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British Colonial Policy towards the Idu Mishmis: A Historical Analysis of Frontier Governance in Northeast India (1826–1947)

Vicky Pulu

Assistant Professor, IGG College Tezu

Abstract:
This article examines British colonial policy towards the Idu Mishmi tribe, an indigenous group in the Northeast frontier of India (present-day Arunachal Pradesh), from the onset of British expansion in 1826 to Indian independence in 1947. Drawing on archival sources from the India Office Records, The National Archives of India, and regional repositories, the study analyzes how British administrators navigated the complex socio-political landscape of the Mishmi Hills. The article argues that British policy oscillated between strategic neglect and limited intervention, shaped by the imperatives of frontier security, trade control, and ethnographic misconceptions. By foregrounding Idu Mishmi resistance, this study challenges conventional narratives of passive indigeneity and contributes to the historiography of colonial frontier governance. The findings highlight the fragmented and often contradictory nature of British policy, reflecting broader tensions in imperial administration.

Keywords: British colonialism, Idu Mishmi, frontier policy, archival sources.

Introduction:

The Idu Mishmi, an indigenous group inhabiting the rugged Mishmi Hills in Northeast India, occupied a liminal space in the British colonial imagination. Positioned at the edge of the Assam plains and near the Sino-Tibetan frontier, the Idu Mishmis were both a strategic concern and an ethnographic curiosity for British administrators. This article explores the evolution of British policy towards the Idu Mishmi from the First Anglo-Burman War (1824–1826), which marked the British entry into Assam, to the transfer of power in 1947. Unlike the more documented hill tribes like the Nagas or Khasis, the Idu Mishmi have received scant scholarly attention, partly due to their remote location and the paucity of centralized archival records. By analyzing primary sources from the India Office Records (London), The National Archives of India (Delhi), and regional collections such as the Assam State Archives, this study reconstructs the contours of British policy and its impact on Idu Mishmi society.

The central argument is that British policy was characterized by a pragmatic but inconsistent approach, oscillating between non-interference and sporadic punitive expeditions. This was driven by the need to secure the frontier against Chinese and Tibetan influence, control trade routes, and to manage perceived "savagery" through ethnographic lenses. The article also foregrounds Idu Mishmi agency, demonstrating how their resistance and negotiation shaped colonial outcomes. The study contributes to postcolonial historiography by decentring imperial narratives and illuminating indigenous perspectives within the constraints of archival silences.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a historical and interpretive approach to investigate British policy towards the Idu Mishmis (then called as Chulikata Mishmis) during colonial period (19th to mid 20th century). The design integrates archival research, historical analysis and ethnographic insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of colonial policies towards the Idu Mishmi community. The study relies on both primary and secondary data sources to construct a nuanced narrative of the British policy towards Idu Mishmis. The primary sources include;

- Archival records from the British colonial period, including reports, correspondence and administrative documents from repositories such as the British Library (India Office Records), National Archives of India and Assam State Archives.
- Ethnographic accounts and travelogues by British officials, such as those by F.M. Bailey, J.P. Mills and T.T. Cooper, which provide contemporary observations of the Idu Mishmis.

The secondary sources include academic publications, books and journal articles on British colonial policies in Northeast India, Particularly those addressing indigenous groups like the Mishmis. Due to the scarcity/limitation of direct references to the Idu Mishmi (Chulikatas) in centralized archives, the study employs a "reading against the grain" approach, extracting insights from broader frontier policy documents, ethnographic accounts, and incidental references in administrative correspondence.

The Idu Mishmis

The Idu Mishmi, part of the broader Mishmi ethnic group, inhabited the upper reaches of the Dibang and Lohit river valleys, a region strategically significant due to its proximity to Tibet and China. The Mishmi tribe is divided into three sub-groups namely Chulikata (Idu Mishmi), Digaru Mishmi (Tain) and Mezho (Kaman Mishmi). The Most dangerous of all the Mishmis are the Chulikatas (Idu Mishmis) who inhabit the ranges north of Sadiya. They derive their name from their fashion of cutting the hair square across the forhead. The origin and migration of the Idu Mishmis is shrouded in mystery as the tribe did not have writing system, we totally have to rely on the oral history. The oral version traces their origin from the spiritual world which is again mystery and cannot be proven. The earliest written record of the Mishmis appears in Ahom records such as Sadiya Serpent Pillar Inscription (1532) and Buranjis (1675). In both events, the Chulikata Mishmis i.e. Idu Mishmis were involved, although their relation with the Ahoms was rather peaceful, only exception was in the year 1675 when Idu Mishmis killed four Ahom priests which led to the conflict between the two. The British encounter with the Mishmi began with the annexation of Assam following the Treaty of Yandabo (1826), which ended the First Anglo-Burman War. The Northeast frontier, unlike the plains of India, posed unique challenges: rugged terrain, diverse tribal polities, and competing regional powers. The Idu Mishmi, known for their decentralized social structure and warrior traditions, were initially perceived as a minor irritant compared to larger tribes like the Ahoms or Nagas.

Discussion:

British policy towards the Idu Mishmi can be divided into three phases: Early contact (1826–1873), Strategic Engagement (1873–1914) and Consolidation (1914–1947). Each phase reflects shifting imperial priorities and local dynamics.

1. Early Contact (1826–1873)

The earliest exploration on some part of the habitat of Idu Mishmi was done by Captain Bedford in 1825

. His further exploration to the interior village was halted by the Idu Mishmi people on midway. During his exploration, he had identified five villages under the first range of hills, Zillee and Annundea containing 30 to 40 families, Maboom containing ten, Alonga twenty and Chunda of twelve. In total, he presumed that eighty families or about five hundred persons of all ages were settled in five villages. His observations were further that the people were dressed in skins and coarse cotton cloth and wore rings below the knee. Their ears were pierced with pieces of metal or wood and armed with dhaos, bows and arrows which are poisoned with the aconite. Owing to the unfriendly disposition of some of the chiefs and picking up situation getting serious, Bedford thought it prudent to retrace his steps back.

In 1841, W. Robinson observes that the Mishmis occupying the hills to the north of Sudiya, are in the habit of frequenting the markets at that place. They bring with them a few Lama swords and spears, Mishmi tita and a considerable quantity of vegetable poison, used in poisoning arrows, and gertheana, much esteemed by the natives for its peculiar, and rather pleasant smell. They also bring a little musk, a few musk deer skins, and some ivory, which they obtain from the Lama country. These they exchange for glass beads, of which they are very fond, cloths, salt and money, to which last they begin to attach great value. When a sufficient sum of money is procured they lay it out in purchasing buffaloes, and the country cattle.

Further, in 1853 A.J. Moffat Mills observation were that the Chulikuttas occupy the continuation of the same range, nearly due North of Saikwah, West from the Mishmee country to the confines of the Bor Abor territory. They are more savage and warlike than the Mishmees, and some years ago were never seen in the plains of Assam except as marauders. Now they find an honest trade a more profitable occupation, and in the cold season they regularly attend the haut at Saikwah and are very keen barterers. They are ever at feud with the Bor Abors, and this somewhat interrupts their communication with the plains, as their trading parties, consisting always of women as well as men, have to make a considerable detour to avoid Bor Abor ambuscades. For the same reason they do not like to be long absent from their homes, and we have not yet been able to reduce them to proceed into the district beyond Saikwah.

Source: From a Photography by Dr. Simpson, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Edward Tuite Dalton, 1872

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In between 1825 to 1855, they never gave disturbance to the people of plain areas. It was in April 1855 they took away three servants of Lieutenant Eden's which was committed by Apelongs. However, it was successfully recovered by the Nossa Mega. Again in the same year, Apelongs made a sudden attack on a village near Sadiya, killing two and capturing others of the inhabitants. This also recovered by the friendly Mishmis. In January 1857, a third attack was made by the Apelongs in one of the village of Sadiya. Due to outbreak of Sepoy Mutiny in Northern India, the Britishers could not able to send their military to apprehend the culprit. In October 1857, the Chulkatttas Mishmi massacred the women and children of a village belonging to the Khampti Chief, Choukeng Gohain. The reason for the attack was that some of the clan had died of cholera after visiting the Gohain. In 1861 and 1866, again attacked Choukeng Gohain's village on the Koondil but was not successful for them. By that time, the Britishers supplied arms to the khampti people to resist against the raid of the Idu Mishmi people. Further, a frontier militia were formed and a strong colony occupied a position towards the Dikrang to thwart the trouble caused by Idu Mishmi. In March 1868 Kalood, a Chulkatta Chief met Deputy Commissioner Luckimpore requested to allow him to settle under the protection of Britishers in the valleys of the Dikrang, Koondil, and Diphoo to avoid an internal feud with the Digaru Mishmi and other neighbours. After discussion, he was allowed to settle in Habba in the Koondil Valley along with 200 houses of his clan. In February 1872 the Chulkattas visited the Sadiya fair in large numbers bringing India-rubber, wax, and skins for sale. They behaved well, but on their way home murdered a worn-out Naga slave of their own, whom they could not able to dispose of at the fair and did not think worth taking back when they failed to sell him.

Thus in the early decades, British interaction with the Idu Mishmi was sporadic, limited to trade disputes and occasional raids into the Assam plains. British records, such as the report by Major Vetch (1848), describe the Idu Mishmi as "fierce but not unmanageable," reflecting a colonial bias towards categorizing tribes as either cooperative or hostile. Policy during this period was one of strategic neglect, with administrators like David Scott advocating non-interference to avoid costly conflicts. However, trade control was a priority, as the Idu Mishmi facilitated commerce in musk, ivory, and medicinal herbs between Assam and Tibet. The British attempted to regulate these trade routes through intermediaries, often leading to tensions when Idu Mishmi traders resisted taxation.

2. Strategic Engagement (1873–1914)

The Promulgation of the Bengal Frontier Tract Regulation, also commonly known as Inner Line Regulation, in 1873 marked a shift towards strategic engagement and asserting military supremacy. The Regulation was enacted due to various reasons like need to secure the frontier because of discovery of Tea Plant and various resources in Assam. This period witnessed escalating tensions between the Idu Mishmis and the British authorities at Sadiya. Punitive expeditions were a key tool during this phase. These expeditions against Idu Mishmi villages were launched in response to alleged raids on British tea plantations or British administered territories. These expeditions often exacerbated tensions, as the Idu Mishmi retaliated through ambushes and trade blockades.

The demarcation of Inner Line was executed by the British authorities peacefully without any objection from the Idu Mishmis. During the cold season of 1878-79 Idu Mishmi committed two small raids into the plains, killing, in one instance, two Assamese of the village of Potia Pathar, and in the second killing two Khamptis and carrying off four others, whom they found cutting rubber in the country twenty miles beyond Sadiya. The captives were afterwards ransomed by their friends. The reason alleged for the murder of the Assamese was an old feud dating from 1865, when the Mishmis stated that some of their people had been killed by British subjects, and in the other case it was stated that the Khamptis had on some previous occasion killed some of their people. The raiders were promptly pursued by the Frontier Police, with some men from the military guard at Sadiya, as far as Jerindamukh, where the dead bodies of their victims were found, but the murderers were not overtaken.

On 12th May 1884, one of the Assamese inhabitants of Dikrang village, while looking after his fishing nets in the Dikrong River, was shot with arrows by Mishmis. He ran into the village with two arrows stucking in his body, calling out the Mishmis are on the warpath, and died shortly afterwards, exclaiming Mishmis, Mishmis. In 1st March 1889, Yosha met Assistant Political Officer of Sadiya and explained that Namji was murdered by Atengga and Asimbon near Nizamghat when he was looking for him who had gone to Sadiya in connection with Anoja Lingio case, as the Meta run away with Deme who is Yosha's sister. After committing the murder, the accused along with two other brothers Lage and Noba hide on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in British territory. The reason for the murder was that three years ago Atengga stole a pig, one axe and a dao from Yosha's uncle, Acholon. In revenge of theft, Acholon's son Shuddi killed Kate, uncle of Atengga. In retaliation of this killing, Atengga and Asimbon murdered Namji.

After receiving complaint, Atengga, Asimbon, Anyi father of Atengga, Asibon and Lage, Pume wife of a Dongon who is a nephew of Yosha were appeared before the Assistant Political Officer of Sadiya. The reason for the murder cited by the Atengga was that five years ago, he gave a Lama sword to Choki on the promise of Lama kahi for the same, but Choki failed to give it and he seized a pig of Acholon and killed it. This subsequently results in killing of Kate and in vengeance later murder of Namji. The matter was solved by the Britishers by returning Pume to her husband and the murderer Atengga and Asimbon to their village with the condition that they should not be harmed.

On November 1893, three sepoys of the Military Police on patrol near Bomjur outpost were murdered and their guns were carried off by Teli Mimi son of Aiyu Mimi and his cousin Thosa with others of the clan. Again in 4th May 1899, Chenchen Mili, Aholon M'dere, Yuna Pocha, Mauson Mitoh, Melon M'dere, all from Abrango village and Chake Mendon of Elanpu village visited the Mitaigaon and killed Chansoi and two others on the spot. They took two male children and one girl along with three guns

after committing massacre. The reason for the killing was that many years ago, father of Aholon Mindere was killed by Khamtis on the Deopani.

In 1895, Athakha, son of Yosa reported to the Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya that Athanu Misa with his groups came down from the hills with an aim to murder some of British subjects working on the Bomjir road. After getting approval from the authority, Noga and his groups seized Athanu's brother Banla Misa from the jungle near Bomjir and Kherimpani. The reason for such an attempt by them was that the British government refused to return Athanu's Misa runaway slave in few years ago. In revenge of Banla arrest, people from Athanu's village attacked Siti village killing three men and one woman, carried of two boys and five women and burnt the village.

Bebejiya Mishmi Expedition 1899-1900

After the incidence of Mitaigaon massacre, the Bebejiya Mishmi Expedition was sanctioned by government in 1899-1900. The main objectives of the expedition were to recover the captive child and guns carried off by the offenders in Mitagaon massacre and to punish the culprits. The expedition team started their journey in December 1899, and cleared many booby traps on their way which was laid for them. They also send a message to the villager that the culprit should hand over the captive child and guns to save themselves from severe punishment. But the people who possessed the captive children and gun refused to comply with the message and challenge them by Pongon M'dere, Ethanon Miso, Atume Miso, Manlon Mimi and Aholon M'dere. They arrived atHunli on 1st January 1900 and found none of the people as they were hiding out of fear. On arrival the expedition team shot one person and two other wounded. In this expedition, they burnt nine houses in Pika village, six in Chaini, twelve houses in Dengi and ten houses in Apali village. The girl child was recovered from Atuma Miso of Pika village, boy from Pongon M'dere of Elanpa village and the gun from a Malon Mimi of Rangon village. On 31st January 2019, they destroyed Aiyu Mimi's village and returned to Nizamghat on 5th February 1900. Though the expedition was failure in the sense that none of the culprit of the Mitaigaon massacre could be apprehended but they arrested Pongon M'dere and Malon Mimi so that the villager should give up the real culprit to the authority. In consequence of this detain, Chenchen Mili was handed over to the authority and he was sentenced to death. So, he was hanged at Sadiya on 11th September 1900. In July 1905, three British subjects were murdered by Pongon and Taji Mideren of Elapoin village. This murder was done for revenge for the detention in jail for Pondon Mideren during Mishmi Expedition of 1899-1900. In consequence of murder and no arrest was effected, a blockade was declared upto 1912 with some relaxation to friendly villages. In 1913, Captain Nevill visited Elapoin village and tried to arrest Pongon and his confederates, but found the village deserted. So, he burnt the houses of Pongon and Taji Mideren.

The shift in British interest is also evident from the fact that they were planning to make a survey of Mishmi country in general and Idu Mishmi in particular, which was so long been neglected. Accordingly,the Dibong Survey and Exploration Expedition 1912-13 was organised with the sanction of the Government of India, in pursuance of the policy (a) Discover the course of the Dibong River and (b) Fix the main range of the Himalayas north of the Dibong river basin. Its object were survey and exploration as well as visit as many as possible of the villages in the areas over which loose political control will now be exercised. In this survey, they have identified 211 villages of Idu Mishmi tribe and also learnt socio cultural practices of the tribe.

3. Consolidation (1914–1947)

The unsettled scores between British authorities and Idu Mishmis continued till it reached its final conclusion. In December 1917, Taji Mideren was arrested when he came down to Sadiya for marketing. He was tried and sentenced to death as his appeal for mercy been rejected by the Governor General in Council and was hanged at Tezpur Jail on the 29th January 1918. In vengeance of death of Taji, in November 1918, rifleman was murdered in Nizamghat by Ekhrome, Bapo and Kosa Mideren of Elapoing village. The military operation was sanctioned in December 1920 and in this military operation, Pongon Mideren was shot dead. Again in November 1933, an outrage was committed by Idu Mishmi people on a village in British territory where four children being killed and others injured. The expedition was executed and successful under Political Officer Mr. Crace along with Captain Glenn and one platoon of the Assam Rifles where many cases were settled. Again in October 1934, similar promenade occurred in upper Dibang which was also settled by Mr. Crace accompanied by Captain Sherman and six sections of the Assam Rifles. The expedition was successful and penetrated above the Ithun by way of Aprunye as far as Ibyni and Erunli on the Emra.

This period marked a shift in the British policy from asserting the military might over the Idu Mishmis in order to establish their hegemony to negotiation, integration and consolidation of Idu Mishmis into colonial economy. The period after World War I saw a consolidation of British control, driven by geopolitical anxieties over the McMahon Line (1914) and the need to counter Chinese claims. The Idu Mishmis were increasingly drawn into the colonial orbit through subsidies to cooperative chiefs and the establishment of outposts like Sadiya and Walong. The political agents like J.P. Mills adopted a policy of "loose control," offering gifts and protection in exchange for loyalty. Colonial ethnography, exemplified by Verrier Elwin's work, began to romanticize the Idu Mishmi as "noble savages," influencing a shift towards preservationist policies in the 1930s. Yet, this romanticism masked the economic exploitation of Mishmi resources, including timber and minerals. British policy had left a fragmented legacy: partial integration into the colonial economy, disrupted social structures, and unresolved boundary disputes that would plague post-independence India.

Conclusion:

The British policy with regard to Idu Mishmis was marked by contradictions—strategic neglect versus intervention, ethnographic fascination versus exploitation. The Idu Mishmis were not passive recipients of colonial policy but active agents who shaped its outcomes. Their resistance, ranging from armed confrontations to subtle non-compliance or unfriendly disposition, forced the British to adapt such policies, as seen in the shift from punitive expeditions to negotiation. British policy towards the Idu Mishmi was a microcosm of colonial frontier governance: pragmatic, inconsistent, and shaped by both imperial ambitions and indigenous agency. Archival sources reveal a trajectory from neglect to strategic engagement and partial consolidation, driven by security, trade, and ethnographic biases. The Idu Mishmi's resistance and negotiation underscore their role as active historical actors, challenging narratives of passive indigeneity. This study calls for further research into regional archives and oral traditions to amplify indigenous perspectives and address the gaps in the colonial record.

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