

'Everyday' Resistance to Colonial Rule in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: *The resistance in eastern Arunachal Pradesh was often carried out through the practice of 'everyday' resistance, which may precede riots, social movements, and political parties in the minds of the people. Due to the economic potential and trade routes, the region became important for the British. Hence, they tried to control these areas to safeguard their commercial and military interests. However, the tribes were not simply allowing them to exploit and extract their resources; rather, they strongly resisted the colonial administrators by preventing them from crossing their villages and also continue the opium trade with neighbouring tribes. Even though they had tried to portray their intervention in the region as the saviour of society. Consequently, the issue of tribal resistance to British rule in North-East India did not receive the space it deserved in the region's historiography. This paper aims to bridge this gap.*

Keywords: Tribal Resistance, Slavery, Sadiya, Tea and Forest Resources

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The historiography of tribal resistance has another problematic area. It is the arthropodization of the area's tribes. They were described as the 'primitive', 'cultural isolates', 'barbarous', 'headhunters', 'criminals', 'opium eaters', etc. The aspects of pre-colonial socio-economic and political formations were completely discarded and analysed as a category of 'undeveloped', 'uncivilised' or 'semi-civilised' people. Consequently, the reactions were never treated in the true spirit of the terms, neither by the colonial masters nor by the early generation of historians. To them, they were of 'personal' or 'local' in character. It was never assessed as a phenomenon of indigenous resistance to colonial penetration.¹ The British were forcefully penetrating the hills, occupying the land and controlling the people for their natural resources. And we have resistance, protest, or rebellion from almost all parts of eastern Arunachal Pradesh spanning the 19th and 20th centuries.²

Eastern Arunachal Pradesh refers to the present-day districts of Longding, Tirap, Changlang, Namsai, Lohit, and Anjaw. However, for our purposes, it also includes Sadiya (now in Tinsukia district) in upper Assam, which served as the eastern frontier administrative headquarters during the British period. The region is inhabited by tribes such as Singpho, Khampti, Mishmi, Nocte, Wancho, Tangsa, etc. Eastern Arunachal Pradesh is bordered by Myanmar to the east, China to the north/northeast, and by Nagaland and Assam to the south and west, respectively. The area is known for its natural resources and strategic location as it shares a common boundary with Tibet, China and Burma. It lies on the trade routes connecting Assam with Southeast and East Asian countries.³ The region was also rich in medicinal and commercial plants, as well as in oil and other minerals. The area of Singpho and Khampti was locally famous for its dao (iron sword), and silver mines, tea and opium, while the Mishmi area was rich in rubber, timber, medicinal plants like Aconite (Mishmi Bih) and Mishmi teeta (Coptis Teeta); the area occupied by the Noctes and Tangsa had salt wells, while Tirap had coal, and Sadiya had tea and petroleum. The availability of these resources attracted the attention of the British. Due to the economic potential and trade routes, the region became important for the British. Hence, they tried to control these areas to safeguard their commercial and military interests.⁴

As Foucault emphasised, with the coming of power, strong resistance emerges. The resistance is sometimes parasitic on power or a reaction against it. At times, however, the affirmative role of resistance, and even its supremacy, which evokes new creative responses and forms of power, must be acknowledged.⁵ The close relationship between power and resistance, then, implies that resistance not only challenges or provokes power but also sometimes supports it. For example, when a few people opt out and refuse to cooperate, these few deviating 'others' expose themselves to the risk of being defined as abnormal. By behaving differently, they contribute to establishing what is normal in relation to the deviant. Thus, it is not always the case that a practice of resistance actually has the expected outcome; it might instead consolidate the power relation at stake. In line with what Foucault has stated, resistance sometimes even reinforces existing power relations, and power's existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations.⁶ To add to this, some forms of covert resistance seem to contain an interesting mix of resistance and compliance, which coexist 'dialectically'.⁷ A final reflection on power is that it has changed over time.⁸

Different forms of resistance evoke each other or transform into other forms of dissent. James Scott has illuminated how aggregated or cumulative political effects arise from many individuals carrying out small-scale acts of resistance. Scott proposes that "everyday resistance", when carried out by many, could be an impactful form of resistance. The dispersed practices of resistance can lead to

major transformations of society when they prevail as serial, non-organised, and still collective phenomena. Resistance is a repetition of many individual acts that, together, create a more collective mode of resistance, furnishing new and alternative understandings of dissent. These single acts of resistance are often carried out by individuals who are 'connected' to others through perceived common interests or grievances, or through shared identity positions. Scott also suggests that the practice of everyday resistance may precede riots, social movements and political parties. Thus, more invisible and individual resistance might develop into more visible, organised, and large-scale forms.⁹ Moreover, the experience of collectively organised resistance, at least sometimes, stimulates and creates dispersed forms of resistance, in which individuals engage in their own glaring or hidden everyday resistance.¹⁰

Resistance against the establishment of British rule

The Khampti were settled in the strategically significant zone between the Brahmaputra valley and the Irrawaddy basin. The Khampti was a powerful chieftainship settled in Sadiya and had established effective control over the region; thus, they emerged as an important political and military force on the north-eastern frontier of Assam during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This consolidation of power marked the beginning of Khampti's dominance in a frontier area of growing strategic importance to colonial authorities. During the early phase of British expansion in Assam, the colonial administration adopted a policy of indirect rule in Sadiya, formally recognising the authority of the Khampti chief, the Khawa Gohain. The chief was permitted to collect taxes and maintain a small armed force, thereby integrating Khampti leadership into the colonial administrative framework. In the 1820s and early 1830s, the strategic value of the Khampti increased as the British sought to secure the Upper Assam frontier against potential Burmese incursions. In 1835, the colonial government deposed the Khampti chief and abolished his office, transferring direct control of Sadiya to British officers. This removal constituted a decisive rupture in Khampti-British relations, as it dismantled the political authority that had previously structured governance in the region.

And the Khampti forces decided to fight back against the British penetration into Khampti land. Thus, they launched a coordinated attack on the British post at Sadiya, resulting in the death of Colonel White and significant casualties among the garrison. Apparently, the Khampti did not show their disaffection. Still, their latent disaffection manifested itself in a full-fledged resistance during a friendly mission under the command of Colonel White in January 1839. On the evening of the 19th of January, a body of 500 Khampti under their Sadiya Chiefs made a sudden attack on Colonel White's quarters and killed him along with many others. In return, the British carried out a severe expedition against the Khampti population, but by December 1843, many Khampti groups remained in arms and continued their rebellion against the British. However,

finally, in December 1843, the remnant Khampti came in and submitted to British authority. This represented a critical turning point, transforming the Khampti in colonial discourse from frontier allies into rebellious subjects. The Khampti were dispersed to the plains of Upper Assam and divided into the Khampti because they were terrified by the idea of unification of the Khampti, which they considered the most skilled warrior tribes of the region. Alexander Mackenzie stated that "had the Khampti Chiefs now shown resolution equal to their skill in combination, they might have done serious damage to our position on this frontier. They retreated with all their adherents without waiting for attacks, and, deserting their villages, took refuge with their leaders, the Tao and Captain Gohain, among the Dibong Mishmi. The troops put down a rising among the Khampti south of the Brahmaputra. The Singphos, Muttocks, and Abors at once offered their aid in punishing the insurgents."¹¹

However, the resistance resulted in the resettlement of the Khampti tribes. In 1844, the position of the Khampti in Sadiya was divided and dispersed the Khampti tribe into every corner of Upper Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The body had been settled at Choonpoorah above Sadiya under Captain Gohain, cousin of the late Khawa Gohain. The few Moonglair Khamptis formerly in the Tengapani Dispersion of the Khampti Settlement were located near Saikwa, south of the Brahmaputra. A third party under Chowtang Gohain were settled at Dhemaji, while a fourth was placed under Bhodia, son of the late Khawa Gohain, to the west of Luckimpore. By this dispersion, they were effectively prevented from doing any further mischief. They ceased from that time to be of any political importance.

Resistance against the liberation of slavery

British engagement with the Singpho tribes in eastern Arunachal Pradesh began largely through the tea trade and the liberation of indigenous enslaved people. To secure their position, the British established a stronghold at Sadiya and fortified administrative posts at Bisa, a Singpho village on the right bank of the Nao Dihing, where they erected a stockade, and Duffa, another village, about ten miles to the north of the former, where they entrenched themselves.¹² These stations, which were recognised as a buffer zone between India, China and Burma, were initially garrisoned by a mixed force of Burmese and Singpho troops under the command of the governor of Mogaung and later managed by British Lieutenants Neufville and Kerr. To further consolidate control and protect their subjects from tribal incursions, the British expanded their outposts to Bomjur and Nizamghat along the Dibong River. Eventually, strategic centres such as Borhat, Jeypore, and Sadiya were designated as protected British territory.¹³ The British East India Company identified the Singpho tribe as a key power due to their indigenous tea plants and trade networks with Burma and China.

Consequently, Singpho chiefs (Gaums) mounted significant resistance against

British efforts to impose a colonial political economy in eastern Arunachal Pradesh. This aggressive territorial expansion and exploitation of tea met with significant resistance; notably, in March 1825, under the leadership of Duffa Gaum, an assembly of 7,500 armed forces established cantonments at the mouth of the Nao Dihing to oppose the British annexation of their lands. This conflict escalated when the British emancipated the Singpho enslaved people, only to conscript them as forced labour for British-owned tea gardens. While the British initially treated the Singpho territory as a strategic buffer zone, tasking the chiefs with monitoring Burmese activities, the discovery of coal, timber, and tea resources prompted a shift in policy.¹⁴ Seeking to consolidate strong control, the Singpho Gaum held significant influence over neighbouring Mishmi, Khampti, and Muttack tribes. To break their power, the British burned Singpho villages and forcibly relocated the population from the hills to the plains of Sadiya, where they could be placed under direct colonial surveillance.¹⁵

The clash between the colonial state and the Singpho chiefs in eastern Arunachal Pradesh during the early nineteenth century can be understood as a struggle over political-economic control of land, labour, and trade networks in a resource-rich borderland. The 1825 assertion by Singpho chiefs, Luttora Gaum, Latta Gaum, Beesa Gaum, and Duffa Gaum, demanding the restoration of enslaved people, was not merely a cultural or political act, but a defence of an established labour regime central to their socio-economic order. The British reformed settlement patterns, resettling Beesa village near Borhat to improve administrative accessibility. The proposals to resettle tribal populations near Borhat indicate an effort to spatially reorganise production and facilitate surveillance, taxation, and resource extraction.¹⁶

Resistance against opium cultivation

The earliest colonial accounts of the Mishmi region, particularly those associated with exploratory missions in the 1820s, describe them as “averse to receiving strangers”. The British aimed to delegitimise the Mishmi authority in the region, planned regular penetration into the village, and also tried to persuade them, in the guise of an excuse, to travel to Tibet through their villages. In 1849, two French missionaries, Mr Krick and Bourry, died on their way to Tibet in the Miju Mishmi village. The event is positioned to justify a punitive military expedition, culminating in the execution of the alleged offender. The punitive expedition functions not merely as retaliation but as a symbolic assertion of colonial sovereignty, transforming an episode of frontier violence into a legitimising rationale for direct intervention and domination. Traditional trade became increasingly subject to closure, surveillance, and military escort. Mishmi engagement in the trade routes is represented as predatory and illegitimate, while economic activity conducted under colonial supervision is portrayed as orderly and lawful. This discursive contrast delegitimises indigenous economic autonomy and redefines legitimate commerce as that

which is regulated by colonial authority, thereby justifying the militarisation of circulation and exchange.

In the Mishmi Hills the theory of “everyday” resistance of James C. Scott can be applied to know the real conditions of the tribes they did not want to be engaged in the British political activities. Even the Singpho and Khampti to have the confidence to communicate with the British officers they in first consumed opium to discussed with the officers to gained the clear consciousness of refusal. There to counter the British interference in the tribes of eastern Arunachal Pradesh the Mishmi began to Cultivate opium in Lohit and Anjaw, “an inordinate use of opium, constitutes one of the greatest drawbacks to industry and progress. Indeed, it is painful to contrast the active industry of the former population, as evidenced by the gigantic ruins to be met with in the country, with the listless apathy of their descendants, who spend most of their time under the influence of opium, caring little for anything else after they have satisfied the cravings of hunger. Men, women, and even children indulge in opium, which they prepare for use in a somewhat novel manner. Dissolving the opium in water, they soak in the solution long strips of cotton cloth, about two inches wide; these, when saturated, are dried in the sun and used as occasion requires, a small piece of the cloth being torn off and chewed, or the rag soaked in water, which is then drunk as a potion.”¹⁷

The tribal population, to whom the British tea planters were dependent for labour, proved “utterly useless” because there way of resisting not to corporate with the British government to tea plantation was to disobey their orders and sunk in idleness and vice, and surrounded by very fertile soil, yielded an abundant return to their lazy efforts at cultivation, they will not labour more than just sufficient to provide themselves with the necessities of life. This unwillingness of the Eastern Arunachal tribes to work in the British tea industry led planters to seek labour from Bengal and Bihar, which they imported to Assam at enormous cost. For the cultivation of tea, even the Singpho's slaves were liberated so they could be employed in the tea garden. And if the planters had been allowed to procure labour in the British way, consistent, of course, with justice to the labourer, there is no doubt that more capital can be attracted at this moment. S. E. Seal, in exchange for opium, secured 300lb of rice, a few fowls and eggs, and also chillies.¹⁸ Therefore, they decided to make them work for the opium so that they should have it but they were supposed to work for it. Thus, they prohibited the opium cultivation in 1848, only the Akbaree opium and licensed opium were permitted to consumed and trade.

Resistance against the exploitation of tea and forest resources

Historically, the local variety of tea, often referred to by the British as a ‘wild variety’, was well known among the tribes of eastern Arunachal Pradesh since the pre-Colonial period. Robert Bruce had found a local variety of tea in the Singpho area (present-day Changlang District) in 1823. According to British

records, the situation suggests that the tea plants flourished throughout the tract occupied by the Khampti and Mishmi, and were found in the Singpho hills southeast of Sadiya. He initiated the cultivation of tea in many areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and suggested that, as these regions lie at the same latitude and longitude as Chinese tea-growing areas and share a similar environment, tea could be planted across vast areas, which helped to develop the tea industry. The British India Government was to advise on the possibility of commercial cultivation of tea in Upper Assam and other parts of India, and Chinese workers were procured to cultivate tea seed according to the Chinese style. Tea being necessary for the Tibetans and the Chinese government, which holds the monopoly of the export tea trade, has granted a retail monopoly to the Tibetans, who, in this way, hold the lay population. Thus, the Chinese protect their tea trade and the Tibetans their religious and political influence over the Tibetans.

Same in the case of the role of tea among the tribes of eastern Arunachal Pradesh was important to note; tea was not just as beverage for them it was their socio-culture and political-economic influence over the Tibet, China, Burma and other parts of Assam and India. However, with the advent of the British rule in eastern Arunachal Pradesh the deterioration of their political, economic and society there was initial disapproval to land-grabbing by the imperialists to establish tea gardens in the Singpho area. When Jenkins occupied tea tracts in the territories of the Singphos, the Khampti and the Tangsa in eastern Arunachal Pradesh the Singpho Chiefs wrote them letter stating that you are taking away all our tea plant and land and labour which caused them heavy loss in their own land. Mackenzie states, "the Government thought, how the action of the local officers was gradually pushing back these tribes from territories which they once had occupied. The Bisa Gam had bitterly complained in 1842 about the loss of land. The factory of a Mr Bonyage, which had been a prominent object of attack in the late rebellion (1842), actually stood on forfeited Singpho territory."¹⁹ The British Government forced the Singpho chiefs to grow tea plants in their gardens, however the chiefs of the tribe were reluctance to consider their order. The widespread uprising in 1843 in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, involving the Singpho, the Khampti, and the Tippum Raja of Hukong Valley, represents collective resistance to British political economy. The attacks on British outposts indicate the persistence of alternative economic networks that challenged colonial monopolisation. British measures, including forced collaboration, punitive expeditions, and the establishment of stockades, aimed to fragment networks and reassert control over both territory and labour.²⁰

Similarly, the Nocte and Wancho early engagement with the British was also mediated through economic interaction rather than immediate conflict. Their pre-colonial trade in salt with the Ahom and later involvement in the tea plantation economy at Jeypore positioned them within colonial commercial networks. However, this relationship shifted as the British sought to assert

territorial sovereignty over economically significant zones. Wangto Lowang's authority at Kheti village initiated the uprising against the British attempts to challenge the transition from commercial engagement to coercive expansion.²¹ The British reply to the Lowang was a threat to punish their village; subsequently, an expedition destroyed their fields, burned down their village, and established a military outpost at Khela, emphasising the centrality of armed force in securing control over productive landscapes. The incident was followed by the British's punitive measures, creating unrest and chaos all over the tribe's territory. In 1876, after Nocte tribesmen met with the colonial power, a deal was concluded establishing a British outpost in Tirap, bringing the region's natural resources under the direct control of the British Company.²²

The Wancho resistance of 1874-75 further exemplifies the intensification of colonial political economy in the region, particularly through the annexation of tea-growing tracts and the control of strategic trade routes. The British decision to annex the Namsang and Hukanjuri tea gardens, along with the intervening land, directly threatened indigenous control over resources and circulation networks. In February 1875, the British reached the Nyinu chiefdom of the Wancho tribe and established their control in the village. The chief named Wangmaan, along with allied chiefs, attacked Lieutenant Holcombe and killed him during the expeditions. The tribesmen of Wancho attacked and killed 80 men of a British expedition team led by Lt. Holcombe.²³ The British destruction of resisting villages, the imposition of disarmament, and the formal annexation of contested lands in May 1875 institutionalised colonial authority over key resource zones. The aftermath of the conflict, the investigation led by C. U. Aitchison was dispatched, and the eventual restoration of peace in 1876 through negotiation reveals the dual strategy of coercion and legitimisation of the colonial states for the political economy of the frontier.²⁴

The Rangpangs of Changlang districts intruded on the British occupied region and take away iron sleepers and the coal from Ledo; therefore, both the Assistant Political Officer and the Deputy Commissioner strongly pleaded for the establishment of a post of 20 men on the Lungchang Hill in the Sarkari Naga territory, ten to twelve miles south of Margherita, and close to the Tirap River, which formed the boundary of the Sarkari Nagas. Hawkins made a party of the district administration to select the site of the proposed post at Lungchang. Following the Government of India's sanction on 19 January 1903, a Military Police outpost consisting of 20 men was established on Lungchang Hill in the country of the Sarkari Nagas. Considering the abundance of timber of teak, hollock, nahar and mekahi, produced in the Namphuk, Namchik, Nampong and around Hukong valley. The great mass of the timber at that point of time exported to Bengal from eastern Arunachal Pradesh came chiefly from the extensive forests of the Patkai hill of Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, the guards previously stationed at Tikak and Ledo were removed, and the Lekhapani and Pangsu Pass military outposts were established.

Wilcox emphasised that the Mishmi were the rude friends of the British, and the Ghalum were the chiefs of the Miju Mishmi, who were reluctant to allow them to cross their village hills and rivers to trade with the Chinese. From the beginning of the Wilcox interference, the chiefs of Lohit and Anjaw, such as Ghalum, Kaiesha, and Kosha, were resisting the British penetration into their region and the extraction of resources, including Mishmi teeta, Musk, ivory, Tibetan coarse woollen, and precious ornaments and beads. J.F. Needham considered that the Chulikattas had deliberately tried to mislead him regarding the character of the Bebejiyas. The fact is that during the incumbency here they (Chulikattas) have oftener than once suffered grievously for the sins of the Bebejiyas, and have not only been accused of committing outrages which British now know was the work of the Bebejiyas, but have likewise been blockaded and fined for the same, on the plea that Mishmis are all alike, and that even if their (Chulikatta) tribe were not the actual perpetrators of the outrage, they nevertheless connived at it, and could, if they wished, arrest and bring in the guilty party; hence they have never lost an opportunity of running the Bebejiyas down before me upon all and every possible occasion, and as there are no Bebejiyas who can speak Assamese, and hitherto honestly believed them to be deceitful and bloodthirsty devils everybody declared them to be, my dealings with them, during my long incumbency at Sadiya have, naturally, not been as frequent or as cordial as they might have been.

Had they possessed intelligent Chiefs, able to talk Assamese, such as the Chulikattas have, they might long ago have got at the true state of affairs, as recently done by the merest chance while halting in their country. The fact is that both tribes are very quarrelsome and given to taking life for very trivial differences (the Bebejiyas are, if anything, worse in this respect than the Chulikattas), and their creed is 'an eye for an eye'. Amongst themselves, therefore, no serious injury can be wiped out with honour until the injurer, or some relative, and it is immaterial whether it be a female or a child, has been killed, hence blood-feuds are very common among them.²⁵

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we conclude that the tribal resistance in eastern Arunachal Pradesh resulted not only from the exploitation of land, labour, and power, but also from changes in the tea culture, trade traditions, and opium cultivation. And after the delegitimisation of pre-colonial authority, which the British considered the White man's burden. They annexed the tea plantation and salt wells under their control in the Tirap and Longding districts, which resulted in the uprising in the region of the Wancho and Nocte, by killing 80 men, including Lt. Holcombe. The British introduced the Opium Act in 1857, which was followed by the tribal uprising against the opium prohibition bill due to its cultivation and consumption in the Mishmi hills, and also trade with the neighbouring tribes and the Chinese.

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