefs who had taken part in the raiding, pillaging, and ravaging of the Chittagong Hills, Cachar, Sylhet, Tripura, and Manipur.

### **3. The Trends of Covert Objectives**

Following the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, which gave the Company authority over Assam and Manipur, the Northeast region became politically connected with the East India Company. As a result, a British representative was assigned to the Manipur court as well as the position of Chief Commissioner of Assam. The assassination of the Raja of Cachar in 1832 who left no heir to claim the throne, provided the justification for annexation of the state by the British.<sup>i</sup>

Besky noted, by the mid-1800s, the desire for tea in Northeast India had led to war, annexation, the expulsion of native populations, and a rise in agricultural productivity [13]. The British East India Company became more interested in Cachar after learning that tea grows there naturally in 1855 [14]. When the tea plantations quickly expanded into the southern part

of Cachar, the chiefs of Lushai believed the British were invading their territory, which is their hunting grounds [15]. The several raids against the tea factory between 1870 and 1871 show that they viewed the growth of the tea plantations as an encroachment upon lands they claimed as their own [16].

The Company had always feared that, following its defeat in the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1826, Burma would launch a counterattack. This led to a great deal of attention being paid to the border area between British India and Burma. Therefore, by 1835, the Company, which had its headquarters in Calcutta, had taken control of the kingdoms of Assam, Cachar, and Manipur [17]. Thus, the Company attempted to establish its administration in each frontier hills after another. In the Naga Hills, a separate Naga Hills District was established in 1867 [18], and the Expedition of 1871-72 was the attempt in Lushai Hills.

After conquering Lower Burma in 1853, the British sought to build a railway connecting it to China by the 1860s. An interest in trade with China resulted in the annexation of Burma (Lower) [19], and the full potential trades would only be possible after annexing Upper Burma. They need to be in control of Upper Burma in order to accomplish that, and in order to do so, they need to secure the frontier areas where any unrest may occur.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, the Company had established a Political Agent in the princely state of Manipur by 1835, and by 1867, they had established the Naga Hills District. Their agents were highly powerful in these two frontiers, and Lushai-Chin Hills was the only area they still needed to secure.

Further, after 1858,<sup>iii</sup> the British administration sought to find a long-term solution for the frontier tribes. It was necessary to build certain racially charged structures to placate the threat posed by the tribe in order to domesticate the hills for British conquest [20]. A range of political agreements and anthropological interests led to colonial curiosity in North East India and Burma, which resulted in a closer examination of the Lushai Hills [21].

Finally, military expeditions are costly, particularly in hilly areas where there is no transportation and the participants must walk the entire distance while carrying their own supplies of food, ammunition, and baggage. In order to reach the interior of the hills, which typically took weeks or months, a strong company of road-cutters and a far larger number of human porters were needed. The government would not expend significant time and resources to punish a few disobedient chiefs, and the previous unsuccessful expeditions needed to be recovered. Moreover, the British discovered that the Lushai country was a part of their dominions only in the 1860s as provided in the Treaty of Yandaboo which stoked the desire to subjugate it to British rule [22].

#### **4. The Lushai Expedition of 1871-72**

The following factors led the Governor-General in Council to decide in July 1871 to send an expedition against the Lushai. The arrangement of the forces was to operate two columns simultaneously, one from Chittagong arriving from the south and the other from Cachar entering the hill from the north. A further force of Manipuris, provided by the Raja of Manipur and led by General Nuthall, the Political Agent of Manipur, also demonstrated across the southern border to assist General Bouchier's section of the expedition in addition to these two columns. The government organised strategic planning after taking into account all of the previous unsuccessful expeditions and the advice of the former officials. And thus, the Lushai Expedition of 1871–1872, which was larger and more organised than the previous, was

launched. Each column of expedition included 1,500 Native Infantry, half a mountain artillery, one company of sappers and miners (for mowing the route through the forest), and all of the European officers in the company. The Military Commanders were given complete control over the expedition's political and military strategy. They were specifically told that the goal of the expedition was not merely to exact revenge but rather to insist on the surrender of the British subjects who were being held captive and that every effort should be made to build amicable relations with the Lushais in order to persuade them that standing in opposition to the British Government would be to their detriment. It was crucial to persuade the Lushai that the British had genuine intentions of entering their nation and to compel them to implement a firm policy towards them. The previous expeditions were to punish certain chiefs and villages who engaged in raids but the expedition of 1871-1872 was to control the whole country. The Lushai had already encountered the power and unwavering might of the British empire during their previous military confrontation, thus they did not oppose the expedition to the extreme extent.

### **5. Consequences of the Expedition**

The campaign's outcomes were as follows: first, sixty villages were completely subjugated, with the twenty that resisted being attacked and destroyed; second, fifteen chiefs personally submitted and vowed to behave well going forward on behalf of themselves and their tributaries; third, Mary Winchester was freed along with 150 other British subjects who had occasionally been taken prisoner; and fourth, numerous looted guns were found; and finally, over half of the 3,000 square kilometres of the country that the survey officers assigned to the mission were able to triangulate had been properly surveyed. The force started returning to its base at Tlabung on February 28, 1872, and by April 3, the last of the soldiers had reached Calcutta. As a result, the 'Lushai Expedition of 1871-1872' operations lasted for almost six months, during which both Columns successfully advanced deep into the Lushai Hills. Many of the Lushai chiefs bowed, promising peace and goodwill that would last a lifetime. Changes were made to the boundary of Lushai and Tipperah, and bazaars were inaugurated at Changsil and Tipaimukh. Additionally, a great deal of knowledge about the Lushais and their nation was acquired, and the Expedition had brought peace at least for a decade [23]. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 (Inner Line) was also extended to the Lushai Hills [24].

The Lushai Expedition of 1871–1872 resulted in the death of numerous Lushai chiefs, and the 'Inner Line' was extended well into their domain, causing internal conflict among the hillmen for territory and land. The eastern Lushai chiefs and the western Lushai chiefs engaged in constant battle from around 1875-1876. All sides to these territorial disputes sent delegates to Cachar on several occasions, asking the British authorities to mediate a settlement. However, all that was said to them was that they should 'make peace with the other party.' This demonstrated that the British had no other intention but to seize their country after establishing amicable connections with the top chiefs during their initial interactions. There was no annexation in the Expedition of 1871-72 but it opens a door for it if the Lushai did not heed the warning from it. They had thoroughly surveyed the country, the potentiality in economy and securing the border, would decide whether the Lushai Hills is to annex or not by the British government. Finally, the Lushai Hills was annexed in 1890.

## **6. Conclusions**

The British gained the permission to form political ties with the North East region by the Treaty of Yandaboo. The British were more interested in the area after discovering tea. The need to monitor and defend the area stems from both the fear of Burmese invasion and the need to build trade routes to China. The Lushai Hills is the subject of colonial fascination sparked by political agreements and anthropological interests. Only in the 1860s did the British realise that the Lushai area was a part of their dominions, which fuelled their ambition to bring the region under British control. The cost of military operations in difficult terrain is high, and failed expeditions from the past had to be retrieved. They wanted to progressively conquer the whole Lushai Hills and establish their dominance there. The Lushais' attacks on the tea gardens were documented and interpreted as a raid or invasion of British territory in all colonial documents. However, their activities may be seen as resistance to colonial expansion because the Lushais claimed many of the places they assaulted. In actuality, in response to the Lushais' armed resistance, it was the colonial forces who broke into and occupied their country. The fact that the native population was forced to rebel against the colonial troops through armed struggle and that the colonial forces responded by invading their territory militarily is a particular aspect of colonialism. The arguments presented in the article, such as the economic interest in tea estates and commerce with China, the need to safeguard the border from potential Burmese invasion, the hills being colonial property, and so on, demonstrate that the military mission of 1871 was more than just a punitive expedition.

The lack of adequate historical research on the issue at hand, as well as the fact that the available literature only discusses the cause and consequences of the events, are the study's limitations. The argument may contradict some preexisting knowledge and understandings, but the researcher hopes that by assisting the reader in identifying what is reliable and what is not, it will inspire them to carry out additional research.

Typically, colonists saw themselves as necessary change agents for the establishment of civilised political and legal frameworks rather than as invaders or expropriators [25]. It began when they first encountered one another and continued until the Lushai Hills were placed under direct colonial rule in the 1890s. It was the tale of persistent resistance and the use of force to put an end to that resistance. The Lushai Hills were eventually brought under colonial authority, but not before the tribesmen lost many priceless lives that history cannot claim to forget.

## **Multidisciplinary Domains**

This research covers the domains: (a) historical studies, and (b) Northeast India studies.

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## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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## Declaration on AI Usage

The authors declare that the article has been prepared without the use of AI tools.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This act might be the first Doctrine of Lapse in India or at least in North East India.

<sup>ii</sup> From 1700 to 1824, the East India Company dispatched a number of envoys to Burma, some of whom provided reports on the commerce with China from upper Burma. John Crawford, Dr. Buchanan, and Colonel Symes all reported the profitable commerce in the same manner. The Indian government might have become interested in their story. In 1827, the Bengal government released a map that indicated the best overland routes to Yunnanfu. The potential for overland trade with China became increasingly obvious as Britain's eastward advance brought greater touch with Burma. Following Britain's acquisition of Burma's Arakan and Tenasserim coasts following the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824, several surveys were conducted between India and Moulmein in the direction of the Chinese border. Richardson, Captain Hannay, and Captain McLeod undertook an incredible voyage to the Chinese boundaries in the 1830s to investigate trade routes. A thorough examination of the abundance of published and recorded materials left by these Southeast Asian business pioneers reveals that British efforts were focused on travelling overland from Moulmein, which became British territory in 1824, to China. By 1860, British interest in the China routes had intensified, and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce had memorialised the home government's need to open the Moulmein-China route for the British textile trade. In 1868, Dr. Clement Williams, the Chief Commissioner of British Burma's first political agent at Mandalay, issued a detailed report on the planned roads and railroads to China. However, regrettably, none of the intended railroads or commerce routes ever saw the light of day. The British India has a rival in the race to the Chinese market with the United States and French Cambodia. See details in, op. cit. Christian. 'Trans-Burma trade routes to China'. pp. 173-191.

<sup>iii</sup> After the power shifted from EIC to the Crown, the British government has started consolidation of their territory.

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