



## Lord Curzon's Tribal Policy: An Appraisal of its Aims of Securing Pacification and Contentment of Frontier Tribesmen

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**Abstract:** *The British Empire, which encapsulated one-fourth of humanity, had few difficult frontiers, and the Northwest Frontier figured prominently among these. The Indian subcontinent was the most prized jewel of its coveted crown, and its preservation was considered vital given the influence and power of other European rivals, i.e., French and Russians in the region. Initially, the Inactive or Stationary Policy was pursued, and later in the 1870s, aggressive and penetrative Policy was adopted in the Tribal Belt. The aggressive Forward Policy alienated the tribespeople, which eventually resulted in the uprising of 1897. The British finally realized that only the Policy of contentment and pacification would ensure long-lasting peace and gain the loyalty of the tribe members. Lord Curzon, the expert on frontier affairs, was the main exponent of this Policy of conciliation to win the confidence of the inhabitants of the most sensitive Frontier of the empire.*

**Key Words:** Tribal Belt, Stationery Policy, Forward Policy, Punitive Expeditions, Uprising of 1897, Tribal Militia

### Introduction

Tribal Belt, by virtue of its strategic location and fierce inhabitants, remained one of the most difficult questions for British policymakers. The British considered control over the rugged mountainous region along the border of Afghanistan essential for securing their strategic interests in the region. To gain this objective the British tribal Policy passed through various stages to gain a firm foothold in Tribal Belt. Initially the British followed Masterly Inactivity or Close Door Policy which necessitated less administrative involvement of the British in the Tribal Belt as it was considered the most ungovernable, perilous and hazardous region (Alder, 1963). The Tribal Belt was considered by the British "a zone of indirect influence" (Chad, 2004) and direct dealings with the inhabitants were not deemed significant. The main purpose of this Policy was to minimize raids in settled districts and secure trade routes.

However, in the event of border raids and tribal incursions, this Policy entailed punitive expeditions. The Indus was viewed as a natural geographic boundary of British India by Viceroy John Lawrence (1864-1869) as he had no plans to annex a region that had the reputation of being non-manageable and non-remunerative in terms of revenue.

The non-interventionist Policy came under fire from the proponents of the Forward Policy when Russia started conquering one Central Asian state after the other in the 1860s. The pro-forward clique gained strength with the appointment of Lord Lytton (1876-1880) as the Viceroy. He desired to bring changes in the governance structure and adopt result-oriented measures to bring Tribal Belt under British Government. In his well-known Minute, he criticized the policies of the past administrations for not being in control of the strategic areas even after the lapse of more than three decades of rule in the

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region. He believed its time to firmly control the "strategically located area in the Tribal Belt" to ensure a smooth way into Afghanistan. Thus Lord Lytton and his successors pursued an aggressive Forward Policy, which resulted in the uprising of 1897.

Lord Curzon, whose term of office was longest than any other Viceroy stretching from 1899 to 1905, designated the Tribal Belt as marchland, a buffer between the official Durand Line border with Afghanistan and India proper. Curzon realized that Imperial Britain would not be able to establish effective control over more than two million inhabitants of the Tribal Belt without pursuing the Policy of pacification and contentment. Lord Curzon was focusing more attention on the Frontier than had any of his predecessors at the Government House in Calcutta. He held himself ultimately responsible for Frontier security and was determined to remove the obstacle of a subordinate government interfering in the matters of Frontier security. In 1901, Curzon took it upon himself to remove the Frontier from the jurisdiction of the Government of Punjab and carve out a separate entity, the North West Frontier Province. Lord Curzon is thus credited with an effective and successful Frontier Policy.

### **The British Government Frontier Policies from 1849 to 1897**

The British annexed Punjab after the defeat of the Sikhs in 1849. The administration of Punjab had two main purposes: to secure tranquillity for settled districts by entering into agreements with the inhabitants of Tribal Areas and management of the settled districts' administration. After the annexation, the five districts of Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Peshawar stretching from north to south, as well as the Cis-Indus district of Hazra, entirely six were designated the Punjab "frontier districts". Two divisions were formed out of these six districts, known as Peshawar and Derajat Divisions, duly notified in 1850 and 1861, respectively, and each was put under the administrative grip of a Commissioner (Baha, 1978). The Deputy Commissioners of the Frontier districts were assigned the responsibility of maintaining relations with the tribes of neighbouring Tribal

Areas. Following the establishment of Tribal Political Agencies, some "Tribal Tracts" on the borders of the districts were left with Deputy Commissioners (Bangash, 2016).

The Frontier issue revolved around various proposals after the uprising of 1857 till 1889 ranging from amalgamating Sind with the Punjab better to coordinate the Frontier policies of the two administrations. The plans of separation of Sind from Bombay and its amalgamation with Punjab from time to time were submitted to the Government but eventually shelved. The recommendations of Viceroy Lord Northbrook (1872-1876) received approval from Lord Salisbury, the Secretary of State, on a similar issue in 1876. The plan, however, could not materialize due to cost and criticism of the "Bombay Presidency," as Bombay's executive didn't consent to transfer Sind to Punjab (Baha, 1978). During Lytton's (1876-1880) viceroyalty, the "vigilantly precautionary Frontier Policy" was pursued due to the perceived threat of Russian adventurism from Central Asia (Lytton, 1877).

Moreover, Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State, urged the "Western and North-Western Frontier Governments" to chalk out a joint strategy for bringing "the area under the personal command of the administration of India." Viceroy Lord Lytton, in his famous Minute written in 1877, agreed with the suggestion of the Secretary of State and worked on a plan to carve out an unconnected province comprising of trans-Indus districts of Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Peshawar as well as of trans-Indus Sind excluding Karachi. The Chief Commissioner, the envoy to the Governor-General, was to head this huge proposed Province. Furthermore, two Commissioners, one for the Pakhtun and the other for the Baluch tribes, were to serve under him (Lytton, 1877).

Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State, rejected Lord Lytton's proposal because this plan involved a huge expense. Subsequently, he presented a compromise scheme: the appointment of two Commissioners directly made by the Viceroy, "one solely dedicated to the trans-Indus Punjab" while "one for the Sind." Lord Lytton agreed to Salisbury's proposals, while for the trans-Indus districts, General Frederick Roberts was the first Commissioner proposed.

However, the plan foundered due to the upsurge of the Second Anglo-Afghan War and the termination of Lytton's viceroyalty. Lord Rippon (1880-1884), the successor of Lytton, put the scheme on the back burner (Zaidi, 1964). In 1889, Lansdowne (1888-1894) became Viceroy; before taking charge of the office, he expressed his desire to form a "single Frontier administration under the immediate command of the administration of India." The transfer of Sindh to Punjab was again proposed. However, matters had changed in the interim. With the creation of the Baluchistan Agency under Sir Robert Sandeman, Sindh had, at last, ceased to be a Frontier and had become an internal province. The scheme of transferring Sindh to Punjab, which for over 30 years had fitful intervals, reappeared on the scene in early 1889 and finally vanished from view. The discussion which had been resumed in the viceroyalty of Lord Lansdowne as to the desirability of developing an advanced Frontier Province terminated in a decision not to proceed further with any such scheme but to leave the Punjab Government the responsibility of carrying out more active Frontier policy of establishing friendly relations with the tribes (Curzon Minute, 1900).

After the tribal uprising of 1897-98, the focus was on bringing Tribal Belt under the immediate control of the Indian Government, which necessitated "the division of Tribal Belt from the Punjab authority." Hamilton, the Secretary of State, not satisfied with the present arrangements, therefore, suggested to Viceroy Lord Elgin, who had replaced Lansdowne in 1895, to take measures for directly dealing with tribes under the supervision of the Government of India (Government of India, 1898). Accordingly, a proposal was forwarded by Lord Elgin (1894-1899), which envisioned that the District Peshawar Commissioner and his subordinate officers would be entrusted with the responsibility to deal with tribes and report directly to the Government of India, whereas, in the civil management matters, he and his apprentice were placed under the Punjab administration. This was a mere replication of Lord Salisbury's scheme advocated twenty- years ago, which could not be implemented like all previous plans.

Finally, Lord Curzon was determined to tackle the Frontier problem, which had proved the most compelling task for the former viceroys.

### Curzon's Tribal Policy of Conciliation and Pacification

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Lord Curzon had acquired in-depth knowledge of the Frontier and Central Asian politics, problems, and issues through extensive travels and broad study, although he believed in neither school of Frontier theorists (Edwardes, 1965). He was well aware of the problems the previous administrations faced while dealing with the tribal question. Thus Frontier was his forte. Before entering his office in 1895, Lord Curzon specified his Tribal Policy:

No distrust of conciliation and no appetite for advance. I am not a chauvinist, and the mere extension of boundaries has for me no attractions. I am not a soldier, and I am not intoxicated by the clang of arms. To me, these wild nature peoples are intensely interesting for their tribal habits, their masculine character, and above all their fierce independence. I would not interfere with these possessions but in the interest of India, and as Lord Roberts has pointed out, for the sake of the recruiting ground of the future I would control them.... I look forward to a time... When along the entire ring of her stupendous mountain barriers on the north and northwest, the native peoples shall look to British guidance and British lead in the field for the security of their cherished institutions and the defence of their patrimonial glens, and when India will be secure from invasion because she has learned how to defend herself (Anjaria, 2012).

On assuming the office in January 1899 as Viceroy, Lord Curzon had to fulfil the two vital obstacles of the Northwest Frontier of India: "the rearranging of military defence" and "the rebuilding of the authority of trans-Frontier districts" (Harris, 1960). According to Carol, Curzon characteristically developed his stance, "First came a sitting stroke, accompanied by an individual pointed stroke on the bull's eye, concluding in a salvo of concentrated rapid fire" (Stewart, 2005). Curzon considered the system under which the Government of Punjab was authorized for

tribal Policy, wherein all decisions had to be channelled through Lahore before reaching the Viceroy's attention, as a dangerous aberration. Lord Curzon was certain that reforming the trans-Indus districts administration would ensure the successful implementation of the Frontier defence scheme. He saw the incumbent system as overflowing with "anomalies, ineradicable and complexities defects" and considered the making of a separate Frontier district consisting of trans-Indus communities the only feasible remedy for the complex situation (Curzon, 1900). He desired to bring the trans-Indus sections below "more elicit, further essential and additional straight" authority and control of the Indian administration through "the abolition of the interceding hurdle of the elaborate organization of the Punjab authority" (Baha, 1978).

In April 1899, Lord Curzon after thorough discussions with officials of the Punjab administration put forward four possible solutions for resolving the complex Frontier problem: first the maintenance of the status quo; second, the formation of the latest frontier section; third, the adoption of "Lord Hamilton's adjustment scheme"; fourth, the division of trans-Frontier section into five or six individual charges, each under a Political envoy. Lord Curzon himself maintained that the status quo was not satisfactory and desirable. The existing system was the most flawed in his view as Viceroy, despite being in charge of Frontier administration, had to rely on subordinate officials who might not be well versed in the affairs of Frontier for the execution of policies. Moreover, he had no control over their appointment and removal. In his private and official letters to Hamilton, Secretary of State Curzon was highly critical of the way the Punjab administration managed the affairs of Frontier. He argued that the officials of the Punjab administration at Lahore had no idea regarding Frontier affairs. Instead, they expressed "doubt regarding their own messengers in the Frontier, which consequently resulted in traditional disapproval, constant conflicts... inevitable errors and... disgraceful delay" (Curzon, 1900). He specifically mentioned Punjab's five Lieutenant-Governors since 1877, "who had a

combined service of 145 years when they were appointed as heads of the Punjab Government", but they had only served for "a combined period of 20 months in the districts of Frontier." Furthermore, none of the Punjab Chief Secretaries appointed between 1878 and 1899 had "any prior experience in political service in the Frontier." (Curzon's Minute, 1900).

Lord Curzon presented his plan in a detailed document on August 27, 1900, outlining the proposed transfer of administration from Punjab and the establishment of a new province. He identified the region between the Gomal Valley and Swat River as highly critical, volatile, and an area of great concern for British India. Curzon emphasized that the Viceroy, in his capacity as the Foreign Minister of India, lacked the authority to issue orders or appoint officials for this significant region without involving the Punjab Government. The strategy for the upcoming Province would include the trans-Indus regions of Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, and Dera Ismail Khan, along with the Political Agencies located in Khyber, Kurram, Tochi, Wana, and Malakand. According to this plan, the Chief Commissioner, acting as the Agent of the Governor-General, would assume the new administration's leadership position, directly accountable to the Government of India. The Chief Commissioner would be stationed in Peshawar and assisted by a Revenue Commissioner and a Judicial Commissioner. To manage matters pertaining to the recruitment, substitution, and advancement of officials in the new Province, a small commission would be established. The Frontier officers, previously associated with the Punjab Commission, would now be included in the graded list of the Political Department of the Government of India. However, Settlement officers and District and Divisional Judges for the new Province would be borrowed from Punjab or other provinces (Lorimer, 1900).

Lord Curzon presented four counterarguments to address the objections raised against the formation of a new Frontier Province. Firstly, he proposed that experienced officials from Punjab would handle revenue matters in the new Province, ensuring that the administration of revenue in the Frontier districts would remain

unaffected. Secondly, since the newly carved out Province would only constitute a small fraction of Punjab's total area, revenue, and population, there would be no need for any compensation to Punjab. The districts to be detached and included in the new Frontier province had no significant geographical, historical, or ethnological connection to Punjab and were inhabited by different people with distinct ways of life. Thirdly, Curzon argued that establishing a Frontier Province would provide an excellent opportunity for training officials who would belong to a separate Political Department of the Government of India. These cadre officers, specialized in tribal affairs, would not face concerns about being posted elsewhere unless their services were required in Baluchistan or the Political Department of the Supreme Government for a similar or more responsible role. Additionally, if an officer proved negligent in handling tribal affairs, they could be easily transferred to another position within the Foreign Department. Lastly, Curzon countered the notion that the Forward Policy of the Punjab Government hindered punitive expeditions against tribesmen or warfare in the Frontier. He highlighted that during the fifty-five years of Punjab's control in the Frontier, the Government had conducted forty military expeditions to facilitate rapid forward movement into tribal territories. By addressing these objections, Lord Curzon aimed to alleviate concerns and emphasize the viability and advantages of establishing a new Frontier Province. (Curzon, 1900).

The Punjab Government was officially informed by the British Indian Government in January 1901 about 'the sanction of the Home authorities' regarding the formation of a new Frontier province which finally came into being on November 9, 1901, as North West Frontier Province. However, Lord Curzon in the presence of three thousand dignitaries at Shahi Bagh Peshawar inaugurated the new Province on April 26 1902, five and half months later. In his address, he hoped that the formation of a new Province would ensure efficient administration not marred by vexatious delays. The first Chief Commissioner of the Province who was also an Agent to the Governor-General and

directly reported to the Central Government was Colonel H. Deane. The Chief Commissioner is an Agent to the Governor-General and had to perform a dual duty, he was not only authorised to cultivate political relations with the bordering tribe, but he also wielded the same power in the civil administration of the Province as the other provinces' Chief Commissioners did in their charge. Thus the Supreme Government acquired direct control over the administration of one of the most critical areas of the British Empire. Olaf Caroe, who administered the North West Frontier Province in the closing days of British rule, acknowledged the success of Curzon's Policy by asserting that after the demise of the Mughal Empire, the Frontier region remained a corridor of invasion. After the onset of the British Empire in India, the British tended to treat the inhabitants of the region as appendages of India, however, the reality was that the Pakhtun dynasties of Sur, Lodhi, Orakzai and Yusufzai had ruled in India, how could they remained satisfied with their lot as "unconsidered trifles on the margin of the Punjab?" Through the establishment of a separate province, Lord Curzon redeemed the self-esteem and pride of the Pakhtuns and firmed up the defence of British India (Caroe, 1958).

The strategic and political significance of the Frontier Province was evident in its unique administrative structure established by the British. One notable feature was that the new Province fell directly under the authority of the "Foreign and Political Department of the Government of India." This department appointed officers with political expertise and training to key positions such as Chief Commissioners, Deputy Commissioners, and Political Agents within the Province (Baha, 1978). Each of the five Political Agencies, namely Khyber, Kurram, South Waziristan, North Waziristan, and Malakand, had a Political Agent responsible for exercising the powers of a District Magistrate and courts of Session in handling criminal cases (Imperial Gazetteer, 1901). These Political Agents, who possessed in-depth knowledge of the tribes under their jurisdiction and were fluent in their language, were individuals selected based on their proficiency, efficiency, and familiarity with the

local people and their culture. It's worth noting that the Political Agents comprised a diverse group consisting of both civilians and military personnel.

Lord Curzon was also very particular regarding military questions, firstly he wanted to withdraw the British forces from advanced positions, secondly to concentrate British forces behind them in British territory and thirdly to improve the communications in the rear (Davies, 1927). Curzon withdrew more than 10,000 troops that the Government had stationed along 200 miles of the administrative border with Afghanistan (Stewart, 2005). The regular troops from advanced positions in Khyber were withdrawn and replaced by two battalions of enlarged and reorganized Khyber Rifles consisting of 1250 personnel (Davies, 1932). The number of British officers in the Khyber Rifles was raised, accompanied by an improved salary scale. Additionally, to reinforce the Khyber Rifles during critical situations, a mobile group was kept ready in Peshawar. Similarly, a contingent of Tribal Militia consisting of 450 Orakzai tribesmen, under the command of British officers, was formed in the southern region of Kohat known as the Samana Rifles (Raleigh, 1906). Furthermore, the Kurram Militia was expanded and restructured to resemble the Khyber Rifles, consisting of two battalions with a total of 1250 personnel in the Kurram Valley (Fraser, 1911). In 1904, the Government implemented a new defence policy for the Tribal Belt, which involved establishing two Waziristan Militia battalions with 800 personnel. One battalion was assigned to the Tochi Valley or North Waziristan, while the other was stationed in the Gomal Valley or South Waziristan. These militia units replaced the large garrisons of regular troops that had been stationed in these valleys since 1895. Mobile columns stationed at Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan were also prepared to provide support when needed. According to Lord Curzon, this new military structure offered several advantages, including reduced costs, increased tactical mobility, and the satisfaction of the local tribes (Baha, 1978). This policy not only relieved Indian Army soldiers from strenuous trans-Frontier duties but also allowed them to concentrate at Bolan and

Khyber, the two main routes to Afghanistan in case of war or hostility. The Government believed that having local garrisons in place would minimize the risk of "disturbance and the stigma associated with military disasters" (Baha, 1978). Lord Curzon's new Militia Scheme was a bold initiative in the Tribal Belt. The British officers in the militia, through close personal interaction, established influence over their personnel and tribal leaders, which proved highly valuable and productive for the Government. In Khyber, the friendly Maliks provided confidential information about the movements of raiding parties. They also assisted the administration in mediating agreements between the tribes and the Government, as well as supporting the Government in constructing roads and railways in the tribal region (Davies, 1927). The press praised Lord Curzon's meticulous Frontier policy in both British India and Britain for geopolitical and economic reasons. The Times of India highly regarded Lord Curzon's policy as "The most important undertaking by the Viceroy in the field of Indian statesmanship" (Baha, 1978). However, being a prudent administrator, he maintained a cautiously optimistic outlook. He was well aware that his Frontier policy would not exempt the Government from Frontier warfare, occasional expeditions, or chronic anxiety." (Baha, 1978).

Lord Curzon's key principle in his military policy was the development and enhancement of communication infrastructure in the Frontier. The primary objective of undertaking communication projects in strategic locations was to rapidly concentrate troops at critical points and reinforce the "tribal Militia." Additionally, Curzon aimed to instil greater confidence in the Militia men and ensure security for their loyalty to the Government (Raleigh, 1906). He firmly believed that constructing railways would not only address the issue of forts, cantonments, and mobile columns in the Frontier but also bring economic benefits to the region. This, in turn, would foster goodwill between the Government and the local population (Curzon, 1900). The strategic projects for the Kohat Pass Road, the Murtaza-Wana Road, and the Thal-Parachinar Road were undertaken alongside the railways. In April 1899, Lord Curzon

initiated the improvement of the road between Peshawar and the Kohat Pass, considering it a crucial project for repairing any serious disruptions in Frontier communications (Aitchison, 1909). The Wazirs of North Waziristan made agreements with the Government of India to facilitate the opening and protection of the 64-mile road from Murtaza to Wana, passing through Kajuri and Kachin in South Waziristan. This road, which followed the Gomal River Valley, had long served as an ancient trade route from Afghanistan to India, often used by well-armed Powindahs (Foreign Department, 1904).

The Government of India undertook the improvement of the Kurram Valley road from Thal to Parachinar, covering a distance of 54 miles, during 1904-05. The primary objective behind this improvement was to maintain the road in excellent condition year-round, specifically for wheeled traffic (Government of India, 1904). The Khyber Pass held significant importance in various communication projects. Safeguarding this strategically crucial pass against external threats and tribal conflicts was a central aspect of Curzon's policy. The successful completion of the Mullagori road inspired Curzon to further enhance the existing communication infrastructure between Peshawar and Landi Khana via the Khyber Pass.

During Lord Curzon's era, military defence was reorganized, and positive measures were taken to improve relations with the tribes residing in the borderlands. Frontier officers were assigned the task of maintaining cordial relations with the tribes, while subsidies to the tribes were increased. The system of locally recruited tribal militias and levies was implemented with the aim of ensuring peace in the Tribal Belt, guaranteeing the tribesmen's service to the Government, and fostering discipline through close contact with British officers to build mutual trust.

The implementation of the new Frontier policy aimed to address the growing unemployment and widespread poverty in the Tribal Belt (Baha, 1978). It also intended to gain in-depth knowledge about the tribes and gradually influence them by improving their economic conditions (Harris, 1960). Lord Curzon's approach to pacification during his tenure as Viceroy involved a strategic

combination of non-interference and peaceful engagement, which almost eliminated the need for punitive expeditions. Only the Bazar Valley expedition in Khyber, conducted in 1908, and military campaigns launched in 1919-20 and 1936 in Waziristan, remained as exceptions to this trend.

## Conclusion

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The Tribal Frontier Policy of Lord Curzon revolved around securing strategic points in Tribal Belt and ensuring law and order upon the borders of Settled British territory. He resolved to achieve this objective by securing the contentment as well as the pacification of the Frontier tribes. Lord Curzon inaugurated a new change in the system of frontier defence during his viceroyalty. He recruited locals in Militia and levies to use their own weapons against recalcitrant tribes and relieve the regular troops from gruelling duty in difficult terrain. The regular troops from advanced trans-Frontier positions were gradually withdrawn as far as possible and were stationed within easy reach in large centres. The various locally raised corps militia, military police and levies took their positions on the border. The extension of improved communications gained great impetus, strategic railways crept further forward. The Peshawar and Quetta divisions and the Kohat, Derajat and Bannu brigades defended the Frontier. The moveable columns from Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan were always ready to move out at a moment's notice.

Local Levies and Militia were strengthened and were made in charge of maintaining peace and tranquillity in the Tribal Belt consequently frequent military expeditions came to an end during the tenure of Lord Curzon. The British officers having knowledge of tribal customs and traditions and local languages were appointed in Tribal Areas. Moreover, they were required to keep abreast of local customs and traditions to cultivate friendly relations with the tribesmen. The subsidy system was further increased to get more influence in the Tribal Areas. Thus Lord Curzon's Tribal Policy of peaceful penetration not only helped in acquiring extensive knowledge about the tribesmen but also paved the way for pacifying

the turbulent Frontier and attaining the contentment of the tribesmen after the Tribal uprising of 1897 which witnessed the scenes of destruction and devastation. His Policy of pacification brought peace and tranquillity to the strategic region and built trust between tribesmen and the British since their first contact in 1849.

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