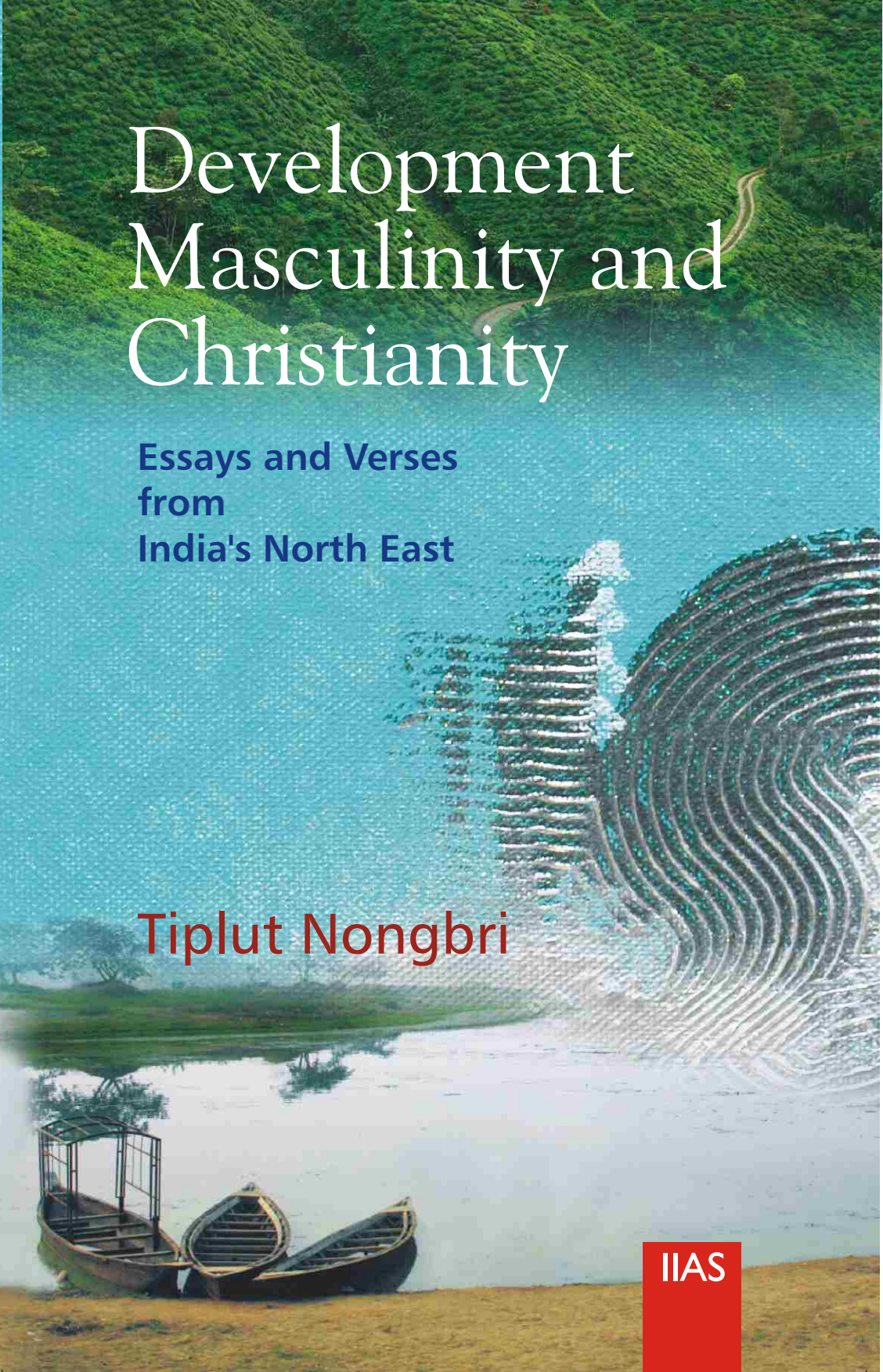
Development Masculinity and Christianity

Essays and Verses from India's North East

Tiplut Nongbri



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Indian Institute of Advanced Study
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Abbreviations

ADC	Autonomous District Council
AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CMR	Child Mortality Rate
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOI	Government of India
GSDP	Gross State Domestic Product
IIPS	International Institute of Population Sciences
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
LEP	Look East Policy
MoDONER	Ministry of the Development of North Eastern Region
MTA	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
NEC	North Eastern Council
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
NEFT	North East Frontier Tract
NER	North Eastern Region
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NSDP	Net State Domestic Product
PESA	Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas, Act
SRT	Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai
TOI	Times of India

Preface and Acknowledgement

The three essays that comprised the first part of this collection have been delivered as Special Lectures at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla where I spent a month in September 2012. The essays have been written at different points of time as part of my ongoing research on India's North East. In chronological terms, the first essay 'Development in North East India: Issues and Challenges' is the most recent. It emerged from a small project commissioned by the Changmai-based Asia Indigenous People's Pact on behalf of the International Fund for Agricultural Development in the fall of 2011. I am grateful to AIPP and IFAD for the financial assistance provided.

The second paper, 'Deconstructing Masculinity: Matriliny, Fatherhood and Social Change' is a revised and enlarged version of an earlier paper published in *Eastern Quarterly*, 5 (II &III), July-December 2008.

Part of the third essay, 'Christianity, Colonialism and Tribes: An Alternative View of Conversion' came from my ongoing project on Khasi religion.

I am grateful to all the scholars and fellows at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study where the lectures took place for their comments and feedback, and to Professor Peter Ronald deSouza, Director, IIAS for his kind invitation, which has enabled me to visit the Institute on a visiting professorship and avail of its rich and stimulating intellectual resources.

The second part of this volume contains 52 pieces of 'stories' in verse based on my personal and professional encounters and experiences written over time. Each piece marks a distinct point in my life as I journeyed from my homeland in India's North East to Delhi where I live and work. Though written independently of the essays, many of the pieces are extensions of the concerns that emanate from my research. However, the work makes no claim to poetic sophistication or rigour typical of literary genre. I have adopted

the verse form primarily as a medium to express my concerns and to capture the changing face of the North East as it comes into contact with the forces of modernization and change. Written from a sociological perspective, special attention has been paid to the incursion of materialist and acquisitive values in the once egalitarian tribal societies; the social and physical effect of resource-intensive development; the trauma of insurgencies and counter-insurgency measures faced by the ordinary citizens; and the struggles of the North East diaspora in Delhi, as they try to carve out a niche for themselves, away from their troubled and development-starved homeland, in the city's multi-cultural landscape. As a backdrop to the latter, some of the pieces turn their gaze on the common sights and sounds of Delhi as seen through the eyes of a North Easterner.

Some of the pieces included may appear to be out of sync with the rest of the collection in the volume. But I decided to put them in because excluding them would make the story incomplete. Though rather personal in nature, these pieces expose both the frailty of human existence and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversities. Written at a time when the world appeared bleak and dark, the exercise provided me with a weapon to battle a serious illness and disruptions caused to my social and professional life. Together with the pieces on the North East diaspora in Delhi, they tell the story of struggles, resilience and hope of a people long viewed as the 'peripheral' and 'cultural other' slowly paving their way to create space for themselves in the flux and flurry of the nation's capital.

I am grateful to all the persons who in different ways inspired and encouraged me in this endeavor. In particular, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. T.R.S. Sharma, Mr. Keki N. Daruwala and Madhu Sahni, a friend and colleague at JNU, for their valuable comments on the manuscript contained in Part II of the volume. To Dr. Prabhat Mittal, a special thank you for helping me with the preparation of the kinship chart and to Pastor Lyndan Syiem for his help in editing the essay on Christianity. I would also like to thank Dr. Debarshi Sen for the care and patience with which he handled the back-and-forth travel of the manuscript between Shimla and

JNU, and to the anonymous editor at the Institute for straightening up my commas and full stops. My sincere thanks also go to Mr Ajay Gupta of 3A Graphics for the kindness with which he met my requests for last minute changes in the manuscript.

To my family, Vijay, Natasha and Vivek, I thank you all for your readiness, as always, to act as my sounding board when doubts clouded my mind and for supportively putting up with the neglect on the domestic front.

Last and most importantly, I express my deep gratitude to the Indian Institute of Advanced Study for giving me the opportunity to put together the essays and verses in this volume and to Jawaharlal Nehru University, my parent institution, for providing me the intellectual space to experiment with a genre of writing that is strictly outside the boundary of my discipline.

Needless to say, none of the persons or institutions mentioned above is accountable for the views and/or limitations contained in this book, for which I alone am responsible.

I dedicate this collection to the young people from the North East studying and working in Delhi, in interaction with whom I was able to re-live and re-experience the angst and trauma that they and many of their families go through.

TIPLUT NONGBRI

Chapter 1

Development in North East India: Issues and Challenges

In recent years, there has been a lot of hype about the strength of the Indian economy, its resilience during the global meltdown and its ability to weather the storm while accelerating the pace of development. What is hidden in this self-praise are the sharp disparities between the rural and the urban, the haves and the have-nots, and the centre and the periphery. The disparity is particularly staggering in the context of North East India, a region described by some as being in the grip of a perpetual 'crisis of development'. For most of the states in the North East, development has been and continues to be an elusive dream. A perusal of the development indicators of the Northeastern states indicates that the North East has missed out on growth experienced in other parts of the country. Even a state like Mizoram with the second highest literacy rate in the country, has failed to translate its literacy achievement into growth. On the contrary, figures released by the Planning Commission in March 2012 for the year 2009-2010 show that the ratio of the poor as well as the absolute number has risen sharply in the states of Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram, a situation which is at sharp variance with its position in the 1980s when the North Eastern states enjoyed the distinction of being categorized as low poverty states. What explains this drastic change in the economy of the region? Given that the North Eastern region is endowed with high human potential, rich natural resources, long tradition of local self-government, besides generous funding from the Centre as 'Special Category' states, this sorry state of affairs calls for an explanation. This exercise is particularly critical at this juncture, as the recent

paradigm shift in India's economic policy post-liberalization and its conscious efforts to forge closer economic ties with the ASEAN countries has made the North Eastern region an important gateway into East and South East Asia.

CLARIFICATION OF THEORETICAL POSITION

Before I proceed with the analysis, it would be prudent to clarify my theoretical position. To be honest, I had not thought of this when I wrote the paper. But thanks to a comment at the breakfast table in the Institute Guest House that Indian works generally suffer from lack of theoretical depth, made me realize the importance of the matter. Having said that, I would like to state that fitting the North East within neat theoretical formulation is not an easy task. What I have done in this paper is to use insights drawn from various theoretical frameworks employed by scholars in the analysis of the world economic system and the unequal relations between the developed and underdeveloped nations and regions, such as the centre/periphery paradigm of Gunder Frank (1966)[1] and Wallerstein (1974)[2] and Emmanuel's (1972)[3] theory of unequal exchange and combine them with the historical and sociological perspective, with special emphasis on the North East's strategic geo-political location and unique historical experience, which together have contributed to the 'otherness' of the region and its isolation from the Indian mainstream and national development agenda.

To put the discussion in a proper perspective, it would be instructive to add that I view social isolation as a) the alienation or distance from mainstream society created by, more often than not, the dominant group's lack of cultural predisposition to gain awareness of and communicate with those who are near enough to permit frequent interaction, b) exclusion from major societal mechanisms which produce or distribute social resources and c) exclusion from decision-making process and social and cultural life of society.

'Otherness', on the other hand, is a product of representation of the world or society we live in into binary categories of 'we' and 'they', based on the perceived sense of difference between the 'self' and the so-called 'other': a difference that has helped the numerically

and politically dominant to assert their authority/control over the subordinate groups/segments of society.

The process of 'othering' comes out sharply in Edward Said's celebrated book *Orientalism* (1978/2001)[4], where he brings out in graphic detail the manner in which western scholars construct a picture of the 'Orient' as the exotic or 'mystic other', that is distinct from the 'Occident' the rational and superior 'self'. Said uses the concept 'orientalism' as an analytical category to map the systematic and multifarious ways in which colonial discourse deals with the 'Orient' (a euphemism for West Asia and other non-western world). In his view, 'Orientalism' is not simply an idea but a way of acting, that functions as a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching about it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (ibid, 3).

Though Said uses the concept of orientalism primarily in the context of western hegemony: to uncover the unequal power relations between the west and the non-west, the process transcends political and geographical boundaries, as similar kinds of hegemonic relations are reproduced by the numerically and politically dominant against the socially and economically weak at different levels of the social and political spectrum, such as state, region, community and gender leading to the intensification of vulnerability of the socially marginalized and deprived.

How does the process of 'othering' and/or isolation/exclusion operate in the context of India's North East? How and in what way do these ways of acting affect the process of development in the region? I shall return to these questions later in the course of the discussion.

LOCATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES

North East India is located on the eastern-most corner of India. Spanning over an area of about 2.6 lakh sq km and covering nearly 8 per cent of the land area of India and less than 4 per cent (3.8 per cent) of its population (39 million according to 2001 census), the North East originally comprised the seven sister-states of Arunachal

Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. With the addition of Sikkim to the region, the North East has now become eight states.

With the exception of the states of Assam and Tripura, the region is predominantly rural in character with a low density of population (149 persons per square km). Population growth, however, is relatively high on account of migration from other states as well as from across the international borders, notably Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma). This is reflected in the rate of population growth, which stands at 2.4 per cent in the North East as against 1.8 per cent for All India, a fact that challenges the government's position on external immigration in the region.

While the rate of population growth of the North East is significantly higher than the national average (2.4: 1.8) the position is reverse with respect to the per capita Gross State Domestic Product(GSDP) which is 18.03 in the Northeast and 25.94 for India as a whole. The same trend is visible with respect to NSDP growth rate, which stands at 3.88 in NE and 5.1 All India.

Though the North East is officially viewed as a single entity, it is in fact highly heterogeneous. Compositionally, the region is a conglomeration of various ethnic groups, cultures and races. A large segment of the population is made up of the mongoloids of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family who came into the region from northwestern China, northern Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos at different points of time, and the Caucasoids belonging to the Aryan linguistic family. However, neither of these two groups referred to is homogeneous in terms of socio-cultural and political aspects. Majority of the former have been designated as Scheduled Tribes. The tribal population ranges from 94.5 per cent in Mizoram, 89.1 per cent in Nagaland, 85.9 per cent Meghalaya, 64.2 Arunachal Pradesh, 34.2 Manipur, 31.1 Tripura, 20.6 Sikkim to 12.4 per cent in Assam, the lowest in the region but substantially higher than the national figure of 8.2 per cent (2001 Census). Out of 635 communities categorized as tribes by the People of India Project, 213 are found in the North East each with its distinct language, culture and system of governance (Singh, 1992) [5].

While the early history of the region is shrouded in ambiguity, its strategic location at the confluence of South, South East and East Asia has made North East India a centre of active population movement and an important pathway of communication between the peoples of the mega region.

The extension of colonial rule significantly altered the political geography of the region. While British annexation brought the region within the economic and political framework of colonialism, it also sealed its people within rigid territorial boundaries hitherto unknown in their history. Besides, with the introduction of the Inner line Regulation in 1873 and the policy of Excluded (Naga, Lushai, N. Cachar & NEFT/NEFA) and Partially Excluded Areas (Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Mikir hills) vide Government of India Act, 1935, substantial parts of the region, which traditionally served as nature's 'bridge' between the populations of the mega region were rendered out of bounds for the outside population (cf. Roy-Burman, 1998)[6].

The partition of the country in 1947, following India's independence, intensified the isolation of the North East. The creation of East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) not only disrupted the road and river communications that connected the region with commercial centres in undivided Bengal and beyond, but also left the North East hemmed in by a long chain of international border. Today, its only link with the Indian mainland is a slender 22-kilometre corridor through North Bengal. In percentage terms, 98 per cent of the border is linked to neighbouring countries whereas only 2 per cent connects it with the Indian mainland.

This geo-political and historical specificity imparts a distinctive character to the North East. Even after six decades of its integration to India's federal polity, North East India retains a remarkably strong regional identity despite vast internal differences. Apart from the wide linguistic, religious and ethnic variation, the different communities experienced different degrees of assimilation and isolation in relation to the general population. While the Assamese of the Brahmaputra valley and the Meitei of Manipur have undergone a high degree of Hinduization and Brahminization, the Khasi, Garo, Mizo and Naga people have largely adopted Christianity, albeit

without fundamentally disrupting their indigenous structures and traditions. There is also a sizable concentration of the Muslim population in the Brahmaputra, Barak and Imphal valley, as a result of the expansion of the Mughal conquest in Bengal and later migration by Muslim peasants in search of land and livelihood. Besides, Arunachal Pradesh's proximity to Tibet has exposed some of the frontier tribes to Buddhist influence. This civilizational mix adds to the heterogeneity and complexity of the region, and has oriented the different ethnic groups differently towards the larger society and the Indian nation-state. It also accounts for the diversity of arrangements provided by the Constitution for the administration of the region.

ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

The system of administration in India's North East differs in important ways from the rest of the country. Whereas the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and the tribal areas of Assam are placed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, Nagaland is governed by Article 371A. This Article provides that, '[N]otwithstanding anything in this Constitution – no Act of Parliament in respect of (i) religious or social practices of the Nagas, (ii) Naga customary law and procedure, (iii) administration of civil and criminal justice … and (iv) ownership of land and its resources shall apply to the state of Nagaland'. Article 371G provides similar safeguards for Mizoram. Though Mizoram comes under the Sixth Schedule, additional safeguards on the pattern of Nagaland have been provided for the state. Article 371G was incorporated into the Constitution in 1986 when Mizoram was elevated from a Union Territory to a full-fledged state. Likewise, to protect the interests of the tribal population of Manipur, Article 371C provides for the constitution of Sixth Schedule-type councils in the hill areas of the state. On the other hand, though Arunachal Pradesh continues to enjoy the safeguards extended to a Sixth Schedule state, it has opted to retain the Panchayati Raj institutions established in 1969 instead of adopting the District Council system (Verghese, 1996, 51) [7].

In states governed by the Sixth Schedule, the local administrative

units (District Councils – for Autonomous districts, that is areas where the ST population is more homogenous - and Regional Councils for autonomous regions – areas where there are different STs in an autonomous district) have been given special legislative powers with respect to the administration of land, forest (other than reserved forests), water canal, jhum, establishment of village and town councils, appointment of chiefs and village headmen and customary laws and practices

On the physical plane, despite large tracts of mountainous terrain, the region is rich in natural resources. According to one estimate, the Northeast has a proven exploitable reserve of 864 million tonnes of coal, 421m tonnes of hydrocarbons (267 metric tonnes of crude and 154 metric tonnes of gas in oil equivalent), and hydroelectric power potential of nearly 60,000 MW. Assam and Arunachal are endowed with rich oil bearing shale formations that could yield 15 billion tonnes of recoverable oil (Uberoi, 2010)[8]. In the opinion of the writer, 'though commercially expensive to exploit now, these deposits could become a real asset when oil reserves elsewhere in the country begin to dry up and the rising global oil prices make imports prohibitive' (ibid).

CONTESTED IDENTITY

Adding to the complexity of the North East is its contested identity. Though the region has generally been accepted as a natural category in political discourse, there is little consensus on its identity. Not only has the nomenclature 'North East India' - popularly applied to the region - undergone a series of transformations the entity itself has been questioned. While some see the North East as a singular entity distinct from the rest of the country, others see it as an accident of geography whose constituent units have little in common with each other (Bhaumik, 2009)[9].

To understand the reason/s behind the different perspectives, it would be instructive to take a quick look at the etymology of the concept.

As a concept, the North East is a colonial construct closely tied up with the imperial strategy of border management and policies

towards the mountain tribes inhabiting the tracts of forested lands and plateaus sandwiched between British Bengal on the South West and Burma in the East. Interestingly, what was initially conceived as the *Eastern* frontier (Pemberton, 1835)[10] became the *North Eastern* frontier (Mackenzie, 1882) [11] within a span of just over three-and a half decades (for details, see Bhaumik, op cit). What is significant in this (colonial) construct of India's North East is not so much the fluid notion of geography and space, as its definition as a 'frontier' in the discourse. As a frontier, the North East was seen not only to lie outside the pale of civilization distinct from British administered India (read Bengal), but also an area to be subjugated and controlled through varied means, depending upon the perception and needs of the empire[12].

Though the image of the frontier continues to haunt the region and its people, in the post-independence period the North East has emerged as a distinct regional and political entity consequent the establishment of the North Eastern Council (NEC) an advisory body, set up by an Act of Parliament in 1971, to coordinate development activities of the states in the region for balanced growth. The Act not only places new emphasis on the oneness of the region but also gives tacit recognition to the importance of development for social and political stability. The former is exemplified by the use of such metaphor as 'seven sisters' to refer to the seven constituent units (now eight with the addition of Sikkim) and inclusion of the word '*region*' in the nomenclature 'North Eastern Region' (NER) officially applied to the entity to underline the shared characteristics.

With the paradigmatic shift in India's economic strategy post-liberalization, yet another label has been superimposed on the North East: a 'bridgehead' whose geo-political location is seen to be ideally suited for the implementation of India's newly crafted Look East Policy for closer economic cooperation with countries in the South and East Asian region (GOI, 2008)[13]. To what extent this new vision of the North East translates into a reality time alone can tell, but what is clear is that while some may contest whether the North East constitutes a single entity, the region cannot be wished away, call it by whatever name.

CRISIS OF DEVELOPMENT: THE COMMON ELEMENT

Notwithstanding the wide diversity in socio-cultural composition and administrative arrangements for the North Eastern region, the eight states are similar in being relatively backward on most parameters of economic, human and social development - so much so that the region has often been described as being in the grip of a socially and politically destabilizing 'crisis of development', belying its rich natural endowments and relatively advantaged position before Indian independence (Uberoi, 2010, op cit).

To understand the gravity of the situation let us take a quick look at some of the development indicators in the region.

INCIDENCE OF POVERTY

One of the most important indicators of the economic health of a state or nation is the incidence of poverty in the society measured by the percentage of people lying below the poverty line (BPL). Though North East India has often been described as a low poverty region (see in particular Thorat, 2005)[14] with proportion of the population living below the poverty line less than the national average (13.9 NER, 23.6 All India – GOI, 2011)[15], the average obscures pockets of intense poverty which in some cases are significantly higher than the national average. The per capita Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) in the NER is also substantially lower than the national average, 18.03 NER, 25.94 All India (ibid). Significantly, the gap has been increasing since the beginning of economic reforms in the early 1990s (GOI, 2008).[16] The gap in per capita incomes in the region, compared to the national average, has increased from a 20 per cent gap in 1990-91 to a 31 per cent gap in 2004-05 (ibid).

Adding to the worry are the recent figures on poverty released by the Planning Commission in March 2012, which reveal that barring Manipur the ratio of the poor as well as the absolute number has sharply arisen in the erstwhile low poverty states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, with the last being the worst affected where poverty has more than doubled from 8.8 in 2004-05 to 20.9 in 2009-2010.

There are also large pockets of poverty among the tribal population in Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, which finds vivid expression in the wide gap in the poverty ratio of the Scheduled Tribes and the general population. Among the states, Assam tops the list with a whopping difference of 34.70 percentage points followed by Tripura with 16.88 percentage points. Interestingly, these are also the states with high proportion of child labour. Abject poverty and the absence of a law banning child labour in the country has exposed many children from poor families to exploitation of diverse kinds. Among the North Eastern states, Arunachal Pradesh has the largest number of child labour (20.1 per cent) followed by Tripura (14.2) and Assam (11.7) [IIPS, 2005-06)[17].

LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Taken as a whole, the total literacy rate of the North Eastern region appears fairly favourable at 68.5 per cent, which is slightly higher than the All India average of 64.8 per cent as per 2001 Census. Individually, the figures show huge disparities among the states with Mizoram topping the list at 88.8 per cent followed by Tripura (73.2 per cent), Manipur (70.5 per cent), Sikkim (68.8 per cent), Nagaland (66.6 per cent). The literacy rates of three states Assam (63.3 per cent), Meghalaya (62.6 per cent) and Arunachal Pradesh (54.3 per cent) lie below the national average. However, literacy rate by itself is not a reliable pointer of development. For instance, Mizoram's high literacy rate has neither helped the state to translate its potential into growth, nor improve its sex ratio which stands at 984 per 1,000 men, considerably lower than Arunachal Pradesh's 1,003/1,000 whose literacy rate is the lowest in the region[18].

A major cause for concern is that despite relatively favourable literacy rates, educational attainment is quite poor in many states. In Arunachal Pradesh, 45 per cent men and 30 per cent women are without any education. In Meghalaya, about one-third of the male and female population has no experience of school. Even among those who had the privilege of attending school, the intensity of education is extremely low as reflected in the median number of years a person spends in school. Again, in Meghalaya and Arunachal

Pradesh, men and women combined barely spend 3 years in school.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

North East also fares very poorly on the health front. The region particularly has high incidence of poverty-related diseases like anaemia and mal-nutrition. States with particularly high levels of anaemia are Tripura and Assam (for both women and men), and Meghalaya (for women). Severe anaemia is most prevalent in Assam for both women and men.

The region scores particularly poorly on safe motherhood. According to the National Family Health Survey-3 Report (IIPS, 2005-06, op cit), several states consistently perform below the national average. The list includes Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland (barring Assam, the three are predominantly tribal states). This explains why despite the relatively low mortality rate at birth (IMR), Scheduled Tribes have the highest post-neonatal and child mortality rates. Among the states, child mortality rate is particularly high in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland (ibid).

That there is a link between the health profile of the region and the availability of heath care facilities is demonstrated by the fact that the North East is also marked by paucity of good health care facilities. An earlier study conducted by this author reveals that the availability of public health care services in the North Eastern states is extremely poor particularly in the predominantly tribal rural areas (Nongbri, 2006)[19]. This is attested by the fact that only 1 out of 5 tribal births take place in a medical facility in contrast to 4 out of 5 for the general population. Even where facilities (such as primary health centres and community health centres) exist, they are often without adequate doctors or medicines.

Even in the area of reproductive health in which the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has adopted the National Rural Health Mission in 2005 as a strategy to mitigate the problems faced by women in rural and far-flung areas, its result has been far from satisfactory. According to the NFHS-3 Report (IIPS, op cit), the distribution of nutrient supplements to pregnant and lactating

mothers in the states of Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland in the North East carried out under the programme covers just about 50 per cent of the target population whereas the coverage in states like Delhi and West Bengal is over 90 per cent.

ACCESS TO CIVIC AND DOMESTIC AMENITIES

It is widely established that the well-being of an individual or group depends to a large extent on access to amenities such as good medical facilities, clean drinking water, clean and wholesome living conditions backed by good sanitation and toilet facilities. For the people of the North East, access to civic amenities is a distant dream. In many areas, toilet and sanitation facilities are almost non-existent. Even with regards to basic goods like electricity and clean drinking water, the situation is far from satisfactory. In Assam, less than half the population has access to electricity. In Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland more than one-third of households have no access to improved source of drinking water.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The region also suffers from gross inadequacy of development infrastructure, communication and transport facility (states like Mizoram, Meghalaya and Manipur have no railways at all and road connectivity within and between states is extremely poor in most states), low investment and high unemployment. Barring Assam, there is hardly any industrial growth in any of the states. Even in Assam, traditional industries like tea and oil are experiencing great difficulty due to high production costs, poor yield, falling markets and extortions by insurgents.

What explains the under-development of the North East? Given that as Special Category states, the North Eastern states receive generous funding from the Central government the crisis of development is baffling indeed.

In its report on development in the NER, the *2020 Vision Document* (GOI, 2008, op cit) attributes the poor state of development in the region to the devastating effect of partition, poor infrastructure,

top-down approach, ethnic conflict and insurgency, poor governance and anomalous status of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and the North Eastern Council vis a vis the Planning Commission and Central Ministries.

It is a truism that each of the above factors plays an important role in stalling the pace of development in the North Eastern Region. To begin with, the partition of India in 1947 not only intensified the problem of access to the North East, but also burdened the region with heavy financial demand for creating new infrastructure since the strategic land and riverine routes of the pre-independence era through which goods and people, to and from the North East, freely passed were immediately snapped, plunging the region into one of the most devastating economic crisis in its history. The once open and vibrant economic spaces became transformed into rigid international borders, setting up permanent barriers to any human activity except for small border hats and routine patrol by the security forces to keep vigil, lest people on either side of the line dared to cross to the other side.

With the domestic market almost non-existent, the goods from the field and the mines perished for want of buyers reducing businessmen/women to bankruptcy and populations in the border areas to near starvation. Partition also transformed the North East the once active commercial centre with close links to the business centres and ports in the Surma valley, into a landlocked, remote and isolated region.

The effect of India's partition (described by some of my informants as the second partition after the imposition of the '1790 Regulation')[20] is particularly acute in the context of Meghalaya, whose mountainous terrain and poor means of communication makes access to markets in India a herculean task.[21] Worryingly, lack of proper means of communication and initiative by the Centre to rectify the problem (notwithstanding the 2020 Vision Document's strong emphasis on the strengthening of internal and external connectivity to capitalize on the Look East Policy- LEP) has today forced the Meghalaya government to sell its limestones to the French-owned cement plant in Sylhet, Bangladesh, at throwaway price[22].

The mode of development prevailing in the North East has also left much to be desired, with plans and programmes formulated in New Delhi with little local participation in the matter. The problem is compounded by the poor quality of governance.

If we test the quality of governance prevailing in the different states in NER in terms of three criteria applied by the World Bank in its definition of governance (cited in GOI, 2001)[23] namely: a) form of political regime, b) process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development and, c) capacity of governments to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions, most of the states in the region fall far short of the mark.

This is particularly true of Meghalaya, where a series of coalition governments has plunged governance in the state into a crisis, with politicians more interested in securing their ministerial berths than in providing good governance. It has not only left the bureaucracy without any clear guidelines in the implementation of policies but also provided ample scope for abuse of power by those in positions of authority. Significantly, the adverse effect of this process is not confined to the administration but spills over to the private sector, civil society and the market, as the functioning of each of these is deeply influenced by the policies and regulatory mechanisms instituted by the state. Though the form varies, the same malaise is seen in other states of the North East.

Coming to the *second* factor, mode of policy and programme formulation, it needs to be stated that though there is much rhetoric about the need to adopt a bottom-up approach, policy formulation and planning in India in general, and the North East in particular, continues to be top-down, with decision-making monopolized by a small group of administrators and professionals who work on the tacit assumption that 'they know best what the people need and want'.

Such a paternalistic approach not only alienates the people for whom they plan but also often results in the formulation of policies and programmes that are ill-suited to their needs. The exclusion of people from development planning and implementation not only

goes against the spirit of democracy and decentralization of power and decision-making mandated by the 73rd& 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, but also exacts a heavy toll on development.

Needless to say that people's participation in policy formulation and implementation is critical for development. Of course, while participation by each and every individual is an ideal to be achieved there are practical limits to it. There are however ways and means by which the voice and concerns of the people can find manifestation. One way of doing this is to operate through community institutions like village councils and assemblies, and/or local groups and associations, such as youth groups, women's groups, etc., where the leaders can function as spokespersons and sound boards of the people. In this mode of functioning, people are not merely passive recipients but partners in development.

Sadly, the ground reality in most parts of the North East is that the state is not only highly reticent to involve people in development but also extremely reluctant to share information and knowledge with the public. Personal experience reveals that one of the most difficult places to get information is the government establishment. Given that information is vital for capacity building, the denial of information is a serious spoke in the wheel of development.

If development is to take off in the right manner, it is necessary to break the culture of silence and secrecy that cloaks the state machinery. The culture of silence and secrecy not only provides those in seats of power and influence with a protective umbrella to indulge in illegal acts, but also seriously impairs state accountability, which in turn contributes to the poor record of the delivery machinery.

INTERFERENCE BY CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

The North East is also plagued by excessive central interference, which explains the anomalous status of the NEC and the Ministry of DoNER noted by the *2020 Vision Document* referred to earlier. This not only imposes serious constraints on the states to exercise their *authority* in the management of the economic and social resources for development (the World Bank's third variable of good

governance), but also makes a mockery of the principle of decentralization mandated by the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Act. While the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act has yet to be introduced in many parts of India's North East, the omission of which has denied women of its progressive provisions, the traditional political system too has little space for women.

ADMINISTRATIVE BOTTLENECK

A related factor that finds little mention in development discourse on the North East is the problem posed by the multiplicity of administrative arrangements prevailing in the region, which is reinforced by Central domination noted earlier. Mention has already been made about the Sixth Schedule and other special constitutional arrangements for the administration of the North East. Designed to strike a balance between the tribes' quest for autonomy and the controlling power of the state, far from bringing about the desired effect the instrument has in fact ended up as a bottleneck for development.

The promised autonomy never translated into a reality as the Autonomous District Council (ADC) and Regional Council (RC) are treated more like extensions of the state and Central governments. All laws passed by the District and Regional Councils require the assent of the Governor, failing which they will not have the sanctity of law. Further, with the insertion of paragraph 12-A in the Sixth Schedule vide the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act, 1969 the power of the ADC has been considerably eroded. Para 12 A (also defined as the repugnancy clause) holds that, should the District Council (or RC as the case may be) and the State Legislature make laws on the same subject, if any provision of any regulation made by the ADC or RC is repugnant to any provision of a law made by the State Legislature, shall to the extent of repugnancy be void and the law made by the State Legislature shall prevail. In structural and functional terms, this paragraph makes the District and Regional Councils subservient to the State Legislature.

The powerlessness of the ADC is evident even in the regulation of forests, which is one of the most important subjects entrusted to

the ADC under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. This fact is illustrated by the series of orders passed by the Union Government, following the Supreme Court decision in 1995-96 banning the felling of timber in private forests, that all forest-related activities irrespective of the class or ownership status of the forests should be carried out only as per the working-plan duly approved by the Department of Forest thereby completely bypassing the jurisdiction of the ADC in Sixth Schedule areas (Barik and Darlong, n.d, 19-20)[24]. That the state is the ultimate controller of forests was further made clear in a letter issued by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to the Government of Assam[25]. To the latter's query whether the Principal Secretary of Autonomous Councils in districts governed by the Sixth Schedule can be made the Chairman of the District Level Committee (DLC) and Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SLDC) - committees constituted under Tribal Forest Rights Act, 2006 - which are supposed to be headed by the District Collector or Deputy Commissioner (DC) in the formers and by a Sub-Divisional level officer (SDO) in the latter, the Ministry's reply was a categorical 'No'. The Assam Government was informed that SDOs and District Magistrates are available in districts governed by the Sixth Schedule as well hence the committees should be headed by state-level officers and *not by an officer from the ADC* (ibid).[26]

Similar experience has been reported from other states as well where the Sixth Schedule operates. In its report on the working of the ADCs, the Expert Committee constituted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj for planning of Sixth Schedule areas that lie outside Parts IX and IX-A of the Constitution (GOI, 2006) [27], brings out the sorry state of the ADC in the state of Mizoram and Garo hills of Meghalaya. Strongly indicative of the severe erosion of its powers, many of the functions performed by the ADC are slowly being expropriated by state-level departments: developmental functions have been taken over by the Department of Rural Development and the executive and judicial powers by the Deputy Commissioner and District Magistrate, respectively, thus reducing the ADC to near redundancy (ibid).

Experience in the last six decades has also revealed serious flaws

in the provision of the Sixth Schedule. This fact comes out sharply if we compare the provisions of the Sixth Schedule with the provisions for the Panchayati Raj institution spelt out in the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1993. In the first place, while the Sixth Schedule provision assigns powers to the District Councils to initiate and carry out development activities at the grassroots level, it does not provide them with financial autonomy. This is in sharp contrast to the arrangements made for the panchayats, which have been provided with their own Finance Commission that is empowered to periodically review the financial position and lay down appropriate principles for the allocation of resources between the panchayats and the state. The ADCs, on the other hand, are dependent on the discretion of the state government. As a result, in many states resource allocation becomes a major bone of contention between the ADC and the state government. This not only seriously hampers the functioning of the ADC it also does not make the relation between the ADC and the state administration a happy one.

There is also no mandatory time-limit for the reconstitution of the ADC once it is dissolved. Hence the government can indefinitely postpone elections to the ADC. This diverges from the mandate of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, which prescribes that panchayats must be reconstituted within six months of their dissolution. Further, the thrust of the Sixth Schedule is on the district as it presupposes the existence of the traditional political institutions at the grassroots level. This again differs from the73rd Amendment provision, which not only gives formal recognition to the community by designating it as the Gram Sabha, but also treats the village as the pivotal point of self-governance under the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) applicable in Fifth Schedule areas.

Last but not the least, the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act contains the revolutionary provision that one-third of the seats at all levels of the panchayats are mandatorily reserved for women, in addition to those specified for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, a provision that finds no mention at all in the Sixth Schedule[28].

EFFECT ON DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICS

It would not be far wrong to say that the lacunea in the administrative structure along with the conflict of interest between the national and the local, which finds reflection in the continuous infringement of the powers of the ADC and the traditional political institutions through state and Central laws, is one of the major reasons for the poor development of the North Eastern region in general and tribal areas in particular. The Twelfth Finance Commission Report (GOI, 2004)[29] ranks all states in the North East in the lowest category for access to physical infrastructure. The region is abysmally poor not only with respect to the means of communications, electricity, water, and civic amenities but in the social sectors as well. The situation is particularly acute in the tribal areas where the existence of multiple levels of administrative machineries and protracted ethnic conflict has posed serious constraints to development.

Attention has already been drawn to the poor performance of the tribal states in the areas of health and nutrition. The North East (notably Assam and Meghalaya) not only tops the list among states in incidence of anaemia and poor motherhood and childcare practices (marked by low immunization coverage and nutrition status), even in education, despite favourable literacy rates, educational attainment is quite poor in many states.

Overall, North East India scores poorly on all parameters of development. The region has higher incidence of poverty even when compared with states having similar average per capita income. Sikkim and Andhra Pradesh have similar per capita income, but 37 per cent of the people in Sikkim live below poverty line, compared to 16 per cent in Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, Rajasthan's per capita income is lower than Meghalaya, but Rajasthan has much lover incidence of poverty - 15 per cent compared to Meghalaya's 34 per cent (World Bank, 2007, 28). This picture points to vast disparities in the population of the North Eastern region; small pockets of affluence with high per capita income co-exist with the large majority who live in penury. The internal differentiation however is obscured by the statistics.

Disparities such as the above and the denial of development to

vast segments of the population, particularly those in the rural areas and interior region, have contributed in no small way to the political discontent among the people, which finds expression in growing ethnic unrest and persistent demand for autonomy and self-rule. Indeed, what has often been projected as ethnic strife and insurgencies is underlined by strong economic overtones.

A close examination of inter-ethnic conflict among tribes of the North East reveals that most of the time the conflict revolves around competition for scarce resources. The same is true with autonomy movements. Evidence reveals that at the root of the matter lies people's deep discontent at the economic and political neglect by the state, which more often than not represents the interest of the dominant groups. A notable example of this is the demand for separate state by the tribes of Eastern Nagaland. Fed up with the poor state of development, the tribes of eastern Nagaland are openly accusing the major tribes in the state of indulging in the politics of discrimination. While some tried to underplay the charge by projecting it as a case of inter-ethnic conflict stemming from cultural and ethnic differences, evidence clearly suggests that the conflict is primarily socio-economic in origin[30].

The process reveals that economic deprivation is not only a major source of ethnic conflict, ethnicity itself represents the deepening of the political process in many parts of North East India. In a situation where the bargaining power and the means to do so are limited, ethnicity becomes a handy tool to articulate a group's economic and political aspirations.

MILITARIZATION AND THE 'OTHERING' OF THE NORTH EAST

Yet another factor that distinguishes the North East from the rest of the country is the social and structural violence that plagued the region since it came into contact with colonial rule, and in some parts carried over to the present, which has resulted in the promulgation of the highly controversial *Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, 1958 (AFSPA). To counter the demand for independence made by the Nagas way back in the 1950s shortly after India attained its freedom from the British, the Indian government responded to the

issue by sending the Army to the region, followed by the imposition of AFSPA, a draconian law that gives the Army the right to shoot and kill on mere suspicion that a person or group is engaged in anti-national activities and to declare any area whose inhabitants are suspected of engaging in such activities as a 'Disturbed Area'. Once an area is declared as disturbed, the entire population comes under military surveillance.

It would be instructive to examine the reasons for the Indian Government's approach to the North East, why a military solution was resorted to for what is clearly an internal political problem that could have been handled more effectively through talks and negotiations.

The answer to this question lies in two inter-related factors. The first is related to the strategic location of the North East and its tenuous link to the Indian mainland by a narrow 22-km strip, what in popular parlance is described as the 'chicken neck corridor', in North Bengal. Besides the region's proximity to countries traditionally hostile to India, makes the North East a high security zone in national perception. The 1962 aggression by China and its persistent claim over Arunachal Pradesh, and continuing threat to divert the tributaries from the source of the Brahmaputra[31] lent weight to India's threat perception vis a vis the NER and its continued militarization. One may recall that for a long time present-day Arunachal Pradesh (previously called the North East Frontier Tract/Agency) was directly administered by the Union Government from Delhi. This also explains the anomalous position of the Ministry of the Development of the North Eastern Region (MyDoNER) and the North Eastern Council (NEC). Despite the formation of MyDoNER to catalyze development of states in the North Eastern Region, the ministry is constrained by lack of full responsibility to carry out the tasks. Apparently, the security imperative prompted the Union Government to bypass MyDoNER and repose nodal responsibility with the Ministry of Home Affairs, whose clearance is necessary for projects and funds.

The second factor (why military and not political steps were adopted as response to the conflict in NE) is linked to the past and

current perception of the North East in popular imagination as a region that is not only remote but also inhabited by the social and cultural 'other' (particularly those residing in the hills). People who are deemed not only to be 'primitive' and 'backward' but also distinct from the general population in racial and linguistic terms and in their religious beliefs and life ways which has made it easier for them to adopt the white man's religion than the dominant religion of India, a fact that raised serious doubts in the minds of the nationalists about the North Eastern tribes' loyalty to India. That the large majority of tribes in the region see themselves as none other but Indians and that the tribal territories are very much an integral part of the Indian Union does not seem to assure the dominant groups about the tribes' loyalty to the country. It is significant that this stereotype idea is not confined to the government but widely shared by intellectuals is corroborated by the proceedings of a seminar held in this very institution (IIAS, Shimla) in 1972, in which the ethnic unrest in the North East was attributed to the divisive role of Christianity, ignoring the deep economic and political roots of the problem[32].

This begs the question, what explains the 'otherness' of the North East? Many scholars and commentators have cited geographical distance and the British policy of 'divide and rule' as reasons for the 'otherness'/'isolation' of the region. While these factors definitely accentuate the problem, they do not constitute sufficient conditions for its cause. Close examination reveals that central to the problem is the hierarchical structure of Indian society, which locates people and groups along the normative scale of caste based on the notion of purity and pollution. To paraphrase Robinson, in India, caste is considered the essence of Hinduism and Hinduism synonymous with the nation (1998, 15)[33]. This ideology has led both to the reification of Hinduism and the marginalization of people and communities falling outside its fold. Given the North East's cultural distinctiveness, the operation of this ideology not only automatically relegates its people to the category of the 'other', but also contributes to what is popularly called 'trust deficit' in the relations between the NER and the nation.

These two factors - 'security concern' and the 'otherness' of the

North East - appear to have played a major role in shaping the Indian Government's policies on the North Eastern region, leading to the subjugation of local and regional interests to national interest. This also explains why despite strong opposition expressed by human and civil rights activists against the continuance of AFSPA and increasing demand from the local population for the withdrawal of the draconian Act (which has been enforced for more than fifty years in many parts of Manipur and Nagaland), the Indian Government pays no heed to them.

Militarization of the region has not only resulted in gross human rights violations but also caused intense psychological trauma and psychosomatic disorders among the affected population, which finds expression in the high incidence of alcoholism and substance abuse among the youth in areas of active military operations. In such a climate, development and peace naturally become a casualty. Yet no proper study has ever been conducted to gauge the effect of militarization on the society and psyche of the people of the North East.

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The account presented in the foregoing paragraphs points to the complexity of the situation in the North East. The facts reveal that in many parts of the North East, people are not only victims of a flawed policy adopted by the state, but also of their location both in political and geographical terms. While the flawed policy has resulted in the multiplicity of structures that compete with each other for funds and privileges causing serious bottlenecks in the delivery of development to the target population, the political sensitivity of the region has led to the subjugation of the people's (read local and regional) interests to national interests.

Added to this is the top-down approach adopted by planners who mechanically shell out development programmes and policies in a general fashion ignoring the historical and local specificity of the people for whom development is meant[34]. This explains why despite enormous resources and generous Central assistance, the fruits of development continue to elude the North Eastern states.

This calls for serious rethinking on the development model to be adopted for the North East. Today, this exercise is particularly critical as the recent paradigm shift in India's economic policy post-liberalization and its conscious effort to forge closer economic ties with the ASEAN countries has made the North Eastern region a potential gateway into East and South East Asia, a prospect that finds sharp articulation in Mr. Pranab Mukherjee's speech on Look East Policy (Mukherjee, 2007)[35] and in the *North Eastern Region 2020 Vision Document* prepared by the Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (MoDoNER) and the North Eastern Council - NEC (GOI, 2008, op cit). While the 2020 Vision Document's portrayal of the state of development in the NE has been questioned by some commentators, its call that the North Eastern region play the arrowhead role in the implementation of the Look East Policy has serious implications for the region and its people (see also Biswas, 2008; D'Souza, 2008)[36].

To what extent the North East and its people can capitalize on this policy shift would depend on the readiness of the Indian state to alter its approach towards the region. If emerging reports on the region are to be believed, the prospects of the NER's gain from the LEP is grossly over-exaggerated. In the first place, the North East never figured in the initial discourse on the LEP (see in particular Sarma, 2012, Rana and Uberoi, 2012)[37]. Secondly, the trust deficit that characterizes the relation between mainland India and the North East would make its transition to a 'bridgehead' extremely difficult without corresponding changes in the nation's mindset. Hence, if the LEP is to be a success for the North East, a multi-pronged approach that encompasses the economic, the political and cognitive is urgently needed.

To begin with, the trust deficit that marks the relations between the Indian Union and the people of the region (particularly those in the hills) needs to be removed. As a step in this direction, the Government and Indian population in general need to recognize that notwithstanding their ethnic and cultural difference, the

northeasterners are as Indian as any other Indian citizen in other parts of the country. This recognition is necessary because the tendency to view the North East through the lens of caste and race continues to colour popular imagination of the region as a Mongolian fringe inhabited by communities that have more in common with the people and society of South East Asia than with the rest of India. This perception was articulated by none other than the first minister of the Ministry of the Development of North Eastern Region Mani Shankar Aiyer, in his famous statement 'South East Asia begins where NEI ends' (cited in Uberoi, 2010).

Aiyer's statement not only epitomizes the peripheral status of the North East in the Indian eco-political structure but also its alienation from the mainland psyche, a feeling that resonates in a Tehelka jounalist's observation that for most Indians, 'North East India is on the map but off the mind' to describe the near blackout of information on events and affairs of the NE in the national media. In a slightly different context, the same point has been made by historian O.P. Kejriwal, who noting the virtual absence of the North East in the historical account of India, matter-of-factly states, 'This region has not so far been an inherent part of the historical consciousness of India' (quoted in Syiemlieh, 1998, 40)[38]. It would not be far wrong to say that this systematic blackout of the region from the collective consciouness of the nation has aided in no small way to the rise of unhealthy racial and cultural profiling of its people by highly prejudicial stereotypes and rampant violence and discrimination of diverse kinds. A fact illustrated by frequent media reports on hate crimes against people of the North East in India's metropolitan cities, and the August 2012 incident in which mischievous SMSes resulted in panic reverse migration by thousands of migrants from the region jamming North East-bound flights and trains as the rest cowered in fear and uncertainty about their physical and economic security in their adopted homes. Such a climate is neither conducive for political stability nor for building a strong and reliable workforce vital for a country that aspires to play a dominant role in the regional and global arena.

This also calls for a relook at India's security policy vis a vis the

North East. The imposition of a draconian law like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act has not only resulted in gross human rights violations but also intensified ethnic conflict making the North Eastern region an unfavourable ground for development. This has not only constrained the implementation of planned programmes and schemes but also scares away prospective investors interested in investing in the region. While the tension has deep historical roots it is aggravated by the failure of the state to address the issue. Central to the tension is people's fear of losing their identity; fear that due to the incursion of people from outside it would upset the demographic balance, erode their culture and tradition, and consequently their identity. Closely related to this is the economic element that influx of outsiders into their territory could gradually deprive them of their land and livelihood. Timely action on the above is vital to create a climate of peace that is conducive for development to take place.

On the economic plane, the state needs to take urgent steps to enhance the productive forces in the region so that people would be able to take advantage of the new opportunities presented by the paradigm change and the LEP. While geo-political location definitely gives strategic advantage to the North East (with its vast international border and physical contiguity with five sovereign countries in its vicinity), given the precarious state of the infrastructure in most of the North Eastern states – characterized as they are by poor land, air, and waterways connectivity both within the region and to the outside, high proportion of population living below the poverty line, paltry Gross Domestic Product, wide disparities between the hills and the plains and tribes and non-tribes in social and structural terms - it remains to be seen to what extent the objective of the 2020 Vision Document to make the North East a bridgehead in the implementation of the LEP can be translated into a reality.

The present effort to make the North East the 'transit point' through a transnational web of road and rail networks that would link India and the NER to countries in South East Asia without concrete steps to enhance the productive forces in the region for its economic regeneration undermines the utility of the policy, and the

NER could end up as a mere corridor for the transportation of third country goods without tangible benefits for the people and economies of the region.

What is a matter of serious concern is that while the state of infrastructure remains precarious and agriculture moving on a downward slide, industry has yet to take off in most of the North Eastern states, barring Assam. This has not only left the region heavily dependent on Central assistance but also rendered the people vulnerable to exploitation in the hands of outside capitalists, who flocked to the region to take advantage of its rich natural resources and subsidies doled out by the Central and state governments as incentives for development. Mention may be made of Meghalaya, which has not only long suffered the monopoly of its business (trade, transport, hotels, restaurants, etc.) by the Marwaris and Bengalis who have made the state their home, but has also become a favourite destination for off-shore (read mainland) businessmen who set up their production units in the state while keeping their corporate office in Guwahati or Kolkata. Close observation reveals that paltry returns from agriculture and poor exposure to the intricacies of business prevented the emergence of competitive local entrepreneurship, leaving the economy open to the outsiders who not only drained out the profits but also further pushed the local population to the margins of production by bringing in their own army of labour from outside[39]. Needless to say, such a scenario is hardly conducive for wholesome growth of the region or removing the structural inequalities between the North Eastern states and rest of the country.

There is also an urgent need to reverse the long-standing practice of viewing the North East primarily as a source of raw materials to meet national needs. The process, which began during the colonial period with an adverse effect on the region (see also Roy-Burman, 1984; Das, 1998)[40], continues to underline India's current economic strategy, a fact borne out by the country's power policy. Taking note of the high power potential of rivers in the region, the Government of India has viewed the North East as the future powerhouse of the country capable of producing thousands of megawatt of electricity

that could light up homes and energize factories (already about 145 sites have been identified for construction of dams in the Brahmaputra basin alone to tap the energy - Hussain, 2008)[41]. According to the World Bank Strategy Report (2007, op cit), one-third of India's run off flows from the North East through the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers. These rivers constitute India's National Waterway-2 (NW-2). There is an estimated 60,000 megawatts of economically viable hydro power potential in the North East of which only about 2004 megawatts is developed or under construction (ibid)[42]

Blessed with such rich power potential this could spell major transformations to the development-starved North Eastern region. Unfortunately, there appears to be little thinking on this score. On the contrary, in what could have serious economic and environmental implications for the North East, the power harvested from the region will not only be evacuated (in fact, already is) to the national grid, plans are also afoot to convert the energy tapped into an exportable commodity. In the words of the Planning Commission, '*As we expand our power potential in the North East, we can transfer surplus power to Bangladesh*' (GOI, 2011, 107, italics supplied)[43].

Such a strategy, while it may augur well for India's quest to forge closer economic cooperation with its neighbours in the South and East Asian region, could end up deepening the economic exploitation of the region as well as intensify the people's sense of alienation from the mainstream society and national development agenda, which finds lucid expression in the mass protests by cross-sections of people against the construction of dams in the region. Disturbingly, notwithstanding local fears and sentiments, the Central Government has gone ahead to give clearance to a number of projects in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Tipaimukh in Manipur, the Teesta river project in Sikkim, among others, which are at different stages of completion and construction[44].

Discussions conducted with local activists revealed people's deep apprehension that the construction of dams would not only bring untold miseries to the tribal and rural communities living in the project affected sites, it will also encourage mass migration into the region by people from outside that can have disastrous consequences

on the demographic structure of the region. According to one analyst, thirty years back the percentage of Scheduled Tribe population in Arunachal Pradesh was more than 80 per cent; in 2001 census the percentage has come down to 64.2 per cent. The percentage of Scheduled Tribe population in the urban areas is as low as 43.3 per cent. In Tawang district where there has been a substantial Nepalese migration, the percentage of ST population is just around 29 per cent (JJ Roy-Burman, 2010, 31)[45]. Adding another grim dimension to the above scenario (threat of eviction and migratory influx) is the conflict that has erupted between the people of upstream Arunachal Pradesh and downstream Assam consequent to the proposed construction of dams[46] due to differential perception of impact on their land and livelihood.

The facts outlined above raise pertinent questions not only about the future trend of development in the North East but also its ability to take advantage of its geo-political location as the 'gateway' into South East Asia. If the latter is to be translated into a reality, it is imperative that the Indian state takes urgent steps not only to revamp the region's stagnant economy and strengthen internal and external linkages, but also win the people's trust by striking a judicious balance between national priorities and local interests. One way of doing this is by giving governments in the North East greater participation in the Look East Policy. At a time when development is couched in the language of regional cooperation and diplomacy, marginalizing the North East from the framework of the LEP does not make either political or economic sense.

The need for a greater role for the North East in the LEP is a point that has been emphasized by many observers of the region. Sanjib Baruah, political analyst and one of the North East's respected sons, for instance, has strongly argued in favour of an open-door policy by which the economy of the North East is not imprisoned by national boundaries. Citing examples of Mexico and Canada in North America whose border regions have immensely benefited from economic integration with the United States through mutually beneficial trade agreements, he makes a strong case for the integration of the North East with markets of the South and East Asian region.

Though by no means oblivious to the vast difference between the North American nations and India's North East, he is optimistic of the benefits trans-border economic integration can bring to the parties involved. In his words:

> [E]conomic integration can bring about a spurt of economic activities. The removal of trade barriers and harmonization of tariffs on third country products could make border regions attractive sites for investments once we take into account full access to new cross-border markets (Baruah, 2004, 16).[47]

To be sure, there is a lot of sense in Baruah's economic vision for the North Eastern region. The sheer force of globalization with its fast-changing technology and tenacious capacity to intrude into the most interior and private of spaces could be suicidal for any society to adopt a close-door policy. This however, does not mean that blindly opening up of borders without ironing out the internal contradictions and apprehensions will automatically translate into benefits for the region. We cannot overlook the North East's social and structural complexity with its sharp disparity between the hills and the plains, the settlers and the indigenes, and the hierarchical relations between them in social and economic terms. Though much of this is a creation of our colonial past, it cannot simply be wished away. If the North East is to meaningfully benefit from the LEP, it is imperative that opening up of the border should be accompanied by a slew of measures directed to enable the hitherto neglected areas and vulnerable population to equip themselves with the necessary skills and infrastructure to avail of the new opportunities usher by the policy shift

This is extremely vital lest, to quote Rana and Uberoi, 'the development effort itself be seen as more extractive than productive, increasing rather than ameliorating the sense of alienation felt in the NE region both vis a vis the centre/mainland, and vis a vis dominant ethnic groups or dominant populations within the region' (2012, op cit, 122) . . . or might eventually end up reducing the region to a 'double periphery' between the 'Centre' on the one hand, and the market economies of South East and East Asian region on the other, transcending national boundaries (ibid).

Clearly, such a scenario should it come to pass, would neither bode well for the Indian nation as a whole nor for the North Eastern Region.

CONCLUSION

Last but not the least, we also need to re-think and re-conceptualize 'development'. Mainstream development paradigm, which originated in the west, is not only too state-centric and destructive of the environment, but also has the tendency to destroy local initiative and life ways which though small in scale are more in tune with the eco-system and the people/region's rich culture and tradition. Western discourse led by western-trained economists tends to view the state as the only agents of development and ignores the vast contributions made by people who fall outside the western development paradigm, such as subsistence farmers, wage earners, petty commodity producers and unpaid home workers, a sizable segment of who comprise women who contribute substantially to the domestic and state economy. This vast body of people's energy and knowledge – which constitutes the so-called 'unorganized' or 'informal' sector of the economy - remains largely unacknowledged and untapped. If development is to be truly participatory and inclusive, these not only need to be integrated but also ought to be emulated for the ethics of hard work and resilience they embody. Such a step will not only go a long way to enhance the success of development but also to preserve the rich indigenous knowledge systems and life ways of the region from being exterminated by the hegemonic and homogenizing tendencies of capital.

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12. The end result of this construct was that the entity (North East) was disected and vivisected into varied ecological and political spaces separating the hills from the valley, tribes and non tribes, areas of high revenue yield from non-productive zones through a slew of policies and regulations designed to strike a balance between British authority on the one hand, and autonomy to the hitherto unadministered territory, on the other.
13. GOI, *North Eastern Region 2020 Vision Document*, 3 Volumes, New Delhi, DONER & NEC, 2008 This document has been prepared by the Ministry of DoNER and NEC as a roadmap for development of the region.
14. S.K. Thorat, 'The Tribal Deprivation and Poverty in India: A Macro-Analysis' in Joseph Bara (ed), 2005
15. GOI, MyDoNER, NE Rural Livelihood Project Social Assessment & Tribal Development Framework Draft Final Report, May 2011 available at http://necouncil.nic.in
16. GOI 2008: II, 5; & III, 7; Atul Sarma, 'Why the North-eastern States Continue to Decelerate', *Man and Society: A Journal of North East Studies*, 2 (1), 2005 pp.1-20.
17. IIPS, National Family Health Survey –3 vol. 1, 2005-06, Mumbai, IIPS available at: http://www.nfhsindia.org/NFHS-3%20Data/VOL-1/India_volume_I_corrected_17oct08.pdf
18. According to information furnished in the latest Human Development Report on the NE, with the exception of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, all states in the North East have total literacy rates higher than the national average of 74.04 per cent in 2011 Census. However while Mizoram has shown an increase in its total literacy rate at 91-58% as against 88.8% in 2001, it has lost the second place it occupied in the 2001 All India rank to Goa. Similarly, though Arunachal Pradesh has shown a significant increase in its total literacy rate from 54.3 per cent in 2001 Census to 66-95 per cent in 2011, it continues to be at the bottom of the ladder ranks occupying the 34th rank, among 35

Indian states (GOI, NE-HDR, 2011)

19. Tiplut Nongbri, *A Situational analysis of women and girls in Meghalaya*, Study commissioned by National Commission for Women, New Delhi, 2006
20. The 1790 Regulation, which was described by Ludden as the first boundary-making by Imperial India, emerged in the Sylhet district of British Bengal to restrict and regulate the mobility of people between two political territories, defined as the homelands of two distinct cultures: the Khasis in the mountains and Bengalis in the plains. The Regulation was preceded by sporadic warfare between the Khasi-Jaintia on the one side and the East India Company on the other, over the traditional levy of tolls by the Jaintia raja on boats plying on the Surma river and collection of taxes by the Khasi chiefs from markets in the foothills, which the British viewed as natural extensions of the plains. At the centre of the conflict was British commercial interest and growing competition for access and control of limestone trade from quarries in the Khasi hills not only among Europeans but also the Greeks, Armenians, and Bengalis of the Sylhet plains, who were negotiating directly with the Khasis for permission to trade in the foothills and secure leases of the quarries. In a move to quash the growing threat to their dominance from competing powers and the rebellious tribes in the hills, the British used the Regulation to restrict the free entry of non-natives into the Khasi territory and to exterminate the traditional right of the Khasis to freely move, trade and hold property in Sylhet. Subsequently, all landed property owned by Khasis in Sylhet was appropriated to make way for the Bengalis (Ludden, 2003; Syiemlieh, 1988)
21. For the effect of partition on the Khasis see Nongbri, *Gender, Matriliny and Entrepreneurship*, Delhi, Zubaan, 2008, pp 115-120
22. According to a 'well-informed' source in the Government of Meghalaya, the limestone sold from the state is of a much more superior grade than the one usually used for the manufacture of cement and can fetch a much higher price in the international merket.
23. GOI, Human Development Report, 2001
24. S.K. Barik & V.T. Darlong, 'Natural Resource Management Policy Environment in Meghalaya Impacting Livelihood of Forest Poor', Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), BOGOR, Indonesia (undated monograph)
25. MTA's Letter No: 23011/28/2008-SG-11 dated 3.12.2008 addressed to Government of Assam, cited in Status Report on Implementation of the *Scheduled Tribes & Other Forest Dwellers (recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006* available at MTA website at http://tribal.nic.in.
26. For a clearer example of state control over forests, see *Meghalaya Forest Authority Act, 1991*.
27. Government of India, Report of the Expert Committee on Planning for the Sixth Schedule Areas, September 2006 available at http://www.nird.org.in/brgf/doc/ExpertReportSixthSchedule.pdf

28. For more on the Sixth Schedule and the Panchayati Raj institutions please see Tiplut Nongbri, *Development, Ethnicity and Gender: Select Essays on Tribes in India,* Delhi, Rawat Publications, 2003 , pp. 217-225
29. Also cited in World Bank Strategy Report, 2007, op cit.
30. According to the figures in the latest *Human Development Report for the North Eastern States* released by Planning Commission in December 2011, while the western district of Mokokchung has a literacy rate of 92.68% the literacy rate in the eastern district of Mon is as low as 56.60%, a gap of 36.08 percentage points (GOI, 2011)
31. Confirming India's fears, on 23 January 2013, the Chinese Government has given the clearance for the construction of three dams on the upper reach of the Brahmaputra on the Chinese side at Dagu, Jiacha and Zangmu under the new energy development plan for 2015. The proposed construction of these dams has triggered concerns in India regarding possible impacts on downstream flows ('China gives go-ahead for three new Brahmaputra dams', *The Hindu,* January 30, 2013)
32. See K.S. Singh (ed), *Tribal Situation in India*, IIAS, Shimla, 1972/1990. Also please look at the Constituent Assembly debates during the drafting of the Indian Constitution available in the Lok Sabha Library and other public libraries on views of India's political class on the North East and its people.
33. R. Robinson, *Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Goa*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1998
34. For example, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has drawn up a list of measures for the uplift of tribes in the country. None of the measures prescribed takes into consideration the specificity of tribes in the North Eastern region (on this see MTA *Annual Report, 2008-2009* available at MTA website: http//tribal.gov.in
35. Pranab Mukherjee, "India's 'Look East' Policy", *Dialogue*, Vol.9 (1), 2007, pp. 22-28.
36. Prasenjit Biswas, Post-Development, Democratic Discourse and Dissensus: A Critique of Vision 2020' in *Eastern Quarterly*, 4 (III&IV), October 2007-2008, pp178-187; Rohan D'Souza, 'Making Backwardness: How to Imagine the North East as a Development Deficit', *Eastern Quarterly*, 4 (III&IV), October 2007-2008, pp. 207-217.
37. Atul Sarma, 'North-East as Gateway to Southeast Asia: Big Dream and Home Truths' in Sujit Deka (ed), *Population Development and Conflicts in Northeast India*, Guwahati, EBH Publishers, 2012, pp.1-20; Rana, Kishan S. & Patricia Uberoi, *India's North-East States, The BCIM Forum and Regional Integration,* ICS Monograph No: 1, Delhi, Institute of Chinese Studies, 2012
38. D.R. Syiemlieh, 'North East India: Trends in Historical Writings 1947-97' in in J.P. Singh et al, *Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North-East India (1947-1997),* New Delhi, Regency Publications, 1998, pp. 36-46.
39. A case in point is the nascent cement industry in Jaintia Hills district, which has attracted and is monopolized by India's leading corporate houses. Among

the major players is Dalmia (Bharat) Ltd, which is one of the largest cement manufacturers in the country. Dalmia has not only entered the region in style by appointing the North East's favourite daughter and Olympian Mary Kom as its brand ambassador, but has also raised up a storm of controversy about the legality of the means adopted in the procurement of the plant (for more on Dalmia, see 'Backdoor entry of Dalmia Cement' by H.H. Mohrmen, *Shillong Times*, 4 February 2013). A visit by this author to the district reveals that none of the plants employ local labour or allow the local population access to the plant/s. Interestingly, the security guard of one of the plants I managed to gain entry - in the guise of a tourist from Delhi - proudly stated as he escorted me around the plant that many of the machineries used were imported from China. To my query why the plant owner (who I was told hailed from Haryana) should choose to import machineries from China when the same are manufactured in India, my guide could not give me the answer.

40. Roy-Burman, 'Issues in North East: An Appraisal' in B.L. Abbi (ed), *North-East Region: Problems and Prospects of Development*, 1984; Guru Das, 'Liberalization and Internal Periphery: Understanding the Implication of India's North East' in Das & Purkayastha (ed), 1998
41. Monirul Hussain, *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North East India*, New Delhi, Sage, 2008
42. '*Development and Growth in North East India: The Natural Resources, Water, and Environment Nexus, Strategy Report*, World Bank, 2007 also available at Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region website at http://mdoner.gov.in
43. GOI, Planning Commission, *Faster, Sustainable & More Inclusive Growth: An Approach to the Twelfth Five Year Plan*, New Delhi, 2011.
44. At the time of data collection for this paper the Times of Assam reported that the Government of Assam had deployed police and para military forces along National Highway 52, where anti- dam protesters had gathered, to ensure safe transportation of turbines to the Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Power Project site. In order to disperse the agitating protestors, the police even resorted to firing injuring several people (*Times of Assam* news item 'Anti Dam Movement Resumes Force in Assam' by a correspondent, dated 1 December 2011)
45. J.J. Roy-Burman & Sukhdeba Sharma Hanjabam, *Regional Exclusion with particular reference to North East India*, Occasional Paper, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, 2010.
46. For more on dams in the North East see Special Issue of the *Ethnologist* on 'Large dams in North East India: rivers, forests, people and power' Vol 11 (1), Jan-March 2005, available at http://www..internationalrivers.org .see also http://www.indiawaterportal.org.
47. Sanjib Baruah, 'Between South and South East Asia: North East India and the Look East Policy', CENISEAS Paper NO:4, Guwahati, Omeo Kumar Das Institite of Social Change and Development, 2004.

Chapter 2

Deconstructing Masculinity, Matriliny, Fatherhood and Social Change

This paper focuses on the position of men among the Khasi, a matrilineal tribe in North East India. Set against the backdrop of the rising tide of the 'men's lib' campaign (spearheaded by some students and youth organizations) to liberate the male from 'obscurity', a position attributed to the matrilineal system, it seeks to closely examine the position men occupy in the Khasi family by looking at their roles as brothers, fathers and husbands and the cutural ideas of masculinity and feminity expressed in language and everyday speech. Premised on the idea that gendered identities are a product of culture, I rely heavily on indigenous categories and thought to make sense of men's roles within the family and community at large.

The motivation for the paper came partly from the men's movement which dominated the Khasi society in the 1990s to overthrow the matrilineal system and dispossess women married to outsiders of their ethnic identity and rights over property, and partly from my teaching of a course *Family Life and Kinship in India* at the JNU, which is marked by a paucity of materials on kinship systems of North East India in general and matriliny in particular. Whenever we had to talk of the matrilineal system, I had to rely primarily on the literature on the Nairs of Kerala, which today bears little resemblance to its matrilineal past.

What is also a matter of concern is that in recent years, there have been increasing attempts made by scholars studying Indian society and culture to come up with a unified model of Indian kinship, which has little space for kinship systems of the North East. Spurred by Iravati Karve's monumental work, *Kinship*

Organisation in India (1953/1965)[1] which is based on materials from Hindu sacred texts (*Dharmasastra* and the epics) and fieldwork carried in Central India in the 1950s, several scholars have come up with their own ideas of what constitutes the unity of Indian kinship. While the recent models showed marked variation from Karve's (who locates the unity of Indian kinship on the importance of caste and the institution of the joint family), the idea that Hindu society is synonymous with caste seems to influence their analysis (see observation made in the first essay). Though Louis Dumont, the French sociologist, came up with a slightly different model from Karve, locating the unity of Indian kinship on the importance of marriage as a system of alliance as revealed in the functional importance played by the affinal kin/s in funerary rites and services, the whole analysis and ethnography centered on upper caste Hindu society (see in particular Dumont, 1983 and 1993[2]). Thomas Trautmann (1981/1995; 1993)[3] is even more explicit, for whom the unity of Indian kinship rests on the ideology of *Kanyadan*, the unrequited gift of the virgin, the practice of which has not only contributed to sharp inequalities between the wife givers and wife takers but has also served to skew the relatively egalitarian cross cousin marriage of the Dravidian South (Uberoi, 1993, 45-49)[4].

The marginalization of the North East in the Indian academia not only lends legitimacy to a comment made by a Tehelka journalist (mentioned in the previous essay) that for most Indians, '*North East is on the map but off the mind*', but also gives misleading idea about what constitutes Indian kinship, in particular, and Indian society in general. It is the contention of this paper that a focus on Khasi matriliny and the position of men within it will not only yield illuminating insights into the complexity and diversity of the Indian kinship system, but will also help us to test and refine existing theories.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The Khasis practised matrilineality with uxorilocality, which means that descent and property are transmitted through the mother, daughter is the heir of the property, and sons have only right of use

while staying in the mother's house. At marriage, the husband moves into the wife's house. If his wife is the youngest daughter, he and his wife continue to stay in her parents' home for the rest of their life. But if the wife is an elder daughter the couple generally stay with the parents for a while or till the younger sister gets married and then move out to set up an independent home of their own, subscribing to what sociologists call neolocal household.

The Khasis are located in the picturesque state of Meghalaya in North East India, a region that stands at the confluence of South and Southeast Asia. The word Khasi is a generic term encompassing five sub-tribes or ethnos viz. Khynriam, Jaintia (also known as Synteng or Pnar), Bhoi, War and Lyngngam. The division however is more territorial (defined by spatial spread) than cultural. In recognition of their common ancestry and oneness as a people, the various ethnos collectively define themselves as the children of *U Hynniew Trep*, a name derived from a myth '*Ki Khanatang u Hynniew Trep*' (Tales of the Seven Huts), which refers to the seven ancestral families who are believed to have founded the Khasi race on earth.

While the people take recourse to myths to bolster their idea of common origin, historians however claim that the Khasis are the remnants of the vast ancient Mongolian overflow into India from China and Southeast Asia (see in particular Gait, 1905/1967, 311-320[5]; Gurdon, 1907/1975[6], 10-18; Bareh, 1967, 15-19[7]). Though the people share common physiological traits with many of the tribes inhabiting the region, their matrilineal institution and Austro-Asiatic language set the Khasis apart from the rest of the population in the region, majority of who are speakers of Tibeto- Burman languages and subscribe to the patrilineal system[8].

A major turning point in the life of the Khasi was the contact with colonialism and Christianity in early nineteenth century. Though the missionaries did not really interfere with the customs and traditions of the people, conversion to Christianity with its schools and churches, and the subjugation of the hitherto independent Khasi territory to the colonial administration, which continued till India attained its independence in 1947 considerably eroded several aspects of their traditional institutions.

Today, the Khasis are regarded as one of the most advanced tribes in the region numbering about a million in population spread over the adjoining Khasi and Jaintia Hills, besides a sizable segment living in areas that fall within the national boundary of Bangladesh, which were ceded by the Indian Government to Pakistan at the time of partition in lieu of Hindu-dominated territories in Sylhet that should have gone to erstwhile East Pakistan.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CLARIFICATION

Before I proceed with the discussion some words of clarification would be in order. The first is the word 'masculinity' used in the title. The word is used primarily as an analytical category to understand the position of men in the Khasi society. As an analytical category, masculinity is not naturally given but socially constructed. In other words, although masculinity generally refers to the physical attributes of the male gender, it cannot be defined in purely biological terms since what constitutes 'masculinity' or 'manliness' is steeped in the cultural notion of the role, behaviour and appearance of men. For instance, in many cultures (including the Khasi), smoking a pipe or sporting a moustache or a turban is considered a sign of masculinity. Secondly, since my intellectual journey into masculinity primarily sprang from my academic engagement in family life and kinship and women's studies, the paper is more an extension of the discourse on gender, albeit with a male tilt to it.

Specifically, what I propose to do in this paper is to examine the position of men and the ideology of fatherhood in the Khasi family by focusing on the cultural construction of gender as revealed in language and kinship. This is necessary because while language provides the idiom through which ideas of maleness and femaleness are communicated, kinship provides the context within which these ideas are constituted and played out.

It may be emphasized that any attempt to obtain an accurate or holistic understanding of men or women's identity cannot afford to ignore the role of language or kinship. Though the two belong to different social orders, they serve as vital agents in the reproduction of gendered identities. However, by 'language' here it does not mean

that we intend to go into the semantics of the system or look at it separately from the social context within which it is embedded, rather to see how gender figures in daily speech and traditional sayings and maxims.

WHY KINSHIP?

The emphasis on kinship as the focal point of analysis is particularly pertinent because of the stereotype ideas that people have about the matrilineal system as detrimental to the position of men. Exposure to the outside world (which is predominantly patriarchal) and the forces of modernization have accentuated the problem, so much so that in recent years the society has witnessed widespread propaganda carried out by the media and a section of the indigenous population that matriliny is against the interest of men, therefore it needs to be replaced with the patrilineal system. Playing a pivotal role in this regard is the local media, which provided a forum where these views are aired and debated, though the national media too did not lag behind in adding its own flavour to the discourse. To attract attention and ostensibly whet the appetite of the reading public for the sensational and the exotic, many Delhi-based newspapers came up with eyecatching headlines such as *'Khasi men sick of being breeding bulls and baby sitters'*, *'War of the sexes in Meghalaya'*. Needless to say, as it often happens with hastily put together articles in newspapers, these 'news' were based on distorted and highly exaggerated information. That the trend has not stopped but continues is attested by a discussion I recently had with a Delhi-based American journalist who was amazed to see the vast difference in the way in which Khasi matriliny has been represented in the national and international media and things on the ground that she observed during her one-month stay among the people in Meghalaya.

Significantly, long before masculinity became a topic of interest in the national media and the academia, the issue had already attained the status of a public debate in the Khasi and Garo society. In effect, a number of associations have sprung up in the two societies, which focus exclusively on the issue. Although they cannot be strictly defined as masculinist associations, many of the concerns they focus

on primarily relate to men. One of the most belligerent issues is the position of men in the matrilineal system and its relevance for the present-day society. A distinctive feature of the discourse is the sharp polarization of views between two camps the pro-reforms anti-matriliny lobby and the pro-matrilineal system traditionalists. What is interesting about this debate is that matriliny not only became the flogging horse on which the two sides thrashed out their arguments, but also how 'gender' and the evolutionary perspective structure the process.

THE IMAGE OF THE KHASI MALE

Let me preface my analysis by sharing a poem written by u Norbert Nodren Nongrum, a catholic priest of Khasi descent, in the introduction to his provocative book *Ka Main U Shynrang Khasi (The Personality of the Khasi Male)*[9] with an enclosed sub-title that reads *Kyrpang ia ki Shynrang (Specially for the males)*. The book is one of the few that lucidly mirrors the ideas that underline the current debate on Khasi matriliny and the on-going project of defining and redefining the male identity. Since many readers may not be familiar with the Khasi language, I reproduce below the translated version of the poem. As the objective is to gain an insight into the indigenous categories of thought, I have tried to stay as close to the original meaning of the words to the extent possible. I seek the author's indulgence for any shortcoming in the attempt.

The Personality of the male (Ka Main u Shynrang)

To men the chosen of the land
Lend your ear to what I say
Into the fountain of our tradition let us delve
Its invigorating waters to drink

Khasi man how majestic his persona
Ancestral father and sculptor of life
In the clan he dons the mantle of the avuncular
Before the pillar of God with raised head he sits

Nieces and nephews how joyous they are
Uncle uncle, in one voice they utter
As the night unfolds, he breaks out in couplets
Divine words of God the protector

Humanity ever changing is thy face
Swift flies the epoch of the mother's brother and sister's son
A new world comes rolling in
Heralding the epoch of father and son

Yet man's position remains unchanged
His power/authority gains greater height
In his natal home he is the revered '*mama*'[10]
In his conjugal home, the father

It is for us to take good care
To bring the maternal uncle and father together
Forward in unison we must march
Taboo and pollution to root out

The poem reproduced above lucidly brings out the cultural ideal of the Khasi male. The first three stanzas neatly capture the glory and honour Khasi society confers on men. The male is projected not only as the chosen creature of God endowed with majestic appearance and high moral and mental attributes, he is also the priest, poet and counsellor, and the main agent in the act of reproduction (please note the word 'sculptor of life' in the second stanza) - in short, *a being born to rule and administer*. Women figure nowhere in the poem except in the third stanza and that too in the role of a social minor or junior kin (niece), who in childlike simplicity rejoices at the sight of the mother's brother and meekly listens as he counsels them through songs of wisdom and divine grace. In fact, in the original (vernacular) version of the poem the word niece does not figure at all as a separate entity but subsumed in the word *pyrsa* (sister's children), which strongly suggests that the female not only lacks an independent identity but is also devoid of voice and agency. Even as

an adult, the woman's existence can only be inferred from the presence of her children (*ki pyrsa)*; clearly, a mere reproductive machine who has no part to play in their growth and character formation. Neither does the father have any significant role to play at this stage. It is the mother's brother or maternal uncle who acts as the children's counsellor and guide and the source of all knowledge and wisdom.

In the fourth stanza, we see winds of change dramatically overtaking the otherwise staid and placid society. Interestingly, far from diluting men's authority, the change serves to reinforce their position in the society, and marks the coming of age of the father who begins to wield his influence over his wife and children. Clearly, the message conveyed here is that the significance of the father as a social category is a later development brought in by the forces of change in the society. But how and when that change occurred the author poet is silent about it.

The poem concludes on a stirring note urging one and all that it is not only 'our' *bounden duty* to bring the mother's brother and the father together, but also to preserve this unity (read male solidarity) so that together they can take the society forward and rid it of all pollution and taboo. It is interesting to note that the poet sees male solidarity as critical to launch the society forward. The reference to taboo *(byrsih1byrsang)* is, however, problematic since the word carries multiplicity of meanings in the Khasi language. The obvious inference that one can draw is that the author finds the (traditional/ old) social order as incompatible with the new society he visualized in his mind's eye; hence, it needs to be supplanted with the new. What is pertinent is it is *men* who are the chosen ones to usher in the change.

While the poem needs to be read in the light of the debate noted at the outset and the continuous attempt made by men to consolidate their position, the ideas it unleashed cannot be dismissed or taken lightly. The poem mirrors both the structural (this includes gender) relations that characterize the Khasi society and the aspirations of the young educated Christianized males who see the traditional order (matriliny) as discriminatory to men. The last is particularly important to understand the author's reference to taboo and pollution

as drags on the society that need to be eliminated. This perception also seems to have shaped the author's view when he projects the importance of the father in the Khasi family as a later development.

To place things in their proper sociological perspective, it would be pertinent to take a close look at the structure of authority and power within the Khasi family. This exercise is important as it will not only help us see the situation from close quarters but will also take us to some of the gendered terms and phrases that mediate Khasi kinship. Besides, a focus on these two important dimensions of society (kinship and language) will not only enable us to gain a sharper understanding of the position of the father in the Khasi family, but also why the Khasi restricts marriage between a man and his father's sister's daughter (patrilateral cross-cousin marriage in sociological parlance).

DOMESTIC AUTHORITY, FATHERHOOD AND MARRIAGE RULES

One of the paradoxes of the matrilineal kinship organization that has puzzled anthropologists is the structural disjunction between the locus of descent and the locus of authority. Unlike the patrilineal system in which descent and authority are located in the father, in the matrilineal system the two are shared between the mother and the mother's brother, the former vested with the right of descent and the latter with authority. While in ideal terms this arrangement provides the mother's brother immense power over the sister and her children, it is rarely absolute. The ban on incest and operation of the principle of exogamy, which denies the brother sexual access to the sister, meant that the latter's husband who fathers her children can wield important influence over them. In the context of the Khasi, this is facilitated by uxorilocal marriage where a man moves into the wife's house (in other words, the woman brings her husband home). The rule of uxorilocal marriage not only gives rise to conjugal-based households but also makes the father an important member of the family. Indeed, the Khasi family stands rather unique in the way in which authority is divided between the mother's brother and father/sister's husband, the two dominant males from the two sides of the family.

Despite the matrilineal principle of descent and the centrality of women in the organization of the family and the clan, authority does not lie with the mother but is shared between the mother's brother and the father. While jural authority vests with the mother's brother, uxorilocal marriage and the ideology of the 'providing husband' which stresses that the father/husband provides for his wife and children gives the latter considerable influence over the conjugal family. This fact is clearly brought out by Gurdon in his widely read monograph on the Khasi. In his words:

> Notwithstanding the existence of the matriarchate and the fact that all the ancestral property is vested in the mother, it would be a mistake to assume that the father is a no body in the Khasi house. It is true that the *Kni* or mother's elder brother is the head of the house, but the father is the head of the new house, where after children have been born to him, his wife and children live with him. It is he who faces the dangers of the jungle and risks his life for wife and children. In his wife's clan he occupies a very high place, he is second to none but a *Kni*, the maternal uncle while in his own family circle a father and husband is nearer to his children and hi wife than a *Kni* (Gurdon, op cit, 7879).

Two things stand out in the above statement.

One, the Khasi family is characterized by a diffused authority structure, judiciously divided between the mother's brother and the father.

Two, where a man occupies the two roles (father and mother's brother) at one and the same time, he is vested with dual responsibility, though this varies within specific contexts depending upon the individual's age, birth order among the siblings and personal qualities. In general, as the mother's brother, a man controls the ancestral property and acts as counsellor and guide to his sister and her children in religious and all other matters affecting the household. As the father, he is the provider and guardian of his wife and children.

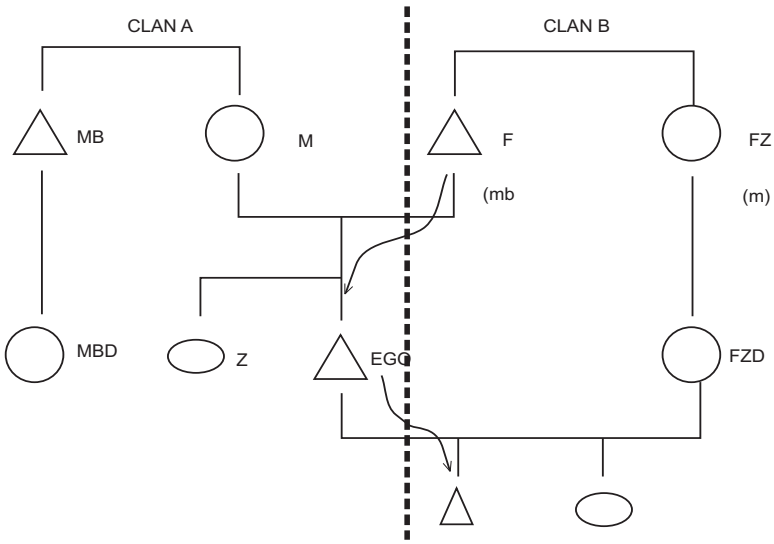
The importance of the father in the Khasi family finds lucid expression in the phrase *ai khaw kylliang* (exchange of rice), an axiom directed at patrilateral cross-cousin marriage - which in empirical terms means the marriage of a man into the family from which his father had come from. In the opinion of the Khasi, this form of

marriage is highly unpropitious as it amounts to reversing the gifts of bread and life the son received from the father by passing them back into the father's natal family. In an apparent attempt to convey their distaste for this form of marriage, the Khasi describe such marriage as *ai khaw kylliang,* literally to return the rice to the giver. The phrase carries the connotation of an improper act that takes away the merit of the relation. Rice is not only a staple food of the Khasi, it is also used as a metaphor for the husband. The metaphor is rooted in the ideology of the providing husband, or more clearly, the father's economic responsibility towards his children. Though Khasi matriliny confers descent right on the mother and authority on the mother's brother, the father is by no means an unimportant figure in the family. By using the symbolism of rice and portraying it as an irreversible element in marital relations, the Khasi not only seek to emphasize the father's biological but also his economic contribution to the children, which cannot be taken light of either by the incumbent or his conjugal family.

In the conception of the Khasi, the father not only brings the seed critical for the genesis of life and the continuity of the family and the clan, but also brings bread and luck *(ka kamai kajih bad ka bok ka rwiang)* to sustain the family. The Khasi say, 'the father not only gives stature and form (*u kpa u ba ai ia ka long rynieng)* but also bears the heat and burden of the day *(u ba kit ia ka khia ka shon)* to provide for the needs of his children'. In sum, what the metaphor expresses is that the contributions made by the father to the life and personhood of the child can never be repaid or returned, and any attempt to do so would be highly improper.

These ideas make patrilateral cross-cousin marriage, that is marriage of a man to his father's sister's daughter, socially unacceptable since in such a marriage what the father transfers to his children in the form of bodily substance (seed) and energy are the same that he derived from his father who in this instance is his wife's mother's brother (see Chart 1)[11].

Chart 1
PATRILATERAL CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE (△ = FZD)



In the above chart, the curved lines with downward pointed arrows depict the direction in which the bodily substance and symbolic elements carried by the father move: from Clan B to Clan A in the earlier generation and in the reversed order (Clan A to Clan B) in the next generation, a practice considered highly unpropitious by the Khasi.

The antipathy towards patrilateral cross-cousin encoded in the metaphor *ai khaw kylliang* gains sharper significance when we relate it to the religious life of the *ing*, the smallest unit of Khasi kinship, in which members falling outside the descent group are excluded. Although in popular parlance the word *ing* is broadly used for a dwelling or residential unit, in ritual terms it refers to a group of close matrilineally linked kin comprising the mother and her brothers, her sons and daughters, and the daughters' children (which is similar to the Tharavad of the Nairs), all of whom take part in

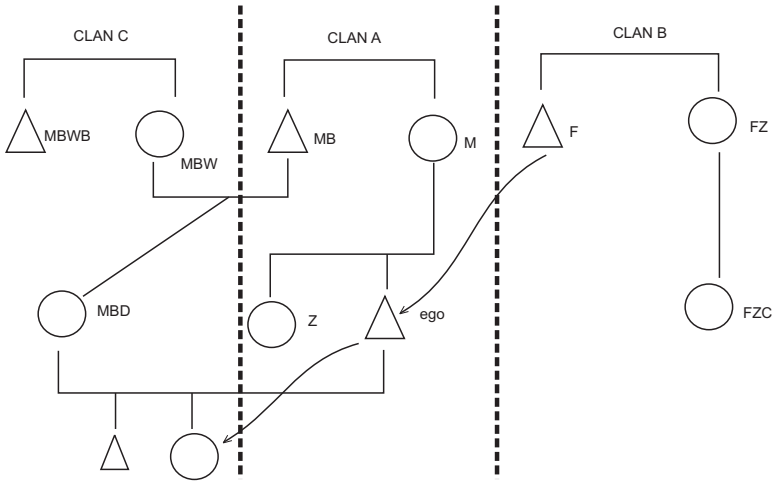
common worship. Premised on the principle of the 'ritual unity of the sibling group', this social arrangement seeks to maintain the solidarity of the (matrilineal) descent group by bringing brothers and sisters together in common rituals while keeping the spouses out of it. Thus, even though brothers may reside with their wife and children they constitute an integral part of their natal *ing*. In other words, this arrangement gives brothers permanent rights in the sister's house.

This arrangement makes patrilateral cross-cousin marriage a highly unsuitable union that threatens to disrupt the ritual unity of the *ing* by transforming close kins into affines (that is, it converts relatives by blood into relatives by marriage). To understand the significance of the matter, we need to look at it from the viewpoint of the *ing* into which a man gets married, in other words, the wife's *ing*. From the perspective of the latter (wife), patrilateral cross-cousin marriage converts the mother's brother - the man of authority and key figure in the ritual life of the *ing* - into the father-in-law, thus putting members of the ritual group into diametrically opposed categories.

MATRILATERAL CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE (△ = MBD)

Though the Khasi try to avoid marriage with the mother's brother's daughter the sanction is not as severe as that of the patrilateral variety because this form of marriage does not go against the princple of exchange involved in the patrilateral variety as the MBD belongs to a different clan from ego's father. So unlike patrilateral cross-cousin marriage, matrilateral cross-cousin marriage poses no danger to the ritual life of the (wife's) *ing*. Here, both the mother's brother and sister's son (who are related as father-in-law and son-in-law under the new alliance) remain outside the ritual group of their wives' *ing* while at the same time they are part of the same ritual group in their natal *ing*. Hence, there is no contradiction in their relation. Neither is there any incompatibility with the terminology as both mother's brother and sister's son continue to be the progenitor (*nong kha/nia kha*) of their conjugal families (see Chart 2 below).

Chart 2
MATRILATERAL CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE (D = MBD)



Unlike the arrows in Chart 1, which move in opposite directions resulting in the return of bodily and symbolic substances brought by the father back into his natal family, the arrows here move in the same direction ruling out the possibility of reversal.

CONQUERING SONS AND DUTIFUL DAUGHTERS

The above discussion brings into sharp relief not only the importance of the father in the Khasi family, but also the role of kinship in the reproduction of gendered identities. As an organizing principle of society, kinship serves both as the idiom and the context within which gendered ideologies are constituted and enacted, a process that continues throughout an individual's life. Right from the time an individual is born, the kinship system moulds and patterns human personality and identity in socially important ways. The process formally begins at the naming rite, which is held the very next day a child is born. Although the ritual act per se is the same for both the male and the female child, difference in gender calls for variation

in the items placed at the ritual site in keeping with the expected gender roles. In the case of a male child, a bow and three arrows are kept close to the baby. For the female, these articles are substituted by a *dao (wait)*, a conical basket and rain shield (*kakhoh bad ka trap*) and/or a winnowing tray (*u prah*). Barring the *dao*, which is made of iron, the rest of the items are made of cane.

These tools and implements signify the child's future calling in life. A male is primarily seen as a warrior who protects and defends the family and community from the enemies and a hunter who brings the game home, hence the bows and arrows. The female on the other hand is seen not only as a carer and nurturer *(ka nongri ka nongbat)* whose duties are to attend to the young and the aged, and the domestic chores of cooking, washing, fetching water and fuel, but also as a worker in the field. This explains the presence of the above named items at the naming of the female child, as symbols of the multiple roles/duties she is expected to fulfill. Traditionally, the *dao*, the basket and strap are indispensable items in a Khasi household. While the *dao* is crucial for the clearance of the *jhum* plots and for cutting of firewood and fodder, the basket and strap are used to transport the agricultural produce from the fields, and water from the springs for drinking, washing, and other domestic use.

This sexual division of labour imparts a distinctive quality to the position of Khasi women. While the Khasi gender ideology clearly defines the female as physically and mentally inferior to men interestingly, in their domestic role women are saddled both with reproductive (nurturing) and productive (economic) functions. This, however, does not entitle women to the same degree of freedom society gives men.

The social differentiation between the male and female child is not confined to the allocation of domestic roles but extends to social norms and values as well. As a warrior, the male is not only expected to be brave and emotionally tough but also entitled to a high degree of freedom of movement and expression. Hence, men can engage in all kinds of activities even sexual exploits - so long as they do not violate other men's right. This explains why though monogamy is the norm and polygyny[12] sits ill at ease with uxorilocal marriage to

which the Khasi subscribes, families often take pride in the sexual ventures of their son, calling a man with many wives *u rang khadar lama* (a man who bears twelve flags). This licence is a prerogative of the male. Deemed to be physiologically and mentally weak, the female is denied the freedom accorded to their male counterparts.

Women are not only expected to be virtuous and above reproach, they must also submit themselves to the guidance and control of the family (read male). As the weaker sex, women are obliged to submit to the control of their brothers and the protection and support of their father and/or husband, and excluded from important areas of decision-making both within and outside the family. As a result, elected positions within the clan and village, such as, *Rangbah Kur* (clan head) and *Rangbah Shnong* (village head) are traditionally reserved for men. Even hereditary positions like *Syiem* and *Lyngdoh* are the prerogative of men; only in rare and exceptional circumstances have women occupied these positions.

GENDERED SPEECH

It is interesting to note how the Khasi employ the cognitive category of language to establish and reinforce male supremacy. Anyone familiar with the Khasi language will be struck at the number of gendered terms and phrases that symbolize the unequal power relations between the male and the female. For instance, the word *U Rangbah*, a term for the adult male, strongly conveys the high esteem the Khasi society has of men. The term is made up of two words: *Rang* is an abbreviation of *shynrang* (male) and *bah* means to bear or carry on the back. Joined together, the word *(Rangbah)* portrays the male as a powerful being infused with high moral integrity and physical and mental prowess to shoulder multiple responsibilities – a sentiment/ideology which finds strong resonance in Nongrum's poem discussed earlier. To express the difference in the mental and physical attributes of the sexes, the Khasi say *U Rangbah khat-ar bor*, which is to state man has twelve units of power/energy and *ka kynthei shibor*, that is, a woman has only one unit of power/energy. To reinforce their physiological and intellectual inferiority, women are analogically equated with children. In an oftquoted saying *Ka kynthei ka khynnah*

(literally, the woman the child), women and children are collapsed in the same category. It follows that by using the agency of language to undermine the position of women, men ensure themselves of a firm ideological base to maintain their dominance in society.

WHAT AILS MATRILINY?

The above account clearly shows that ideologically matriliny is by no means antagonistic to men. What then explains men's dissatisfaction with the system and their demand to replace it with the patrilineal system? An insight into the matter can be found in the ideas of late Professor B. Pakem[13] contained in the introduction to a book authored by a local scholar on the Khasi matrilineal system (Syiemlieh, undated)[14]. Lending tacit support to the author's argument that matriliny is detrimental to men, Pakem notes that the matrilineal system is not only an outmoded institution that is 'well suited for a society of hunters, food gatherers and shifting cultivators', but also far removed from the requirements of a modern society. To buttress his argument and show his solidarity with the pro-reforms movement endorsed by the book, he traces the roots of Khasi matriliny to the people's warring past. The Khasi's continuous engagement with war gave rise to a system of division of labour where women have rights over children and property and men over politics (ibid).

Pakem's view is by no means a novelty. Rooted in evolutionism, the idea can be traced to (Lewis Henry) Morgan (1871; 1877/1985)[15] who associated matriliny with an earlier or archaic stage of human society. Although Morgan's ideas, which define kinship systems in terms of stages of human advancement, have been widely challenged for lack of conclusive evidence, the framework he employed provides the theoretical base of many important studies. One of the earliest and most influential works on the subject was Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884)[16]. Endorsing Morgan's evolutionary theory of the human family, Engels advanced the view that patriarchy and monogamous marriage are a consequence of the accumulation of surplus value and rise of the state. In Engels' schema, matriliny not only precedes patriliny but was also associated

with pre class, pre literate and stateless societies: societies that are essentially based on a subsistence level of production and community cooperation (a view that underlines the disintegration theory in social anthropology)[17].

The 'matriliny is primitive and outmoded' argument outlined above is only the tip of the iceberg. The debate represents the crisis of a system rooted in a belief that is increasingly under threat. As noted earlier, the Khasi matrilineal system is closely tied up with the indigenous belief system organised round the *ing*[18] in keeping with the principle of the ritual unity of the sibling group. As shown in the foregoing section, Khasi religion not only demands that brothers and sisters come together in close cooperation, but also exclude spouses from its jurisdiction. This means that while husband and wife may live together in the same household, in ritual matters they belong to their respective *ing* comprising exclusively of matrilineally related kin.

So long as the society was insulated from external forces, the arrangement worked without any hitch. Village endogamy and adherence to the same faith provided a firm foundation to the system. However, the advent of colonialism with its powerful agents, education and Christianity has posed serious problems. While education brought about a change in the occupational structure leading to migration and disintegration of village endogamy, Christianity on its part considerably eroded the powers of the mother's brother over the sister's house. Though Christianity never directly interfered with the matrilineal system, by taking the people away from their traditional belief it directly attacks the basis of the system.

Given that the power of the mother's brother is bound up with religion, the decline in the observance of rituals following the spread of Christianity in the society sharply erodes his authority in the sister's household. Further, Christianity with its strong patriarchal orientation serves to gradually consolidate the father's position within the family by enabling him to step into domains earlier occupied by the maternal uncle. This is precisely what lies at root of the current debate on Khasi matriliny. The debate represents the conflict of

roles occupied by men, that of the mother's brother on the one hand, and the father on the other, when exposed to the process of modernization and change.

AMBIGUOUS SYSTEM AND FLAWED PERSPECTIVE

A close examination of the problem suggests that the conflict is accelerated by the ambiguity in the system of inheritance that gives ownership rights to women but control in the hands of men. Among the Khasi, while family property passes from mother to daughter, control over it lies with the mother's brother. Ideally, what this means is that the heir/heiress to the property cannot use it in any manner that she likes without the approval of the mother's brother and other men of the matri-family. This arrangement while it provides scope for manipulation by not so honest and money-hungry maternal uncles to divert the benefits from their sisters' house to their wife and children[19], has also given rise to a feeling of discontent among the younger males who view the system as discriminatory towards them.

It may also be argued that the current disenchantment with matriliny may have been aggravated by the misrepresentation of the system in anthropological writings as the kingdom where women reign[20]. Early writers tend to call any system where descent is traced through the female as matriarchal or a system of 'motherright', suggesting that in such a system women's position is supreme. The perception came from the tendency to look at the matrilineal system as a mirror opposite of the patriarchal system or 'father right' where the father occupies a super eminent position (see in particular Radcliffe-Brown, 1950[21]; Fox, 1967)[22]. Gurdon's (op cit) book on the Khasi suffers from the same malady. Although Gurdon is fully conversant with the authority structure of the Khasi family (see his statement quoted in previous section), women's relative independence in matters of marriage and movement and their right over children led him to describe the Khasi society as matriarchal, ignoring the strong gender ideology that subjugates the female (daughters in particular) to the male. Many latter day scholars on the Khasi accepted Gurdon's view without dispute, elevating his book to the

status of a master text in which both outsiders and insiders bestow tacit faith.

As a result, the current debate on matriliny far from objectively examining the system has blindly denounced the institution, condemning it not only as downright outmoded but also as antagonistic to men. What is significant about this development is that matriliny has not only become a site for contesting discourses on the kinship system but also for the construction and reconstruction of gendered identities, in the process ethnography as well as ethnic identity themselves get reconstructed. Of course, different people are positioned differently on the matter, however, what is a cause of worry is that the debate is marked not only by the conspicuous absence of women's voices, but also heavily underlined by dogmatic positions with few really interested in understanding/knowing what the real Khasi society is like.

Interestingly, obscured by the narrow partisanship that dogged the debate are elements which suggest that ideally Khasi society is neither matriarchal nor patriarchal but androgynous in nature, where both women and men share responsibilities. This little acknowledged fact finds lucid expression in the symbolism of the hearth (fireplace), the most sacred part of the Khasi house. The hearth or fireplace is a symbol of warmth, hospitality and unity, and a site where oblations to the ancestors are offered. The three spherical stones that surround the fire, upon which the cooking vessels are placed, stand for *Ka Iawbei* the primeval ancestress of the clan, U *Thawlang* the first father of the clan, and U *Suidnia* the first maternal uncle of the clan. Traditionally, the three constitute the cornerstone of the Khasi family and basis of its religious life. Though the *Thawlang* ritually belongs to his natal family and clan, he is a revered figure in the conjugal home propitiated by his children and their descendants as the first father of the clan. This ideally makes the mother, the father and the mother's brother equal partners in the administration of the family. However, gendered ideology and the tacit belief that women are physiologically, emotionally, and intellectually weaker than men propagated through socialization and popular speech/language has reduced women to a subservient position.

Significantly, in the picture of the hearth shown on the back cover of Nongrum's book, in which the poem discussed earlier is included, the representation of the figures is misleading. While the position of the father and the mother's brother is accurately depicted, the author has replaced *ka Iawbei*, the clan ancestress, with *u Syiem* (chief/king), the head of state. In his attempt to establish that Khasi men enjoy a super eminent position, the author seems to have missed the crucial point that the substitution of *ka Iawbei* with *u Syiem* in an emblem that strictly relates to the family goes against the spirit of the matrilineal system and fundamental principle of Khasi religion, which is strictly based on the clan. Of course, the *Syiem* also performs religious functions but these relate primarily to public rites and celebrations: private or domestic rituals are basically the responsibility of the mother and the maternal uncle (*ka kmie bad u kni*).

Nongrum's misguided representation of the symbolism of the hearth may be reflective of his theological and ideological orientation as a member of the heavily patriarchal Roman Catholic Church. The (mis)act also conveys another disturbing message. It points to the failure of our present day educational and legal systems to infuse balance in our thinking, and to caution us against the danger of looking at the problem only from one side, or simply in terms of black and white, in which most of us are complicit. This was precisely what led to the failure of the men's movement in Meghalaya, which despite the initial enthusiasm it generated not only ended in a whimper, but also failed to bring about the desired reforms in the system necessary to keep up with the changing times.

At the root of the problem lies a flawed perspective, which looks at Khasi matriliny primarily from the vantage point of the patriarchal system. The flaw in the perspective has not only led the architects of the movement to lose sight of the good but also the ambiguities in the system. For instance, while it is true that the matrilineal institution is organised around women, it does not imply 'matriarchy' or rule by women. In fact, as data in the foregoing discussion shows, Khasi women have little control over many aspects of their life as authority lies with men.

Of course, men too are not without problems. However, this has

less to do with matrilineality *per se* as with the system of 'age-set' that structures social relations and the allocation of roles and functions to members in the society, which is primarily based on age and generation[23]. As an organizing principle, age-set gives advantage to seniority both in terms of age and generation. This explains why though jural authority is vested in the hands of the mother's brother, the advantage does not percolate to all brothers or men in the group but primarily rests with the senior/s. This left junior males in the group without authority or controlling power over the family resources.

To be more specific, what is really problematic with Khasi matriliny, which affects men in significant ways, is the system of inheritance that gives property rights to daughters only and denies the same to sons. Discussions carried out with cross-sections of Khasi men reveal that *more than* the issue of *lineage and authority*, the main grouse against the system is the *absence of property rights for sons*. With an increasing number of people acquiring education and moving out from the village into town, and from land and family-based occupation into business and wage employment, the absence of inheritance and/or rights to family property poses major constraints for men. Many of my young male informants pointed out that in the absence of ready capital to invest in business ventures or family property that could be used as surety for loans from financial institutions, Khasi men are at serious disadvantage as compared to their counterparts in patrilineal societies, who enjoy the economic backing of their family. The Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) and its allies in the pro-reforms lobby, however, appear to take this fact for granted. Though it did take note of inheritance rights for men in its three-pronged agenda, the issue is obscured by its anti women stance[24] and call to overthrow the matrilneal system failing to recognize the real crux of the problem.

Even the *Khasi Custom of Lineage Act* adopted by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council[25] in 1997, which formed the backdrop of the debate, has failed to address the ambiguity in the system. In fact the Act, which was driven by the objective to preserve the Khasi matrilineal system became vitiated by the obsession with the issue of female sexuality and racial purity. Distracted by the idea

that the increasing number of marriages between Khasi women and non-Khasi men poses a threat to the identity of the Khasi and purity of the race, voiced by a small but highly vocal segment of educated urban-based youth[26], the Act lost the opportunity to address the real problems that men [and women] face in the matrilineal system.

The denial of property rights to the male takes on a serious dimension if we relate it to the ideology of the 'providing husband' and/or 'supporting father' implicit in the Khasi marriage rules (discussed earlier) and the indigenous notion of masculinity embodied in the term '*Rangbah*', which is at sharp variance with the notion of masculinity in western popular discourse. The analysis reveals that unlike the popular notion of masculinity, which primarily centres on physical prowess and valour, among the Khasi 'masculinity' goes beyond physical attributes and/or acts of valour but embodies men's familial roles. To the Khasi, masculinity is an over-arching concept that straddles two key roles that a man is called upon to fulfill: as 'husband/father' to his wife and children and as 'mother's brother' to his sister and sister's children, a role-model that is built on the idea that the male is a 'powerful being' capable of discharging multiple responsibilities. This model of masculinity not only imposes heavy demand on men to strike a balance between competing roles but also gives rise to a diffused authority structure in which authority over the family is shared between the father and mother's brother.

Implicit in the materials presented above is the message that any analysis of Khasi matriliny and the position of men in the society needs to take note of this unique fact (i.e. masculinity as embodiment of kinship roles), a failure to do so can lead to disastrous results, as borne out by the inability of the men's 'lib movement' in the society to garner public support. It would not be wrong to say that the movement, which peaked at the time when the Khasi Custom of Lineage Bill (now an Act) was tabled in the Khasi Hills District Council, failed to win the support of civil society and the general public largely because it went against the concept of masculinity held by the society. By selectively emphasizing on the role of father[27], the movement not only ignores the composite position that Khasi men occupy in the family but also misses out on the real crux of the problem.

What the paper reveals is that the tendency to look at matriliny purely from the woman's perspective (as is the case in most feminist works) or the man's perspective (as done by the SRT) has resulted in a distorted picture of the institution and thrown up a fragmented and piecemeal view of the position of the men and women within it. What is needed therefore is a 'two-way' approach. By 'two-way' approach, I mean we look at the problem from the vantage point of both men and women through the lens of gender. By adopting the two-way analysis to examine the Khasi matrilineal system and the associated ideas of masculinity and femininity encoded in their kinship roles and everyday speech, this study has shown that while Khasi men are not in want of authority there are a number of ambiguities and loopholes in the system which are contrary to the interest of both men and women and need to be addressed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the final analysis, it would not be out of place to say that the materials presented in the discussion not only explode the long held myth that women in matrilineal societies enjoy superior status, but also raise several theoretical and methodological questions both for kinship and for gender studies. In the first place, the Khasi case challenges the assumption long held by modernization theorists (and nostalgic feminists) that matrilineal descent groups are highly vulnerable and liable to dissolution when faced with processes of state-driven modernization, community-led reforms (as happened among the Nairs), or market-induced economic differentiation. To the contrary, our findings indicate that the processes of modernization and change (while it may increase dissatisfaction with the system as revealed by the rise of the men's movement in Meghalaya) are in fact strengthening and reinforcing the matrilineal system. The passing of the *Khasi Custom of Lineage Act, 1997* is an illustration of this fact. In its statement of 'Objects and Reasons', which spells out the rationale of the Act, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council clearly states that the Act is intended to protect and reinforce Khasi matriliny against the forces of change by clearly defining the Khasi identity - (that is 'who constitutes a Khasi'?).

This is also true of the Mosuo, a matrilineal people in the Yunnan province of China, where, with the opening up of the country's economy and the subsequent surge in tourism, the Mosuo are not only using matriliny as a bait to attract tourists and thus gain economic advantage from the flourshing (new) industry, but also putting new emphasis on the institution of 'visiting husbands'[28] as a marker of Mosuo identity. The result is on the one hand, a considerable rise in household income in tourist centres, and the blatant commercialization of minority women as symbols of free living, on the other (Uberoi and Nongbri, 2006)[29].

Read together, the Khasi and Mosuo data also raises pertinent questions about the universalization of the Levi-Straussian idea that marriage is a system of exchange where groups of consanguineally related men exchange sisters/women with each other (Levi-Strauss, 1969)[30]. That marriage as an institution is far from universal is brought out by the Mosuo case where marriage as a permanent union between one man and one woman simply does not exist[31]. Even among the Khasi, where marriage is not only socially recognized but also provides the basis for the formation of households, it is not women but men who constitute the item of exchange. Not only do men move between households (at marriage) but also contribute their bodily substance and other symbolic elements (to their children), an act which is vital for the perpetuation of the wife's clan. The ban on patrilateral cross-cousin marriage encoded in the metaphor *ai khaw kylliang* or exchange of rice discussed earlier rests on this ontological fact.

What is important to note is that not only is the paradigm of marriage in matrilineal societies vastly different from the paradigm of most societies, the structure of the matrilineal institution is also more varied and complex than that of the patrilineal system, which calls for a more nuanced and careful scrutiny of the matter.

NOTES

1. Iravati Karve, *Kinship Organisation in India*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1965 [1953]
2. Dumont, L, *Affinity as a Value: Marriage Alliance in South India, with Comparative Essays on Australia*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983;

_____, 'North India in Relation to South India', in P. Uberoi (ed) 1993, 91-111.

3. Trautmann, Thomas R. *Dravidian Kinship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981: _____, 'The Study of Dravidian Kinship' in P. Uberoi (ed), 1993, 74-90.
4. P. Uberoi (ed) *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993.
5. E. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, Thacker Spink & Co. 1967 [1905]
6. PRT Gurdon, *The Khasis*, Delhi, Cosmo Publications, 1975 [1907]
7. H. Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Calcutta, The Author, 1967
8. The sole exception in this regard is the Garo people, the Khasis' neighbour on the west who are said to have borrowed the matrilineal institution, albeit with distinct variations, from the Khasis.
9. N. N. Nongrum, *Ka Main U Shynrang Khasi (The Personality of the Khasi Male)*, Shillong, Don Bosco Press, 1989.
10. This is a term of address used by the Khasi for mother's brother. Apart from the generic term *Mama*, depending upon the birth order the words *Ma'bah*,*Ma'deng*, *Ma'nah*, *Ma'Rit*, and *Ma'duh* are used to address the mother's brother. However, the term of reference for the mother's brother is *kni*.
11. I am grateful to Dr. Prabhat Mittal, University of Delhi, for helping me in the preparation of these charts.
12. Polygyny as an institution is ill-fitted to the matrilineal system (particularly those following the uxorilocal pattern of residence like the Khasi). Hence, where so-called polygynous unions exist, they are usually in an informal form, with the 'husband' visiting the 'wife/wives' occasionally.
13. Professor Pakem was a noted Khasi educationist and statesman affiliated to the Political Science Department, North-Eastern Hill University. He was a minister in the Meghalaya Government for several years and served as the ViceChancellor of NEHU before his untimely death.
14. P.B. Syiemlieh, *The Khasis and their Matrilineal Systems*, Shillong, The Author, (year not stated).
15. Lewis H. Morgan. *Systems of Cansanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1871;_____, *Ancient Society*, Tuscon, University of Arizona Press, 1985 [1877]
16. F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1948
17. Disintegration theory refers to a body of ideas which predicts the inevitable demise of matrilineal descent groups when confronted with the forces of modernization, urbanization and economic differentiation. This prediction rests on the notion that matrilineal descent groups (MDG) are inherently unstable as compared to patrilineal descent groups. The theory can be traced to Morgan, who regarded MDG as less advanced than PDGs. Several scholars

have endorsed this view which includes among others Murdock (1957), Aberle (1972), Jack Goody (1956), Kathleen Gough (1972) and Schneider (1972/1951).

18. As stated earlier, the word *ing* carries dual connotation, referring both to a grouping of close matrilineal kin descended from a common ancestress, and the dwelling unit or house. This duality in the meaning often creates confusion, leading many to equate *ing* with the household. This is erroneous because, while the household includes the in-marrying affine/spouse, namely father/husband as members, the *ing* excludes the affine from its membership. Strictly speaking, the *ing* is a grouping of exclusively uterine-linked kin, bound together by shared religious functions.
19. This problem is particularly common among the landed families and those with substantial amount of ancestral property, where mothers fearing that the hard-earned property they accumulated may fall in unscrupulous hands (read daughter's husband/s) often repose tacit control over the property on their son/s.
20. This viewpoint gains credence from the fact that the dissatisfaction with matriliny is more a phenomenon of the young educated youth exposed to western knowledge system.
21. A.R. RadcliffeBrown, 'Introduction' in A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (eds), *African System of Kinship and Marriage*, London, Oxford University Press, 1950
22. Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1967, 112114.
23. For more on how the age-set functions among the Khasi, see A. K . Nongkynrih, 'Sociology, Sociologists, Seng Samla and Seng Kynthei in Meghalaya' in M. Choaudhuri (ed), *Sociology in India: Institutional and Intellectual Practices*, Delhi & Jaipur, Rawat Publications, 2010, p 67-8.
24. See the preoccupation with the control of female sexuality referred to earlier.
25. The District Council is an elected body with legislative and judicial powers created under the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution to safeguard the interests of communities living in Scheduled and Tribal Areas. Under this provision, the District Council is entrusted with powers over the administration of land, forest, protection of customary laws and practices, regulation of village and town councils, etc.
26. Viewing the increasing number of marriages between Khasi women and non-Khasi men as a threat to the identity of the Khasi and purity of the race, this group of men called for the abolition of the matrilineal system and dispossession of all rights to women who enter into marriage with the 'cultural other'. For details on this issue, see T. Nongbri, 2003, Chapter 8, 229-267.
27. This finds vivid reflection in the three-pronged agenda drawn up by the *Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai* (SRT), an urban organization formed primarily of students, businessmen and civil servants, which proposes that: i. authority

over the wife and children should be given to the father, ii. the children be incorporated into the clan of the father and property divided between the son and daughter; the daughter; however; would lose her right to the property if she marries outside the community; iii. parents should be cared for and live with sons.

28. In an attempt to give a name to Mosuo marriage, Chinese scholars have defined it as 'non-institutionalised sexual union'. The Mosuo themselves describe their marriage as *axia*, colloquially known in *putonghua* (mandarin) as 'walking marriage' (*zouhen*) that is, unions which may be furtive or relatively open, serially monogamous or polygynandrous
29. P. Uberoi & T. Nongbri, 'Household dynamics in a coparative milieu', joint paper on Khasi and Mosuo presented at Institute of Chinese Studies, Comparative Development Seminar Series-5, ICS, CSDS, Delhi, August 2006. For more on the Mosuo, see also T. Nongbri, 'Family, gender and identity: A comparative analysis of trans-Himalayan matrilineal structures', *Contributions in Indian Sociology*, Special Issue: Essays in Honour of Patricia Uberoi, 44, (1&2), June, 2010 , 155-178
30. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, London, Eyre & Spottiswood, 1969 [1949].
31. Levi-Strauss's idea of marriage as a system of exchange where women are ciculated between groups has also raised the ire of feminists, who consider his view highly androcentric.

Chapter 3

Christianity, Colonialism and Tribes: An Alternative View of Conversion[1]

Many studies on conversion in India tend to view Christianity as the handmaiden of colonialism, and missionaries the agents of the British Empire, whose primary objective was to consolidate the rule of the Raj by transforming the colonized into docile subjects through evangelical propaganda and conversion. Drawing heavily from government archives, mission records, personal letters, and biographies of administrators and missionaries, they primarily look at the process from without (etic), ignoring the people's own views and motives (emic) for conversion. While these works shed important light on colonial politics, the negotiations and compromises that marked the relation between the officers in the colony and their bosses in Britain, the vulnerability of the colonialists to the hostile climate, unhygienic conditions and perceived immorality of the East, they tell us little about 'how' and 'why' the colonized people, majority of who lie at the margin of the great Indian civilization, readily accepted the alien religion. Of course, attempts have been made to highlight the 'craftiness' of the missionaries who used education, western medicine and other material inducements to lure the ignorant and unsuspecting people to Christianity, but the picture remains incomplete, failing to bring out the complex dynamics on the ground. Besides, such accounts tend to gloss over the difference of interest between the administration and the mission and the sectarian divisions within the latter, which often spilled over into the mission field, dividing the converts along denominational lines. Apparently aware of the limitations that characterized this earlier perspective, recent works on Christianity (see, for instance, Lal Dena,

1988; Downs, 1992, 1994, Robinson, 2003)[2] reveal a shift of focus from the colonial process *per se* and its imperialist agenda to the socio-cultural context within which conversion took place. However, more work needs to be done and the methodology refined in order to achieve greater clarity of the subject.

This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of Christianity and conversion in the nineteenth and early twentieth century among the tribes of North East India, a region that is noted for the high concentration of tribes with strong allegiance to Christianity. The spurt of identity and autonomy movements that rocked the region from the eve of Independence to the present has not only attracted wide political attention but also cast doubts in the minds of many about the loyalty of the North Eastern tribes to the Indian State. Many see these movements as the direct consequence of Christianity and the 'divide and rule' policy of the imperial power. To gain a better understanding of the process and the misgivings of the Indian political and intellectual elite, it would be pertinent to retrace the history of Christianity in the region and examine the multifarious factors that contributed to its spread.

The paper argues that while colonialism created conditions for conversion, the phenomenon was a result of a multiplicity of factors, exogenous as well as endogenous to the environment within which it took place.

However, none of the books available gives adequate attention to this aspect. Neither has any systematic attempt been made to explore the subjective dimension of conversion to find out what conversion really meant to the recipients of Christianity. Most of the writings on the subject tend to view conversion from the outside and ignore the spiritual/subjective aspect of the process. Although a number of factors came/come into play in triggering the process of conversion, it is important to note that conversion is not an objective fact of history that can be separated from the agency of the actors involved in the process or the social conditions within which they are embedded.

What I propose to do in the discussion is to focus on some of these neglected aspects of conversion. It, however, does not seek to

undermine the contributions already made in the field but rather take off from where they left in order to gain a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the process.

This is my third lecture here focused on different aspects of the North East and amongst an informed audience so I'll dispense with providing an ethnographic account of the region. Suffice it to say that the annexation of the North East to British India began from the plains of Assam following the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 between the Kingdom of Burma and the East India Company at the end of the first Anglo-Burmese War. This triggered widespread changes in the region, ushered in a new system of administration in the Assam Valley, money economy, and a host of Hindu immigrants from Bengal required by the white rulers to man the new administrative machinery.

The new system was gradually extended to the hills, which led to the erosion of the traditional power structure and hold of tradition on the people. The process was accelerated by the coming of the missionaries, who imbued with the evangelical zeal to save the 'heathen' from damnation, set the wheels of proselytization in motion. An important factor that aided the missionary was the colonial idea that tribes were 'primitive' peoples in need of improvement. The idea was expanded by officers in the field who confronted with tribal resistance to the extension of colonial rule branded the people so designated as 'wild', 'ferocious' and 'barbaric', categories that called for and legitimized punitive and/or conciliatory measures against them depending upon circumstance.

This understanding of tribe (as primitive and in need of civilizing) had its roots in Western Enlightenment that views human society in terms of the linear notion of modernity emanating from the West. The implication is that societies distantly located from the centre of modernity (read West) lag behind in social advancement or progress.

In the Indian context, this construction of tribe gained legitimacy through the (colonial) government's classification project whereby the population was categorized into 'castes' and 'tribes'. To facilitate the task of administration, the British government collected detailed information on the people and society they sought to govern, and in

the process classified the population into types and sub-types on the basis of certain criterion, such as habitat, religion and occupation.

Although the boundary separating 'castes' and 'tribes' was often hazy, caste was used to describe people who fell within the ambit of Hinduism and its four varnas; tribes were people who lay outside it. By using caste as a frame of reference, the colonial government brought together a wide range of people, who for the most part resided in hilly terrain and forest tracts, under a single umbrella of 'tribe'.

Though the people so designated had little in common with each other, the 1901 census formalized the distinction between 'caste' and 'tribe' by defining the latter as 'animists' and a 'primitive' people with no organized religion or clear conception of God, but believed in spirits[3]. This view stood in sharp contrast to 'caste', which was deemed to be of a higher social order.

The definition of tribes as 'primitive' not only denigrated the people's history and way of life but also served as an important facilitator for the spread of Christianity in tribal society. This fact comes out sharply in a statement made by Beadon, Secretary to the Government of Bengal in 1854 in his attempt to justify government aid to missionaries for carrying out educational activities in the Khasi hills:

> The *absence of religious prejudice, and almost of religion*, among the Khasias and other hill tribes in that direction *removes the objection* that might be taken to the promotion of secular education by the government in other parts through the means of missionary aid (Mills Report, p.120, emphasis added).[4]

The supposed primitivism of 'tribes' (and their lack of religion) was also emphasised in the writings of missionaries from the early 19th century onwards. The message they carried was that such communities could be saved and civilised through conversion to Christianity (cf. Bhukya, 2008, 106)[5].

Similar ideas appear to underline the thinking of Christian missionaries working in India's North East, as is evident in the view expressed by Thomas Jones the first Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary, in a letter written soon after his arrival at the mission field in Sohra (aka Cherrapunji or Cherra for short), Khasi Hills[6] in

June 1841. Describing the Khasi, the people whom he had come to proselytize to the people back home, he wrote:

> A more pitiful, lamentable, and at the same time a more inviting field for the Christian cannot be found. Here are multitudes and multitudes of *untutored heathen, naturally lazy and sluggish*, living in filth and rags, afraid to wash a rag lest it should wear out the sooner; depriving themselves of proper clothing; niggardly holding up every *pice* (farthing) they can get, and if asked the reason why, they answer 'that they may have something to sacrifice when they or their friends are ill' (quoted in Morris, 1930, 26, italics added).[7]

Such value-loaded view not only raised pertinent questions about the political neutrality of the missionaries but also strengthened the argument that they were agents of colonialism, and, conversion a product of cultural imperialism through the use of education and the church. Whether this was so in fact requires close scrutiny. While it is true that the missionaries shared similar ideas with the administrators about the state of the natives and the need to liberate them from the clutches of 'ignorance' and their 'barbaric ways', it would be naïve to assume that the two shared a common agenda.

Evidence reveals that the administration was not only wary of the missionary, but also the two often worked at cross-purposes to each other. (I'll come back to this later)

Besides, to define conversion as a product of cultural imperialism[8] simply on the basis of the converter's socio-cultural or political predisposition is not only to ignore the interplay of other causal factors but also to undermine the agency of converts who often exploit the situation to meet their own ends.

As Robinson notes:

> We need to look more closely at questions of motivation and the understanding of what constitutes conversion or, for that matter, mission. Themes regarding the 'agency' of converts and the ways in which they sometimes redefined the terms of evangelical interaction are of great interest. Moreover, we need to try to sort out particular patterns and strategies of conversion and attempt to analyze the conditions under which they become possible (2003, op cit, 61-62).

Before we proceed with this issue, let us take a quick look at how Christianity came into India's North East in the first place, its *modus operandi*, and the people's reaction to it.

EARLY CONTACT WITH CHRISTIANITY

For the people of the North East, contact with Christianity came at different points of time and through different agencies. The first missionaries to reach the region were two Jesuit priests, Stephen Cacells and J. Cabral, who landed in the Brahmaputra valley in the course of their exploratory trip to Tibet and China. Though no trace of their presence could be found today, records indicate that in 1696 there were two Catholic Churches at the Moghul Garrison in Goalpara district of lower Assam, believed to have been set up by Jesuit priests who came with the Moghul army sent by Aurangzeb to conquer the Ahoms in 1667 (Lal Dena, op cit, 18; see also Downs, 1971[9]).

These early contacts however were confined to the plains of Assam. For the tribes in the hills, it was not until the advent of colonialism that contact with Christianity was established. The first contact was with the Khasi, through the agency of the Serampore Mission headed by William Carey, an English missionary of humble origin and indomitable spirit. Working independently of its parent body the Baptist Missionary Society, the Serampore Mission sought to take Christianity beyond the borders of Bengal to the interior of Assam and Burma. Driven by this zeal, Carey sent Krishna Chandra Pal, a Hindu convert, to take the gospel to the 'aboriginals' in the hills of Assam.

As Assam and the tribal-inhabited areas in the hills were then independent territories, Pal used Pandua, a trading centre in the Khasi-Sylhet border, as his base. Though Pandua's population was predominantly Bengali, it had a regular flow of people from the hills.[10] Thus, when Pal took up his preaching at Pandua in 1813, among the converts were two Khasi men (U Anna and U Dewan) besides four Assamese and one Bengali (Morris, op cit 1930, 24). Opposition to conversion, however, forced Pal to abandon his station.

Undaunted by the resistance, and to intensify the reach of the gospel, William Carey added Khasi to his Bible translation project so that its message could be communicated to the people in their own tongue. Using the Shella dialect as the medium and Bengali character to script the content, Carey and his men diligently applied

themselves to the task and by 1824 despatched a copy of the first Khasi Bible to the Khasi Hills. In the word of one commentator, '[T]he translation, however, was so imperfect as to be altogether unintelligible to the Khasi, which ultimately led to its total failure and wastage' (I. Nongbri, n.d.)[11]

Following the annexation of Assam, and under the persuasive influence of David Scott, Commissioner of the newly constituted province and Agent to the Governor General, in 1829 the Serampore Mission opened a school at Gauhati under a young soldier James Rae as teacher. In the school were three Khasi and nine Garo students personally committed to its charge by Scott whose zeal to take education to the hill tribes knew no bounds. The school however proved to be a failure and was subsequently closed down (ibid, 25; Cf. Barooah, 1970, 187)[12].

The failure of the Gauhati experiment led Carey to resume Pal's unfinished project to the Khasis. In 1832, he sent Alexander B. Lish a Eurasian youth to establish a station in the village of Sohra (aka Cherrapunji or Cherra for short)[13] on the southern plateau of the Khasi hills, where the British had recently opened a military station and sanatorium. There, Lish opened a school where he combined basic education with proselytization.

Though Lish's stay in the Khasi hills was short, it left a deep impact in the minds of those who had come into contact with his teachings, some of whom had accompanied him to Calcutta for his ordination in 1833 (Mathur, 1979, 14)[14]. The effect of the trip deeply touched the visitors from the hills, whose contact with the urban ways of the metropolis opened their eyes to the vast possibilities of education. The enthusiasm of this small group was, however, offset by the stiff resistance Lish encountered from the majority of the people whose resentment against foreign rule had yet to subside. Failing to cope with the opposition, coupled with fiscal uncertainties caused by the 1838 amalgamation of the Serampore Mission with the Baptist Missionary Society, the mission was discontinued (ibid; Morris, op cit, 25).

It was the Calvinistic Methodists from Wales who began sustained missionary activity in the Khasi hills. According to one account,

the Calvinists owed the Khasi mission to one Rev. Jacob Tomlin who, waylaid by a shipwreck while on his way to China, landed in the Khasi hills in 1836 (Jones, 1966, 5)[15]. Impressed by the potential for evangelization during his brief sojourn amongst the Khasi, on his return to England Tomlin called upon the London Missionary Society to adopt the Khasi hills as its mission field[16]. After hectic parleys and deliberations in London and Liverpool, the Welsh Presbyterian Mission decided to send Rev. Thomas Jones, an enthusiastic Welsh preacher, as its first missionary to the Khasi hills[17].

Thomas Jones and his wife Anne arrived in the Khasi hills in June 1841 (Morris, op cit, 6). Like Lish before him, he landed in Cherrapunji where he spent the first three months of his stay under the roof of William C.J. Lewin, a devout British army officer. The early years of the Welsh mission in the hills were, however, testing ones. The Jones not only had to put up with the inclement weather and harsh living conditions in a land that holds the world record as the wettest place on earth, but also to overcome the deep cultural gulf and people's hostility to the white men kindled, as it were, by the domineering attitude of the administration. Storming the undercurrents of hostility, Thomas Jones laid the ground for evangelization by acquainting himself with the custom and culture of the people he had come to convert. He began by learning the Khasi language so that he could reach out to the people in their own tongue. Their abject condition and technological backwardness not only proved to be a challenge but also an opportunity for the young missionary. Spurred by humanitarian concern and the imperative to gain the trust and confidence of the people, Jones liberally drew from his personal store of knowledge, training and erstwhile practice and began to teach the Khasi many useful skills, beyond his evangelical calling[18].

To put his evangelical mission in motion, Jones opened three schools - one each at Sohra, Mawsmai, and Mawmluh. He was assisted in this task by Duwan Rai and Jongkha, and other enthusiastic youths who had earlier studied under Lish. The dedication and zeal of this indigenous team of workers was to contribute tremendously to the success of Christianity in this hill society.

Explaining the importance of education and the role of indigenous workers for the propagation of the gospel, in one of his letters to the sponsors in Wales, Jones wrote:

> The only plan which appears to me likely to answer a good purpose is to establish schools in the various villages, to teach the Khasis – children and adults – to read their own language . . . or to train native teachers, and to make use of the natives to teach their fellow-countrymen to read … In this way we shall not only bring up the young people in the knowledge of Gospel doctrines, but we shall also teach them to read; and when we shall have translated the Holy Scriptures into their language, we shall have some, at least in every family, able to read them, and I may add, able to understand them also; and I shall regard this as an important step towards their evangelization (cited in Morris, op cit, 26-27).

Clearly, Thomas Jones' plan was not only to *universalize education* through the use of native teachers (Indian policy-makers could take a leaf out of Jones' book) but also to teach them in their own language and own script.

The arrival of Rev. and Mrs. William Lewis and Dr. Owen Richards[19] two years later provided Jones the opportunity to translate his idea into a reality. Leaving the task of teaching in the hands of the newcomers, he devoted his time to literary works. The success of this neat division of labour was attested by the quick turnover of evangelical and educational materials in the native tongue. Within a short span of time, the mission was able to bring out school primers and numerous translations from the Bible and other religious works in the Khasi language.

The scripting of the Khasi language by using the Roman letters was to leave a permanent imprint on the hill societies of the North East. Till the Welsh missionaries arrived on the scene, none of the tribal languages had a script of their own, official documentations and records were maintained in the Bengali language[20]. Even in the Brahmaputra Valley where Assamese was spoken and Devnagiri script was used, official records during the *Raj* were kept in Bengali.

It is said Thomas Jones adopted the Roman character to script the Khasi language in place of the Bengali because he found the former easier to write and phonetically more adaptable to the Khasi than the Bengali character. While the real intent can never be found out, the act, however, generated severe consternation among the

officers of the British Empire, who feared this could rouse the antagonism of the Hindus, India's dominant group. Interestingly, according to Jenkins, Jones' liberal use of Welsh orthography in adapting the sounds of Khasi words to the alphabet instead of English, the sovereign's language, hurt the sensibilities of many Englishmen. Sharply reacting to the matter, Sir Charles Elliot, Commissioner of Assam, disparagingly remarked, '…the transliteration is so barbarous and uncouth that it requires the reader to learn Welsh in order to know how the words are to be pronounced' (quoted in Jenkins, 1995, 185).

The controversy of the script found its resonance even within the mission. Leading the attack was William Pryse, who arrived in Cherra in 1849, two years after the severance of Thomas Jones' connection with the mission,[21] Pryse not only openly expressed his unhappiness with the script, but also his poor opinion of the Khasi which he described as a small and uninfluential people with little ability to stand up against the numerically and culturally dominant Bengalis. Six years after Thomas Jones' death, in the Preface of his paper 'Introduction to the Khasia Language', the writing of which he ironically and liberally drew from the former's work, Pryse observed:

> Should the Khasia tribe be ever brought under the influence of education, civilisation and commercial intercourse, the Bengali character must supplant the Roman at a not so distant day. For the sake of the Khasi that would be very desirable. Nor would it be less desirable for the Bengali language to supplant all the hill dialects of the North-East Frontier (quoted in Simon, 1991, 3; Cf. Jenkins, 1995, op cit, 185-186)[22].

Educated Bengalis in the hills and their non-Christian Khasi allies joined chorus with Pryse in questioning Thomas Jones' choice of the Roman character in place of the Bengali. Ironically, despite the sharp controversy that surrounded the scripting of the Khasi language and strained relations with the mission, which eventually resulted in his expulsion, Thomas Jones not only went on to earn the reputed title of 'The Father of the Khasi Alphabet', but also left a deep impact on the other tribes of the region. With the expansion of Christianity in the hills, tribes like the Naga, Mizo, Kuki and Garo

followed suit and adopted the Roman character to script their language.

Notwithstanding the radical step, the progress of education in the initial years of the mission was however painfully slow. Ignorance and fear made many parents unwilling to send their children to school. A monthly grant of five pounds sterling made by Lord Dalhousie in 1854 (hailed by Morris as the *first* education grant made by the Government of India to a religious organization (op cit, 31, italics in original) eased the situation for the mission.

The announcement of the grant sparked wide interest in education among the chiefs who till then were indifferent to it. Whether the response came due to official pressure or genuine appreciation for the value of education is not clear, but records reveal many native chiefs approached the missionaries to open schools in their territory. As a result, by 1866, the number of schools in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills rose to 65 with 2,000 students on rolls (Jones, op cit, 45).

Whatever the government's intention may have been in extending aid to the mission, schools proved to be a vital means of effecting conversion. Although the progress of conversion was initially tardy, in fact, it was not till 1846, that is, five years after the Mission's entry, that conversion took place. But once the process started it made a steady march. On 8th March 1846, U Amor and U Rujon, the first Khasi converts of the Welsh Mission were baptized by William Lewis. Three months later, three more men U Tirasing, U Luh and U Ramjan were baptized. Qn 16th August 1848, Ka Nabon Dkhar, the first Khasi woman to adopt Christianity, was baptized.

In practically every village, schools preceded the establishment of the Church. In addition to lessons on reading, writing and arithmetic (the 3 R's), the curriculum included readings from the Scripture and moral instructions, making schools the preparation ground for conversion. Schools were also effectively used by the missionaries to infuse in the pupils respect for cleanliness and hygiene and proper management of time and duties. The latter was effected through the school 'Time-Table', which systematically organized the day's activities by the hour, neatly divided between studies, prayer and play.

The same principle was applied to the converts whose traditional eight-day week, based on the circulation of the local market, was replaced by the seven-day week of the Gregorian calendar. The new calendar not only assigned new names to days but also introduced the Khasis to a new division of time and labour based on the Welsh/Christian conception of time-use that revolve around church activities and domestic chores. The new 7-day week and the names were quickly adopted though the old 8-day circulation of local markets remains.

Conversion to Christianity, however, took place against heavy odds. The orthodox section of society strongly opposed the process.

Despite the opposition, converts to Christianity exhibited extraordinary zeal and devotion to their new faith. Enthused by the new ideas and new way of life presented by the church, the newly educated took up the mantle of village schoolteachers-cum preachers to take education and the gospel to the rural population. These indigenous workers not only helped to popularize education but also significantly lightened the financial burden of the mission. With limited wants and unquestioning mind, the native workers proved to be a boon to the church.

The procurement of a printing press helped the missionaries to intensify their evangelical mission and ingrain the elements of modernity and Christian virtue on the native mind. Through pamphlets and religious tracts the missionaries propagated the tenets of Christianity and issued strict instructions on how to lead a pious life.

To discourage slackness in belief, the converts were not only expected to lead a life of prayer but also to give up all social 'vices', such as drinking of rice beer and engagement in traditional games and sports. Sunday was to be a day of worship and abstention from all kinds of secular activities. In addition to mandatory church attendance on Sundays, the missionaries instituted weekly prayer meetings where every Wednesday the converts met for Bible study and fellowship. Knowledge of the Bible was a mandatory requirement for church membership. In 1868, a rule was passed that except for the very old and infirm no new aspirants would be baptized unless

they could read the Bible and regularly attend Sunday School. Further, to infuse a sense of responsibility towards the church, each family had to regularly shell out a part of their earning as contribution for its various activities.

Interestingly, these rigid codes of conduct, and new notions of time and duties, far from acting as disincentives made Christianity more attractive to the people, particularly among the older generation. This was borne out by the steady rise in the number of converts drawn both from the ordinary and the influential section of the society. The most notable was the conversion of u Borsing Syiem of Sohra in 1864. Borsing's conversion challenged the popular assumption that conversion to Christianity was motivated by material and social benefits. In accepting Christianity, Borsing lost his right to the office of the Syiem. Though he was the designated heir to the coveted office he renounced this right, since according to the Khasi tradition a Syiem is not only an administrative head but also the custodian of the religious rites of the state, a duty that conflicted with his new faith. On the death of Ramsing the incumbent ruler, when the nobles of the kingdom approached Borsing the designated heir with the offer of office with the stipulation that he give up Christianity, he declined the offer[23].

With the increase in the number of converts, an organizational structure was put in place leading to the formation of the 'Presbytery' a supra-local body comprising representatives - pastors, elders, evangelists - of the local congregation, coming together to resolve policy, administrative and theological issues. In 1867, the first Presbytery was held at Sohra. By 1895, the number of Presbyteries had risen to seven. The formation of the Presbytery saw the birth of a new bureaucratic structure in the church, with clearly defined functions and powers akin to those in the government, and also the emergence of an indigenous Christian leadership - development that was to have important implications on late twentieth century Christianity.

Another significant development was the mission's engagement with medical works. The dearth of scientific knowledge about health and hygiene exposed the people to all kinds of diseases, some of

which assumed epidemic proportion. To tackle the situation, in 1879, the Welsh Presbyterian Mission started a dispensary at Mawphlang where the sick were provided free medical treatment. This marked the beginning of the Church's illustrious career in medical service and training. It also marked the beginning of the breakdown of people's belief in the efficacy of the traditional system of healing. Since the notion of illness and health was traditionally linked to the supernatural, the entry of the missionary in the domain of healing had important implications not only on the continuity of the system but also on the knowledge upon which it was based. Today, even as traditional healers were becoming a rarity, religious-run medical institutions have not only shown a steady increase but also remained one of the most respected in the region.

The arrival of the Roman Catholic Mission was to further deepen the spread of Christianity in the Khasi and Jaintia society. Although the original intention of the Catholic Mission was to send its missionaries to Tibet, problems of access through China and intermittent delays in the execution of the plan through alternate route in Assam forced the Mission to limit its work to communities in Assam. (But so obsessed were they with the China Mission that their presence left little impact on Assam). It was only in 1889, when the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam, Bhutan and Manipur was created that work among the indigenous people began. The first missionaries appointed to the Khasi Hills were the Salvatorians from the Society of the Divine Saviour, a young German Order. In 1890, a team of four German priests - Father Otto Hoffenmuller, Father Angelus Minzlcher, Brother Joseph Bache and Brother Marianus - arrived to set up their station in Shillong, the new government headquarter from 1864. Tragically for the mission, Father Hoffenmuller and Brother Marianus died the same year they arrived within a few days of each other. The following year, another team of monks along with a group of nuns led by Sister Xavaria came to take on the work left by the departed priests (Khonglah, 1971, 154-155[24]; see also Becker, 1980, 5-27, 156-224[25]; Downs, 1992, op cit, 91-92).

By the time the Catholic missionaries entered the field, the Presbyterian Church had not only won a sizable number of converts

but also established a strong organizational base. To succeed in their mission, the Catholic Mission had to look for new strategies and new pastures untouched by the former. Finding that the schools established by the Presbyterian Mission were limited to the elementary and primary levels with only a sprinkling of high and middle schools, the Catholics put their energy on higher education. While they set up base in Shillong, they fanned out into the countryside. Starting with Laitkynsew, their work soon spread to Sohra, Lamin, Raliang, Jowai and other interior parts of the Khasi and Jaintia hills. However, the outbreak of the First World War converted the German priests into 'enemies' of the British Empire, which forced them to quit the Khasi hills. But this did not mean the end of the mission. The works initiated by the German priests were carried forward by new teams of workers who came in batches from Ireland and Italy in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Khonglah, op cit; Becker, op cit).

Though they were late entrants on the scene, within a short span of time the Catholics, led by the Salesians of St. John Bosco, were able to come up with a number of institutions in the educational and medical fields, besides a sizable following. While the quick success cannot be disassociated from the ready groundwork laid by the Presbyterian, the uniqueness of their institution contributed in no small measure to it. Characterized as it were by a highly authoritarian and regimented ecclesiastical structure, communal living, and celibacy as a mandatory requirement for entry into the order, these made the Catholic Church an ideal institution for evangelical work. By insisting on celibacy and monastic living, the missionaries were not only freed from family encumbrances, it also ensured the Mission of a permanent team of workers and sustained source of income. Today, the Catholic Mission boasts of a long chain of churches, parishes, schools, colleges, seminaries, orphanages and old-age homes, a large hospital, in addition to heading some of the largest non-governmental organizations in the region.

The twentieth century saw the mushrooming growth of Christian denominations in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Apart from other foreign-based missions such as the Anglican Church, the Seventh

Day Adventist, Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witness and Ceylon Pentecostal a number of local/indigenous denominations like the Unitarian Church, Church of God, Church of Jesus Christ, Christ National Church, etc. came into existence. While some of the latter have links with foreign missions others are self-sustaning institutions.

II

LUSHAI HILLS

As the Catholic Mission was consolidating its position in the Khasi and Jaintia hills, the Presbyterian Church was looking for new pastures in the adjoining hills. Work was already in progress in Sylhet and Cachar plains but these were primarily among the Hindus and Muslim communities where conversion was a slow and laborious process.

With the integration of the Lushai hills (present-day Mizoram) to British India (in 1891) and the prospect of advancing peace,[26] the Mission cast its eyes on the Lushais as a fertile field for conversion. An appeal to the home board was made, and a favourable response received. After obtaining the necessary permission from the Government in India, the General Assembly unanimously adopted the Lushai hills as its mission field. Unfortunately for the mission, the first missionary appointed to the Lushai, William Williams, who was then serving at the Khasi mission station in Mawphlang, died of typhoid before he could take up the new assignment. That was 1892, and Williams was then thirty-three years old (Morris, op cit. 80).

Williams' untimely death and the Mission's delay in finding a replacement left the Lushai field open for other Missions to claim. During this time, two missionaries J.H. Lorraine and F.W. Savidge of the Aborigines Mission (popularly referred as Arthington Mission)[27], a private society in England whose mission was to take the gospel to the 'aborigines' in distant lands, sought the Government's permission to work among the Lushais. On receipt of the permission, they opened their base in Aizawl. With the active support of the officials, who saw the missionaries as important allies

in the pacification of the Lushais, Lorraine and Savidge applied themselves to the task of mastering the Lushai language not only to communicate but also to translate the Bible into the native tongue, besides attending to education and health needs of the people. Before long, the two missionaries were able to come up with the book of Acts and two gospels of the New Testament in the Lushai language, besides a Lushai Grammar and Dictionary. But before the impact of their work could be felt in the spiritual realm, their stay was terminated. The missionaries' engagement with literary and welfare activities did not find favour with their sponsor, whose main concern was the harvesting of souls and not with the native's intellectual and material development[28] (ibid; Lal Dena, 1988, 43-44).

The departure of Lorraine and Savidge did not mean that the Lushais could get back to their old ways. Neither the missionaries from across the seas nor their tribal brethren in adjoining Khasi hills allowed them to do that. Thus, on the last day of August 1897, D.E. Jones of the Welsh Mission, accompanied by Rai Bhajur Jyrwa a Khasi evangelist, arrived in the Lushai hills to take up the stupendous task of winning the Lushais to Christ.

It may not be impertinent to note that the initial work of the mission in Lushai hills was greatly facilitated by the dedication of the native converts from the Khasi hills. Rai Bhajur, the Khasi evangelist who accompanied Jones, not only gave up a prestigious post of Inspector of Schools but also his home and people to work for the gospel among the Lushais. Another was Sahon Roy, whose work as a contractor brought him to Lushai hills, spared no effort in lending his might for the 'noble' cause (Morris op cit), an act which illustrates the receptivity and commitment of the tribal converts to Christianity.

This was not only true of the Khasi but equally, if not more, of the Lushais. Within two years, the Church was able to get its first converts Khuma and Khara, who were baptized by Jones in June 1899. At the end of 1904, a Church had been formed, with 32 communicants, and a total membership of 57. But what contributed to what may be defined as the 'mass conversion movement' was the spirit of the Revival, which originated in Wales, and swept the Khasi

hills in 1906 converting hundreds of people to the Church. The same year, the wind of the Revival was carried into the Lushai hills, beginning with Aizawl and then fanned out into the countryside. Unable to comprehend the meaning of this phenomenon, and to restrain the increasing number of people who flocked to the church, families and chiefs began to persecute the Christians – preachers were beaten up, young adherents forced to take intoxicating drinks and enquirers fined by the chiefs. The Revival wave however proved too powerful for the repressive measures to work. Morris notes, by the end of 1911, Christianity had spread to 80 villages with 1,800 converts (ibid, 81-82).

With the bifurcation of Lushai hills into two districts of North Lushai Hills and South Lushai Hills, a new mission - the Baptist Missionary Society - entered Lushai hills, which took over evangelical work in the south, curtailing the jurisdiction of the Welsh Mission to the north. New development was also taking place in the Arthington Mission, following which Lorraine and Savidge returned to Lushai hills under the aegies of the Baptist Mission.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the phenomenal growth of Christianity among the Lushais stood unparalleled. Today, Mizoram not only has a very high percentage of Christians but also ranks second in literacy rate among states in the country. While staunchly adhering to the tenets of Christianity and strict observance of the Sabbath with all the biblical rigours of prayer, gospel reading and self-denial, they are noted for their reformist zeal and active role in the indigenization of the Church, integrating indigenous elements that were regarded as pagan by the western missionary into their order of worship, a step that marks the growing independence of the Indian church from its parent Mission.

III

NAGA HILLS

For the tribes of the Naga Hills and Manipur, contact with Christianity came through the agency of the American Baptist Mission. Their work among the tribes, however, was preceded by

failed attempts to establish a mission in northern Burma and China. Like the Catholic Mission, mentioned earlier, the original destination of the American Baptist was not the indigenous communities in Assam but the people beyond its eastern border – the Karen and Shan tribes in upper Burma and China. Their intention was to use Assam as a strategic outpost in their passage to the east. However, resistance put up by the Frontier tribes foiled their advance.

It was in the course of this failed mission to the East that the American Baptist Mission under Miles Bronson, made its first contact with the Nagas[29]. The Nagas' open rebellion against the colonial government (and the Ahoms before them), inter-village feuds and customary practice of head hunting, had made them a painful thorn for the administration. The missionary's interest in them could not have come at a more appropriate time. Notwithstanding the policy of religious neutrality and non-interference officially subscribed by the Government, the administrators in Assam lent full support to Bronson[30]. The mission, however, did not last long, after a year's stay at Namsang village (1840-41) Branson left, and the work discontinued. But while it lasted, Mackenzie notes, 'it was very successful, as many chiefs of the eastern tribes sent their sons to him for instruction'. Mackenzie attributes the closure of the Namsang mission to Bronson's ill health, which forced him to leave (Mackenzie, 2001, 92[31]). But Lal Dena has another story to tell. According to the latter, the Namsang mission came to naught because Branson succumbed to his colleagues' ruling that regarded the Brahmaputra Valley as the 'land of Cananites flowing with honey and milk' because of its fairly stable political condition and better facilities, implicitly a more favourable field for evangelization than the turbulent tribal country (1998, 24; see also Downs, 1992, 70).

Thirty years down the line, the Mission was to reverse its opinion. The poor balance sheet of the years spent amongst the Sanskritised Assamese made it plain to the missionaries that if their mission to Christianize the Indian colony was to succeed, the target had to be the 'animists' in the hills and not the Hinduised communities in the plains. Humbled by this new understanding, the American

Baptist Mission re-established their contact with the Nagas, this time round with the Ao Nagas and the man in the lead was E.W. Clark.

For some years, Clark carried out his evangelical work among the Nagas from Sibsagar. Permission sought from the government to set up a station in an Ao village had not been assented to as the Naga territory was then treated as 'unadministered area' (Lal Dena, op cit, 26). Four years later (1876), against wiser counsel and with no guarantee of protection from the government on his safety[32], Clark moved into the hills to permanently reside and work among the Aos. Amidst opposition from the people who suspected him to be a government agent, Clark managed to attract a small group of believers in the village of Deka Haimong (Eaton, 1984, 8)[33]. However, the *modus operandi* he employed, akin to the ones used by the Welsh missionaries among the Khasi, interfered with the rhythm and routine of Naga life, which was based on communal lines. Eaton observes that this not only undermined the village economy but also its ritual and political unity. Though the village council was divided on the course of action to be taken, the assault on their social and religious life brought about by the new codes of conduct increased the hostility to Christianity (ibid).

To circumvent the opposition, Clark gathered his small flock of believers to set up a new settlement at Molung where he opened a school, in which besides introducing the pupils to the rudiments of education he taught the people to give up their old ways of life that centred on feasts, festivals and feuds, and adopt instead a life based on the tenets of the Bible. Insulated from the wider society, the experiment worked and Molung grew to become a model Christian village. As news of the village spread new followers came from neighbouring villages that Clark had to enlist the services of Assamese evangelists till reinforcements came from the Mission.

By the end of the nineteenth century, two more American Baptist missionaries arrived and new centres opened in the Naga hills - Kohima in1878 and Impur in 1894 (ibid). Downs however cites 1880 as the year of establishment of the Kohima centre; he also mentions the opening of a third centre, in 1885, at Wokha among

the Lotha Nagas (Downs, op cit, 82).

Like the Mission compounds of the Welsh Presbyterians in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Baptist mission centres served as little islands where the believers not only found refuge from persecution but also practised a life that had little in common with the world around. Limitation of space does not permit me to describe in detail the activities of the missionaries, suffice it to say that the introduction of schools and the new ideas they propagated about God, spirits, science and geography, among a host of others, and the associated lifestyle changes had strong appeal to the hitherto isolated and animistic Nagas.

The arrival of Christianity also brought a softening in the Nagas' stand towards the colonial administration. With the advent of Christianity, the dreaded Naga raids on the British-controlled territories in the plains and internal blood feuds showed signs of decline

The last major offensive against the British occurred in 1878 in Kohima at the heart of the Angami territory, in which a Political Officer Mr. Damant and some of his escorts were killed. The Angamis held on to Kohima for eleven days, depriving the garrison of food and water, and were finally subdued by a force of 2,000 troops supplied by the Raja of Manipur to Col. (later Sir) James Johnstone. Writing on the event in 1905, Gait notes:

> Since that day steady progress has been made in the establishment of peace and good order, and in the quiet submission of the Nagas to British rule, blood feuds and head hunting now survive only in the memory of the older generation which is rapidly passing away, and all disputes that cannot be settled by them are brought before the local officers for adjudication' (Gait, 1997, 368)[34].

Interestingly, Gait maintained an ambiguous silence on what led to the 'peace' and 'quiet submission' of the Nagas. Given that military action had been a regular method employed by the British against acts of rebellion carried out by the Nagas and other cognate groups in the region, it could not have been the fear of the gun alone that brought about the 'good order'. It is surely no coincidence that missionary activity in Kohima and other parts of the Naga hills intensified from1878 onwards, the year of the offensive.

What this suggests is that what tamed the fiery spirit of the Nagas was not the might of the British army and/or its Manipuri ally, but the American missionary with his Bible and the blackboard.

IV

HILL AREAS OF MANIPUR

The process outlined in the preceding section was limited to the tribes in the Naga Hills. For the Nagas of Manipur, Christianity had yet to come into their midst. Opposition by the Raja of Manipur to Christianity, under whose jurisdiction the British administration placed the hill areas, meant that no missionary was allowed to enter their territory. It was only at the intervention of Maxwell, the Political Agent that a missionary was permitted to work in the Manipur hills. The Valley, however, was to remain strictly out of bounds to the missionary. The reason being, the Raja of Manipur who adopted Vaishnavaite Hinduism in the eighteenth century imposed it as a state religion with the decree that all subjects must subscribe to it. Though Manipur was under a regent king at the time permission for missionary activity was sought, the colonial administration did not want to take any chances of antagonizing the Hinduised Meities. Therefore, it stringently applied the official doctrine of 'religious neutrality' and 'non-interference' in the Valley.

The tribes in the hills were, however, another story. As animists, they were deemed to be 'people without religion' so the doctrine of 'neutrality' could be dispensed with. With this clever and convenient interpretation of the official doctrine, the tribes of Manipur received their first missionary.

The socio-political context of Manipur and the circumstances under which Christianity entered the area did not make the task of the missionary an easy one. In the first place, William Pettigrew, the first missionary in Manipur, had not only to dispel the people's suspicion that he was a government agent, but also to keep on the right side of the state, for the survival of his mission depended upon the goodwill of the administration.

Secondly, Pettigrew's denominational affiliation almost cost him

his job. Pettigrew had come to India under the aegis of the Arthington Mission, whose dictum was that a missionary should not only be a celibate, he should also not stay in the field for long but move on to another site once the seed was sown (see also footnote 28 in this paper) This rule made any long-term plan to stay in Manipur an impossibility for Pettigrew.

As a way out, Pettigrew joined the American Baptist Mission, though as per the record he was allowed to represent the Mission only after proving his religious credentials and that his views were not contrary to those subscribed by it (Lal Dena, op cit, 35-36).

With the litmus test under his belt, in 1896 Pettigrew began his evangelical work in Ukhrul among the Tangkhul Nagas. An appointment as honorary inspector of schools in the state he received from the government facilitated his work. Though official decree barred him from carrying out evangelical activities in the Valley inhabited by the Meities, he was free to preach and teach to all the tribes in the hills. Despite the jurisdictional restriction and the limitation on manpower (only one missionary at a time was allowed in Manipur till the end of the First World War), Pettigrew was able to gain a dedicated group of believers. Among his first converts were Tangkhul and Kuki students who studied in his school at Ukhrul (ibid).

Like the Welsh in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and his new[35] colleagues in the Naga Hills, Pettigrew used the school/s not only to impart secular but also Biblical teachings. The success of this two-pronged strategy was evident from the increased demand for schools among the various tribes and the high receptivity of the students to the tenets of Christianity, many of who took to teaching in village schools, or became evangelists and church leaders.

The spread of Christianity, however, came at heavy costs to the tribes. The new religious teachings and way of life led to serious conflict with their tradition and customary practices. The rigid moral codes and demands put by the school and the church on time-use sharply weakened traditional institutions like the *morung* (bachelor's dormitory). Besides, the emphasis on peace and brotherhood preached by the church while it contributed to the gradual disappearance of

such inhumane practices as head hunting and blood war, it eroded the authority of the village political and legal institutions for whom annexing the territory of the enemy or avenging the death of a kin were important functions. Furthermore, the setting up of model Christian villages away from the non-converts was not only responsible for the death of many of the feasts, festivals and rites that made up the social and cultural fabric of the society, but also considerably undermined village cohesion and solidarity.

Interestingly, despite the many ills associated with Christianity, to the converts the benefits (real and perceived) far outweigh the debit side, a fact borne out by its large-scale spread in the hills.

V

GARO HILLS

In the Garo Hills, the spread of Christianity took a slightly different turn from the Nagas and the Khasi where missionaries catalysed the process. Among the Garos, Christianity was less the handiwork of the missionary but a result of the selfless efforts of two native youths who defied ostracism from family and kin to share the message of the gospel with the people. This however is not to suggest that no attempts were made by the colonialists to Christianise the Garos.

It may be recalled that way back in the 1820s David Scott, Agent to the Governor General[36] had strongly advocated the invitation of missionaries to live amongst and civilise the Garos. Though this plan did not materialise, Scott was relentless in his efforts to educate and civilise what were, in his view, 'savage' tribes. To achieve his objective, in 1827, he opened a school at Singimari (a Garo village presently in Bangladesh) on the Garo-Rangpur road, for the education of Garo boys. However, the resignation of its first headmaster and the death of the second forced Scott to close down the school (Barooah, op cit, 187). Undaunted by the failure, in 1829 he convinced the Serampore Mission to open a school at Gauhati (referred to earlier) in which he personally placed under its charge a group of Khasi and Garo students. But like the first, this too collapsed (ibid; Downs, op cit, 35-36).

While Scott, with all the political and material resources available at his disposal, failed to bring the Garos to Christianity, two students from a government school at Goalpara succeeded in this with little else in their hands but conviction. The students Omed and Ramkhe came into contact with Christianity through their interactions with Bengali and Assamese Christians at Gauhati during their school days.

Convinced of the value of Christianity, in 1863, the two sought baptism and decided to take its message to the people back home. Opposition from kin forced them to leave their village and set up residence in the foothills where they opened a school. The school graduated to a church, and with it the first Christian village (Rajasimla) among the Garos was established. As more enquirers from neighbouring areas joined the village, Omed invited Bronson, the American Baptist missionary, to administer baptism. According to Downs (op cit), when Bronson visited the village for the first time in 1867, he found thirty-six persons ready for baptism.

For a mission that started off on sheer conviction with little resources, the growth of Christianity in the Garo Hills was remarkable indeed. From a few families, within a year the number of communicant membership rose to 150, and within seven years to 400, a phenomenal growth indeed as compared to the poor progress made earlier by the Mission in the Hinduised plains. Initially, the American missionaries with whom the two pioneers forged their alliance operated from the mission centre at Goalpara. After Garo Hills was made into a district with Tura as the administrative headquarter, the base for missionary activities in the Garo hills was shifted from Goalpara to Tura (ibid, 78-79).

Garo Hills presents a classic example of the fundamental role indigenous workers played in evangelization. Needless to say, it was the selfless effort of the two native converts that was instrumental in planting the seed of Christianity in the Garo society. As the account shows, the Mission stepped into the scene only after a sizable Christian community had developed. The leadership role played by the natives was however not unique to the Garos but prevalent among the other tribes as well.

In fact, Christianity in the North East would not have succeeded the way it did were it not for the band of indigenous workers whose familiarity with the field – language, culture, customs and geography – helped to communicate the message to the masses in an idiom that was intelligible to them. As pointed earlier in the context of the Khasi Hills, success of Christianity was due in large part to the enthusiastic support it received from the native converts, particularly in the initial years of the church. Having imbibed the fervour of the gospel from the missionaries, they tirelessly worked to transmit the same to virgin minds in the process, transformed evangelization from a missionary-centred activity into an indigenous enterprise.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The account documented in the preceding pages strongly demonstrates that Christianity made its entry into the tribal societies of the North East following the opening of the hills and their integration with the colonial empire. In many instancles, its entry was facilitated by the officials in the field as a means to subjugate and pacify the tribes, who were a source of constant irritation to the government by their stubborn refusal to acknowledge British supremacy and frequent raids and incursions into the plains where colonial interest lay. Although the official policy was one of 'religious neutrality' and 'non-interference', this was rarely followed in the context of tribes.

The departure from the norm was propelled as much by the tribes' open defiance of the imperial power, as by the colonial conception that tribes were a primitive and barbaric people devoid of the finer nuances of a civilised society, hence they needed to be tamed. The presence of the missionaries, with their zeal for education, became a handy tool to subdue and civilise the tribes.

All this suggests the complicity of the colonial state in the missionary's evangelical mission. State aid to education and the close link that existed between schools and conversion further lends weight to this viewpoint. It would, however, be hasty to conclude that Christianity was an extension of the colonial project.

In the first place, the missionaries and the administrator were

never bound by a common agenda. The administrator's primary objective was to bring the tribal territories within the political control of the Empire and transform tribes into loyal subjects of the sovereign. Whereas, the goal of the missionary was to win the native's soul to Christendom that is unbounded by political and geographical boundaries.

This different location made the relation between the mission and the administration an uneasy and complex one. While devout officers like David Scott and William Jenkins made fervent attempts to promote the cause of evangelization, they never received the backing of the Government. In fact, emphasizing government's commitment to religious neutrality in 1831, the Court of Directors in London condemned in no uncertain terms Scott's attempts to use government fund to support his education project to the Garos which carries implicit evangelization agenda (Barpujari, 1970, 70-89; Cf. Downs, 1992, 36-37)[37]. Needless to say, Scott's evangelical attempts miserably failed. At the other end of the spectrum were officers like A.J.M. Mills and J.H. Hutton, who were highly critical of the missionaries.

There were also several instances in which the administration clashed with the missionaries over the latter's attempts to interfere with the customs and practices of the people, even as they facilitated their entry into the field. A case in point was Lushai hills where the officials vigorously opposed the missionaries' call for the abolition of slavery and for rallying around the chief against the government's disarmament policy (for details see Lal Dena, op cit, 70-77). Further, the government's control over the mission's jurisdiction and education had always been a source of strong undercurrents of conflict between the missionaries and the officials. Interestingly, notwithstanding the tension, the two managed to evolve a working relationship, with each drawing from and reinforcing the other, which accounts for the success of both, in the North East in particular and the colonies in general.

Today, both the colonial administrators and the missionaries have departed, and have left behind a monumental legacy in their respective realms. If the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution is a silent reminder

of the policy of 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded' areas initiated by the colonial government for the administration of the tribal areas in the region, the large Christian community with their churches, ecclesiastical structures, comparatively well-equipped educational and medical institutions are a living testimony that Christianity has found a permanent home in India's North East. What is significant is that despite its alien origin, many of the tribes in the region seemed to have made Christianity their very own. This is reflected in the high percentage of Christians in some states, with Nagaland taking the lead where, as per 2001 census, Christians constitute 90 per cent of the state population. Mizoram comes next at 87 per cent, and Meghalaya is in the third spot at 70.3 per cent. In Manipur, where Christianity is largely restricted to the tribal areas in the hills, Christians constitute 34 per cent[38] of the population. If we compare these figures with the recorded statistic of 2.3 per cent Christians at the national level, the difference is enormous indeed.

What explains the wide success of Christianity in the North East? The answer to this question assumes significance because, contrary to popular perception, the colonial state never directly supported evangelical activity for fear that it would antagonize the dominant groups and hurt its economic and political interest (recall Manipur experience). The only aid given was towards education, partly to pacify rebellious tribes and partly to minimize state expenditure, especially in areas that yielded little revenue.

Secondly, Christianity itself was a divided house spawning different denominations –Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, Anglican, Adventists, and Independents - often with diverse ideological and theological positions. The division was intensified by the government's 'licensing policy', which imposed a limit on the jurisdiction of missions, resulting in intense conflict and competition between them over jurisdictional rights.

Besides, the missions were also highly deficient in human and material resources. Apart from the Catholic Church, which had a relatively large workforce, the other missions never had more than two or three missionaries at a time in the field, which explains why they had to rely heavily on the converts. While this has significantly

contributed to the wide acceptance of Christianity, it has also helped tribes to preserve their culture. Despite the sharp onslaught of Christianity on the indigenous belief system and the abolition of practices like headhunting and the bachelor's dormitory, critical aspects of their culture, such as family, marriage, village institutions, dress and diet have remained more or less intact.

This also accounts for the distinctiveness of Christianity in the North East where in each society the churches bear the marker of the tribe. This ethnicisation of the church has enabled people from the region to question the identification of Christianity with the West, claiming that Christianity in the North East is as much an indigenous venture as it is of the mission. Not only is the faith popularized by local agents, native evangelists and teachers, the kind of Christianity practised in the North East today reveals intricate interweaving of indigenous elements with Christianity.

EXPLAINING CONVERSION

The critical question that arises is what gave rise to conversion among the tribes of North East India? The large-scale adoption of Christianity among the aboriginal groups and depressed classes has been a matter of serious concern among the dominant groups in India, and numerous theories have been propounded to explain the phenomenon.

These theories looked at conversion from different perspectives, ranging from the imperialist theory that saw Christianity as the colonial design to undermine India's unity subscribed by Mahatma Gandhi (1957, 160-164)[39] to the materialist theory supported by Srinivas (1962)[40], which asserts that the backward classes adopted Christianity for material gains doled out by 'crafty' missionaries. In Srinivas's conception, conversion is basically a product of coercion and has nothing to do with the personal conviction or choice of the believer (ibid, 107).[41]

At the other end of the spectrum is the official view of the Church, which looks at conversion primarily as a quest for salvation.

To be sure, there are elements of truth in both these perspectives. The correct picture, however, lies somewhere in between. While it

is true that Christianity is a product of colonialism as Gandhi and Srinivas asserted, to credit conversion solely to the actions of the colonialists is to undermine the agency of the converts, who often used it to bolster their position socially, politically, and/or spiritually.

This, however, does not imply that all conversions are motivated by anticipation of benefits. Much has also been said about the role of education in facilitating conversion to Christianity. But it does not explain the conversion of a large number of people who had nothing to gain from it, and may in fact have to lose everything by changing their religion. How does one to account for this kind of conversion? Besides, to attribute all conversions to material gain tends to confuse the cause of conversion to Christianity with its effects. Several scholars however seem to have fallen into this trap. For instance, Downs tries to explain conversion in the North East in terms of the acculturative function played by Christianity against the onslaught of the forces of modernization and change brought by colonial rule. In his words:

> People require an effective world-view or ideology. When a traditional one is undermined they must adopt a new one or become completely dehumanized. This was the function of Christianity among many of the hill tribes of North-East India; an acculturative function that helped the tribes retain their distinct identities (even though modified from the traditional) in the new circumstances. It provided them with an ideology that helped them maintain their identity in the face of the serious erosion of their traditional, religious, social and political institutions (Downs, 1977, 164)[42].

While there is a lot of truth in Downs' view on the functions of Christianity and the process that contributed to its spread in the North East, his explanation, however, appears to be one-sided. To reduce conversion to a single denominator – preservation of identity – not only misses out on the other dimensions of the phenomenon but it also gives a highly political colour to conversion.

In the first place, identity assertion among the tribes of the North East took place much after Christianity had established itself in the region. Secondly, evidence suggests that, in general, conversion among the North Eastern tribes lacked the political intent that guided conversion among other disadvantaged groups, such as Dalits

who converted to Buddhism and Islam in large numbers to escape the stigma of untouchability and other forms of repression perpetrated by the Hindu caste system.

It also needs to be recognized that while Christianity has helped tribes to preserve their distinctive identity, this was incidental to and not a causal factor of conversion. In fact, more than Christianity the prime source of tribal identity in the region has been ethnicity, which relies on shared origin, language and territory than upon religious identity[43].

It also needs to be noted that conversion is not a simple fact that could be explained by a single factor only, but is a complex phenomenon that has social, psychological and spiritual dimensions and therefore could be brought on by a variety of factors, singly or in combination with each other. This means that to understand conversion we have to look at the phenomenon both from the point of view of the convert(s) and the empirical context within which it occurred.

For a start, it would be prudent to appreciate the fact that conversion is basically a religious phenomenon. While there is no doubt that the motives for conversion can be as varied as the individuals involved in it, yet we cannot ignore the fact that conversion, in the conventional sense of the term, involves a change of belief and acceptance of the new tenets by the convert. To ignore this aspect can lead to serious distortions to our understanding of the process.

This is precisely the drawback of the genre of studies developed on the lines of Mahatma Gandhi's and Srinivas's theories. Their preoccupation with the political diverts attention from the more subjective aspects of conversion, which in the ultimate analysis make them oblivious of the real manner in which colonialism was implicated in the process.

The earliest cases of conversion in the region suggest that the converts were drawn to Christianity by the sheer force of the preacher's argument and the promise it held for their parched souls, rather than for social and political advantages. Indeed, when Christianity came on the scene there was hardly any advantage that

the converts could avail of. On the contrary, many of the early converts had to face severe opposition from their family and community for forsaking their traditional religion. Stories of U Borsing Syiem, U Kinesing Syiem, Ka Painkiri and her son U Shemuel Syiem who were important members of the Khasi royal family show how they renounced their political rights for the sake of their faith. Stories such as these strongly challenge the materialist theory of conversion. Similarly, the first converts among the Garos, Omed and Ramkhe had to bear the brunt of their families and community's anger for adopting Christianity. The same is true with the Lushais.

A close look at the pattern of conversion in late nineteenth century Khasi society reveals that in many instances illness and suffering provided the impulse for conversion. Many conversions took place after the individual/s concerned experienced serious bouts of illness and/or personal tragedy. Indeed, some of the important dates in the history of the Khasi church were associated with epidemics and natural calamities. The years 1879 and 1897, in particular, stood out as red-letter years when the membership of the church shot up in the aftermath of the calamities that overtook the people.

There was a three-fold increase in church membership following the cholera epidemic of 1879. Likewise, there was a dramatic increase in the number of converts following a severe earthquake in June 1897. The earthquake, which was the severest in the history of the people, wreaked severe havoc with over fifteen hundred persons killed - 600 in Cherrapunji and its environs alone - and hundreds of thousands worth of property destroyed besides causing long-term injury to the economy and the natural environment. In the War (pronounced 'Waar') area in South Khasi Hills, a region reputed for its prosperous economy, many orchards and agricultural farms were destroyed.

The economic hardship and diseases that followed the event shook people's faith in their religion and drove them into the fold of Christianity. It is reported that in that year alone, 2,373 persons were affiliated to the numerous churches of the Presbyterian Church

(Jones, op cit, 79).

The process outlined above demonstrates that people change their religion as a crisis management mechanism in a situation where they perceived that the old order lacks the capacity to meet their needs. Such a situation usually occurs in times of personal, social and/or natural crisis when the individual finds himself/herself overwhelmed by uncertainties and powerlessness.

This process throws valuable light on the social function of religion and its capacity to provide a sense of peace and security to the troubled heart in times of distress. It also reveals the close link between religious change and changes in the wider environment, especially those of drastic nature where existing conditions are significantly altered, leaving people with a sense of loss of direction and meaning. The anxiety that such a situation creates produces in some sense the precondition for religious change.

Viewed thus, the spread of Christianity in nineteenth and early twentieth century North East India can be understood as the people's response to the overwhelming changes that overtook the land in the wake of colonial rule. British annexation of the hills not only undermined the autonomy of the people but also effectively contributed to the erosion of the traditional beliefs and values. We may recall that directly after its entry in the hills, colonialism unleashed one of the most violent conflicts ever experienced in the society. The warfare (Anglo-Khasi War, 1827-32) between the Khasi states and the British administration that rocked the land in the second quarter of the nineteenth century exacted a heavy toll on the Khasi not only in terms of men and material but also in terms of the social and religious life of the people. Immersed as they were in the protracted conflict, most of the customary rites and ceremonies, which traditionally provided the emotional and psychological support to individuals and families, suffered severe neglect.

At the same time, the conflict opened up the territory to the ravages of the army. Cherrapunji itself was converted into a military base housing the Sylhet Light Infantry, a company of Indian sepoys under the command of British officers. The sudden presence of such a large number of outsiders with their alien life-styles and value system unsettled the equilibrium of this hitherto insulated and

relatively stable village society.

What further touched the core of the society was the sharp erosion in the traditional power structure organized around the chief and the village council. Although outwardly the traditional institutions appeared to be relatively intact, yet the extension of the colonial system of administration, with their western concept of law and authority, reduced them to mere appendages of the colonial government.

To the people, this was a direct attack on their culture and tradition. In the pre-colonial tribal society, the chief and the village council represented the essence of tribal polity and culture, constituting as it were the pivot around which not only the administration but also the religious life of the community revolved.

However, the subjugation of the authority of the chief and the traditional administrative machinery to the colonial government took away the sanctity of his position and loosened his control over the people.

Besides, the manipulative politics of Pax Britanica further sharpened the strains in the tribal polity, leading to an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty on the micro plane. These developments not only weakened the social fabric of the society but also made it conducive for conversion to take place. This onslaught on the social and political institutions weakened the hold of tradition and posed a serious challenge to age-old practices.

Besides, the new demand for land and land-use pattern that emerged with the establishment of administrative centres and residential quarters by the colonial government threw traditional beliefs on spirits and sacred groves out of gear.[44] Further, the introduction of modern modes of communication like roads, and institutions such as the market and money economy, accelerated the pace of change and set new standards for the people.

In addition to the changes outlined above which occurred as a direct consequence of the policy of expansion and consolidation of colonialism, the Raj also brought with it elements of material culture which, though innocuous in appearance, had profound effect on the indigenous belief system.

One of the most notable of these was the introduction of the modern system of healing where simple pills could cure many life-threatening diseases, remedy of which would normally cost a family dozens of eggs and fowls in the appeasement of offending spirits. In most of the tribal communities in the North East, illness and suffering are traditionally regarded as the act of spirits or a consequence of some wrong committed by the afflicted, hence solution to the problem could be obtained only through divination and sacrifices. However, exposure to modern medicines and methods of healing put ideas about diseases and cure in a new perspective.

This is not to suggest that the tribes were alien to medicines. On the contrary, the tribes in the region have always had a rich tradition of herbal cures and therapies, but these constituted part of a system in which divination and sacrifice reigned supreme.

The domination of the new ideas on health and cures has pushed both indigenous medicines and their practitioners into the social and spatial periphery. Since piacular rituals and intercession rites formed a major part of tribal religion, this development took away much of its significance.

The spread of Christianity in the region cannot be disassociated from the cumulative effect of these changes. However, as Eaton (op cit) observed in the context of the Nagas, conversion cannot be explained as a consequence of social change alone but is influenced to a large extent by the nature of interaction between religious cosmology and their social relations.

Going a little further than Eaton, I would say that what aided conversion among the Northeastern tribes was the important role that religion played in their day-to-day life. Contrary to the views advanced by the colonisers that tribes were a people without religion, the tribes under consideration were/are an intensely God-fearing people for whom religion enters into every sphere of their life. Hence, the missionary teachings with their Biblical stories of sins and condemnation fell on fertile soil.

Further, the close similarity between the basic tenets of Christianity and critical aspects of tribal cosmology made it easy for the people to identify with it. For instance, the Khasi conception of

God (U Blei), their ideas of the after-world and of sin and punishment bear close resemblance with corresponding elements in Christianity, as do the stories of the fall of man from the grace of God. The Old Testament stories of the Creation and of Adam and Eve's disobedience of God's commandment in the Garden of Eden, resulting in their banishment from the garden, are matched among the Khasi by Ki Khanatang U Hynniewtrep and U Lum Sohpetbneng where man's sins severed the ladder that connected them to God.

There is also a close similarity between the symbolism of the cock, the Khasi sacred bird, which pledged its life before God to save the Khasi race from darkness and Jesus as the fulfillment of the archetypal sacrificial lamb who gave up his life on the cross to release humankind from the bondage of sin.

These similarities in the cognitive realm provided the Khasi with the conceptual categories that helped them relate to Christianity. This explains why the early Khasi, after the initial hesitation, took to Christianity in large numbers, many in the face of severe opposition from their families.

As documented earlier, some even willingly renounced their social and political positions for their new faith. It would not be far wrong to speculate that the cognitive similarity between the two systems of belief may have worked in the minds of the early converts as they savoured the Bible with Thomas Jones and William Lewis in the Mission Compound at Sohra. It also explains why the converts were quick to take up the mantle of evangelization with single-minded devotion to spread the message of the gospel among their brethren across the hills. Given that there was little by way of material advantage to be gained from conversion, the logical explanation for it can lie only in the cognitive realm.

The large-scale conversion among the Khasi, Naga and Lushais as a result of the religious fervour generated by the Revival in the first half of the twentieth century, its persistence in Mizoram and its recent recurrence (2006-07) in Meghalaya also raise pertinent questions about the mono-causality of conversion. The process suggests that there is more to conversion than can be explained in economic and political terms alone.

The process outlined above contrasts sharply with the conversion

movement among the tribes of Chotanagpur, for whom protection of their dwindling land rights was an important motivating factor. In the words of Bara:

> The Chotanagpur tribal, emotionally more concerned with the protection of their agrarian rights than the fate of their souls, found the religion of Christ for several reasons attractive. It gave them privileged access to the missionaries, who were white men in close contact with the European authorities. The tribals saw them as a valuable channel of influence (Bara, 2007, 205)[45].

INSIGHTS FROM THE PRESENT

Although we are not privy to the real motives of the early converts, it is possible to gain an insight into these by looking at what Christianity meant to the believers in the present times. A close scrutiny of the process in present-day Khasi society reveals that for many Khasis, Christianity with its symbol of the Cross and deliverance had great appeal not only because of its promise of salvation but also for liberating them from the fear of spirits and the burdensome rituals for their appeasement.

Christianity's stress on love, truth and humility also augurs well with the religious ethic and philosophy of the Khasis whose own religion is based on the principles of righteousness (*kamai ia ka hok*) and equal love and respect to God and fellow human beings (*tip briew tip blei*).

Further, the strong monotheistic orientation of Khasi religion made Christianity, with its equally strong conception of God as the powerful yet benevolent Being and its simple emphasis on faith and prayer, highly attractive to many.

Implicit in the above discussion is the assertion that the spread of Christianity among the tribes in the North East cannot be attributed solely to the proselytizing activities of the missionaries. While the missionary's arrival provided the people with an alternative system of belief, the prime mover for conversion came from the wide disruptions in the social and political realm brought in by colonial rule and facilitated by the close similarity between critical aspects of tribal cosmology and Christianity. Paradoxical though it may seem, given the cognitive similarity between the two systems of

belief, the sharp onslaught that colonialism perpetrated on the society made conversion to Christianity a natural alternative for many.

In some respects the spread of Christianity in the North East bore a striking similarity to the conversion movement that took place in the early history of the Christian Church. Christianity entered the world outside Palestine at a time when the Roman Empire had gone far in breaking down local cultures and ethnic barriers and united a vast area into one political unit. This breakdown of traditional groups and traditional values created a need for a larger world-view and a new kind of community in the face of urbanization and its continuing anomie (O'Dea, op cit, 61)[46]. Although conversion among the Northeastern tribes cannot be strictly defined as a quest for a larger world-view, as was in the old Roman colonies and early Europe, the need for a spiritual/psychological anchor in the face of the widespread uncertainties around them contributed to it.

Christianity, with its close cognitive similarity to tribal religion and its powerful promise that the hardships and sufferings that one experience in this world would be suitably compensated for in the next world, gave the much needed solace to the people amidst the wide disruptions around them.

Conversion among tribes has to be seen as a complex interaction between the social (this includes the political) and religious forces. While the early wave of conversion was undoubtedly a reaction to the anomie created by colonialism and the socio-cultural changes it entailed, it would not have been possible had it not been for the deep religious sensitivity of the tribes. For all their apparent worldliness and love for games and warfare, tribal cosmologies reveal that tribes are highly dependent upon the supernatural for their material and spiritual well-being, both in this world and thereafter. The wide repertoire of rituals and festivals in each tribe attests to this.

Hence, the breakdown in the old system of belief made Christianity with its cult of worship, prayer and ceremonies a logical choice for many. Moreover, Christianity with its strong organizational base represented by the Church gave a sense of stability in the face of the

rampant changes that took place in the society.

Interviews of a cross-section of people in the Khasi Hills who joined the Church in recent years reveal that the reasons for conversion have not changed very much.

To the query 'what made you convert to Christianity?' apart from the standard reply, such as 'because I wanted to be saved' and 'because Christianity represents the best that one looks for in religion', prominent among the answers I received were:

'Because we have been *left orphans* and cannot abide by the old religion anymore, it is better to adopt Christianity' (*'namar ba ngi lah sah khynnah, bad ngim lah shuh ban bat ia ka niam rim, ka bha ba ngi long Kristan noh'*).

'Since most of my relatives have joined Christianity, I cannot be left alone, otherwise who will perform my funerary rites when I depart from this world?' (*Ba ki kur ki jait ki lah long Kristan lut te kumno ngan shu sah marwei, mano ban pyndep ia ka niam ka rukom ynda nga khlad na kane ka pyrthei?)*

Such answers and others in the same line suggest that for many Khasis and their cognates in the region, Christianity continues to be a way out of the spiritual and cultural impasse created by the twin forces of modernization and urbanization.

The reference to their infantile state 'we have been left orphans' (*ba ngi la sah khynnah*) is an apparent allusion to their estrangement from their kith and kin, the network of people that provided an important source of emotional and strategic support to the individual. Modernization not only played havoc with tradition but has also led to migration of the population from the rural into the urban areas and loosening of the traditional support structure represented by the wider family and the clan.

Many individuals, torn from the protective arm of the latter, found in the Church a new source of security and social network. In the process, the Church not only assumed the role of a surrogate family but also inculcated in the convert(s) new values and ideologies that distinguished them from the non-converts. Looking at the process of conversion in the North East, I am reminded of Victor Turner's words that religious movement occurs in periods of history

analogous to liminal periods of ritual (1969, 111)[47].

CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to look at the spread of Christianity in India's North East by focussing in particular at the process of conversion that took place in the early years of the mission/s. While the paper does not deny that Christianity was/is an aspect of colonialism, it moves away from the idea that conversion to Christianity by the socially marginalised was basically the result of the imperial agenda of rule with little agency on the parts of the converts. Nor does it agree with the evangelical view that conversion means 'turning' or 'returning' to God, triggered by spiritual reawakening and repentance for sins. Using insights drawn from the 'theory of practice' derived from the works of Anthony Giddens (1976, 1984)[48] and Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990)[49], which aver that social life is neither the sole outcome of structures (laws, norms, institutions) nor by how individuals think, feel or desire to do, but by the interplay between the two, the paper turns the lens of analysis away from the agents of conversion to the converts and the social milieu within which they are located. The result is illuminating, exposing us not only to the variety of factors that come into play in effecting conversion but also how the people in turn use and mould the faith, which seeks to change them, to suit their own cultural understanding and ethos, in the process transforming Christianity from an alien belief into a localised and vernaularised variant.

NOTES

1. The historical materials for this paper have been drawn largely from secondary sources, most liberally from Morris, Downs and Lal Dena, with some inputs from my own research on the Khasi. The interpretation of the data and the opinion expressed are, however, mine, for which I assume full responsibility for errors or inconsistencies, if any. I am grateful to all the authors whose works I have borrowed.
2. Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in North-East India with particular reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills*, 1894-1947, Shillong, Vedrame Institute, 1988; Fredrick S Downs, *History of Christianity in India: North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*,

Vol. 5 (2), Bangalore, The Church History association of India, 1992; Rowena Robinson, *Christians of India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2003.

3. Today, in India, tribes are classified as 'Scheduled Tribes', an administrative category drawn by a Presidential Order. Though stereo-type ideas persist about the association between tribes and primitiveness, the list includes communities that are far removed from the colonial concept of 'tribe' based on essentialist attributes.
4. A.J.M. Mill, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, 1853, 120. Reprinted with an introduction and annotated by J.B. Bhattacharjee, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong, date not mentioned
5. Bhangya Bhukya, 'The Mapping of the Adivasi Social: Colonial Anthropology and Adivasis', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, (39), September 27, 2008, pp 103-109.
6. Today, Khasi Hills falls in the state of Meghalaya and covers three districts: East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills and Ri Bhoi district.
7. John Hughes Morris, *The Story of our Foreign Mission: Presbyterian Church of Wales*, Liverpool, Hugh Evans & Sons Ltd, 1930 (First published 1910. Reprinted in India by North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 1996)
8. For a critique of the concept 'cultural imperialism', see Andrew Porter, 'Cultural Imperialism and Christian Missionary Enterprise', 1780-1914, in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 25, No. 3. September 1997, pp. 367-91.
9. Fredrick S. Downs, 'Early Christian Contacts with North East India' in *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. 5 (1), 1971, pp. 69-70.
10. According to local history, Pandua was originally a Khasi territory under the jurisdiction of the Mawsmai and Cherra Kingdoms. The territory was however expropriated from the Khasi by the East India Company, which irked by the Syiem (Raja) of Jaintia's refusal to allow company boats to ply on the Sumna river without paying a tariff to the Raja, imposed a Regulation in 1790 that restricted the Khasis from occupying Pandua and ceded all lands owned by them to the Bengalis (see also David Ludden, 2003). The final loss of Pandua to the Khasis occurred in 1947 when the country was partitioned into India and Pakistan. The failure of Rev. J.J.M. Nichols Roy, the then Khasi leader and the Union of the Chiefs of Khasi States or Federation of Khasi States, to convince the British of the Khasis's claim over the territory led the 'Radcliffe Boundary Commission' to award Pandua to Pakistan.
11. Nongbri Iaithrang, *The Death and Travails of Thomas Jones*, Unpublished Monograph, Not dated
12. Nirode K. Barooah, *David Scott in North East India, 1802-1831: A Study of British Imperialism*, New Delhi, MunshiramManoharlal, 1970.
13. In Khasi, Cherrapunji is known as 'Sohra'.
14. P.R.G. Mathur, *Khasi of Meghalaya*, Delhi, Cosmo publications, 1979.
15. Angell Jones, *Ka History Jong Ka Balang*, Shillong, Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian

Synod, 1966.

16. At the same time as Jacob Tomlin put in his request for a mission to the Khasi, a missionary from Bombay, Dr. John Wilson had pressed for Gujarat as a more promising destination for the foreign mission, but an offer of fare concession to Calcutta made by an unidentified benefactor went in favour of the Khasi hills (Cf. Downs, op cit, 72).
17. Before his departure to the Khasi hills, Thomas Jones was caught in the crossfire of sectarian rivalry within the London Missionary Society (LMS) of which the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists was a part. Theological differences between the Calvinistic Methodists and its other two partners (Anglicans and Independents) in the LMS, and the ostensible discrimination against the Methodists in the recruitment of persons for service in the foreign missions, resulted in acrimonious relations among the partners, which eventually led to the breakaway of the Calvinists from the LMS and its rebirth under a new nomenclature, the 'Welsh Calvinistic Methodists Foreign Missionary Society' (Morris, op cit, 10-13). It was under the auspices of this newly-formed Society that Thomas Jones' mission to the Khasi hills was undertaken. Because of its theological and organizational closeness to the Presbyterian Churches of Britain, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists later adopted the name Welsh Presbyterian Church. In this paper, I have used the two names interchangeably.
18. The skills he gave the Khasi included: the art of burning lime with coal, basic carpentry, improved methods of agriculture and the scientific method of distilling liqour in place of fermented rice beer. Interestingly, the official history of the Presbyterian Church in the Khasi and Jaintia hills, authored by Angell Jones and published in Khasi in 1966, is silent on the last. While the book lists a number of skills that Thomas Jones taught the people during his short stay in the hills, it makes no mention of distillation. Apparently, the Church's opposition to the consumption of rice beer/liquor, which it sees not only as an element of the 'pagan' (Khasi) religion but also a source of evil, may have led the church historian to omit this information from his account.
19. Dr. Owen Richards barely stayed a year and suddenly left for home due to what Morris calls, an 'early recall' from the home mission (1930, 27). Jenkins, however, pointed out that refusal to rectify an indiscretion committed on the teenage daughter of an army officer and his habit for 'undesirable company' at the military base, led to the premature departure (Jenkins, 1995, 205)
20. A popular myth claims that the Khasis had a script of their own but lost it during a flood. The story goes that when the level of the water rose, the survivor held the script between his teeth as he swam to safety. Unfortunately, in the struggle against the swirling water, he accidently swallowed the script and lost it forewver.
21. Despite Thomas Jones' monumental role in laying the foundation of Christianity in the Khasi and Jaintia hills, in October 1847, his connection with the mission was terminated because of his involvement in economic activities considered improper for a missionary. Precipitating the stern action,

was Jones' so-called 'injudicious' second marriage (Morris, op cit 28, for details see Jenkins, 1995, 238-241)

22. I.M. Simon, 'High-Water Marks in the Work of the Presbyterian Church', in *Sesquicentennial Jubilee Souvenir of The Presbyterian Church in Khasi & Jaintia Hills*, Shillong, 1991, pp.1-9; Nigel Jenkins, *Gwalia in Khasia*, Llandysul, Dyfed, Gomer, 1995.
23. Kinesing Syiem of Khadsawphra was another notable member of the Khasi royal family who embraced Christianity (in 1878), much to the consternation of his *Myntris* who rose up against him. This prompted the British Government to institute an inquiry by the then Deputy Commissioner to ascertain the will of the people. Despite his conversion, Kinesing had many supporters even among those who were not in favour of his new religious affiliation. This made Kinesing the first Christian head of a Khasi state. A good administrator and a powerful preacher, Kinesing was soon elected as a deacon of the Mairang church. In 1903, he was conferred the title of a *Rajah* by the British Government in recognition of his able administration. Among the royal females who took to Christianity, mention may be made of Ka Painkiri Syiem, a maternal niece of Klursing, the powerful Syiem of Khyrim. Painkiri's conversion invited strong reprisals from members of the royal family, that she was forced to leave her home and sought refuge in the mission school. Her family viewed her conversion a blatant violation of the royal code, not only because of her gender, but also because she was in the direct line of succession to the office of ka Syiem Sad, the spiritual head and custodian of the state cult. Painkiri was soon followed in her faith by her younger sister Rupamai and, subsequently, by their mother. It is reported that Painkiri's son, Shemuel Syiem was a powerful preacher and he died at the pulpit of the Laban Presbyterian Church, Shillong, while preaching to the congregation (personal communication, Hesting Manik Syiem, Elder, Nongkrem Presbyterian church and a grandson of Rupamai, see also Angell Jones op cit).
24. J. Khonglah *Ki Khanatang jong ka Balang Kristan*, Shillong, Don Bosco Press, 1971
25. C Becker, *History of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India, (1890-1915)*, Shillong, Vendrame Missiological Institute, 1980, translated and edited from the German edition (1923) by G. Stadler & S. Karotemperel.
26. Like the Khasis and the Nagas, the Lushais have been known for the terror they created on the population in the plains. They were considered by the Europeans, then residing in Bengal, as the fiercest and most barbarous of the hill tribes within the Province. The object of the raids were said to be to obtain human skulls to adorn the graves of their ancestors. As a punitive measure, the British conducted several expeditions into their territory in the hills.
27. By the time the two missionaries came to the Lushai hills, the Arthington Mission had already had a stint in Manipur where its missionary William

Pettigrew, who later joined the American Baptist Mission worked first in a school at Imphal and later among the Tangkhul Nagas and Kukis in the hills.

28. The Arthington Mission, which sponsored the two missionaries, was unique in some ways in that the missionary should not only be a celibate but he should also not stay in the field for long but move on to another site once the seed was sown.
29. This first contact was made with the Nagas of Namsang village in the Tirap division of the North-East Frontier Agency (present day Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh).
30. The following quotation from Mackenzie brings out the support Bronson received from the administration even while it denied official sanction to evangelization, 'Government thought it improper to give direct aids to mission, even when working among *savage* tribes…but it agreed to pass for a year any small sum shown in the Agent's contingent bill and not exceeding a monthly maximum of Rs. 100, for objects of practical utility connected with the improvement of the Naga country, and spent with a view of leading its population into habits of industry' (Mackenzie, 2001, 92).
31. Alexander Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India,* Reprinted 2001, Photographically reproduced from 1884 edition entitled, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal.*
32. This contrasts sharply with the treatment given to Branson, who received the tacit support of the administration. Although Branson's project failed, as pointed earlier, it was not for want of official support but because of the Mission's miscalculation (see Lal Dena, op cit, 24)
33. Richard M. Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21, 1, 1984, pp. 1-44.
34. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, Thacker Spink & Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1967 (first published, 1905)
35. I have used the word 'new' here because Pettigrew originally belonged to another Mission and only recently joined the American Baptist Mission.
36. Prior to his appointment as the Agent to the Governor General on the North-East Frontier of Bengal on 15th November 1823, a post he held till his death at Cherrapunji in August 1831, David Scott had served as Commissioner of the Northeast parts of Rangpur and Commissioner of Cooch Behar.
37. H.K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes: North East Frontier*, 1822-42, Vol. I, Gauhati, 1970.
38. This figure excludes the population of Mao Maram, Paomate and Purul Sub-divisions of Senapati district (tribal concentrated areas), where census enumeration could not be carried out (official statement of 2001 Census).
39. M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions: Their Place in India*, edited by Bharatan Kumarappa,, Ahmedabad Navajivan Publishing House,1957 (First published, 1941)
40. M.N. Srinivas , *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Bombay, Asia

Publishing House, 1962

41. These theories have large supporters in the Indian academia especially among anthropologists and historians (see for instance K.S. Singh, 1985, 14-17, Saurabh Dube, 1993; Arun Shourie, 1997).
42. Fredrick S. Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hill Tribes of North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in G.A. Oddie, *Religion in South Asia, Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1977, pp.154-172.
43. Though ethnicity as a process is really a phenomenon of the post-Independence period, ethnic symbols like language, religion and culture have been an important source of tribal identity.
44. This fact finds vivid expression in the defiant act of Rev. John Roberts shortly after his arrival at Shella in 1871. Faced with the difficulty of obtaining a house plot within the village, the missionary went on to construct his house in the precincts of the sacred grove where the villagers feared to venture as such acts were/are believed to incur the wrath of spirits that reside therein (Jones, op cit, 50).
45. Joseph Bara, 'Colonialism, Christianity and the Tribes of Chotanagpur in East India, 1845-1890' in *South Asian Journal of South Asian Studies*, n.s., Vol. 30, No. 2, August 2007, pp. 195-222.
66. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion*, New Delhi, Prentice Hall India Pvt. Ltd. 1969
47. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure*, New York, Aldine, 1969.
48. Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*, London, Hutchinson, 1976; _____, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984
49. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; _____, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990

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PART II

Stories in Verse

Retracing the Streams of Time: North East and Beyond

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1

Streams of time

As I try to retrace the stream of time
Flashes of memories come passing by
Like fire flies in the dark
They come and go before my eyes

Some are pleasant memories of my past
Rousing strong yearnings for a life long passed
Some are lessons that I failed to read
Exposing my frailty as a human being
Some are of recent vintage
Lending vibrancy to the collage

Like the rivers of the earth
Formed by the union of little streams that pass their way
So is the story of my life
A bundle of experiences of different hues and shades
Gathered at different times and places

Just as the river cannot pick and choose
Which of the streams she should carry
So can't I
And neither must I

What would my life be without the little streams
That gave me my sustenance and vigour
Take away these streams, I'll be like a dried-up riverbed
Sans life and vitality!

So, with the current and its myriad hues I will flow
Till my life empties out into the sea of eternity . . .

To them all, I owe what I am

2.

Nostalgia

Laitumkhrah, prized locality of Shillong
How my heart bleeds for you
Your once quiet streets and flower bedecked gardens
Are now but a distant memory

As I traverse down the familiar road
From Fire Brigade Ground to Don Bosco Square
I long for the cool breeze that once wafted my way
On my daily walks to college

There was then no heavy traffic to interrupt my thought
No clogged drains or garbage dump
No shops or merchandise spilling out onto the footpath
No beggars or vagabonds to waylay the pedestrian

Now, all that is in the past
A mere slice of our fast fading history
With the onset of modernity and the craze for development
Our public and private spaces alike
Are fast taken up by commerce and machines

No longer do we see carefree faces
Leisurely walking their children to school
But a harried lot audibly cursing the motorists
As they ferry their brood across the busy street
Into overcrowded taxis

Is this the price we pay for progress?
For an ideal world in which prosperity and comfort is assured for all,
Where is that Promised Land?
Why is it eluding us?
Does anyone have the answer?

3.

An ode to the forest

Ko law kyntang, ko law kynjah[1]
Priceless heritage bequeathed by our forefathers
In your cool bosom I long to lie
With *u Ryngkew* and *u Basa*[2]
And the myriad floral and faunal life
That thrives in your kind embrace
Away from the humdrum of the city
And the greed and malice bred by modernity

For centuries you've been a source of strength and vitality
An emblem of our culture and tradition
Where humans and nature are bound in peaceful co-existence
Where harmony reigned
And vested interest an alien name

Hush! I can hear ominous sounds advancing from the distance
With wings of steel and speed of a hurricane
Threatening to devour everything that comes its way

Faced with such a formidable foe,
O sacred woods, how long will you be able to hold your own?

Driven by prospects of quick riches and power
And mindless commitment to growth at whatever costs
I fear, the heritage we hold dear
Will soon be reduced to a mere resource

1. *Law kyntang* in the Khasi language literally means sacred forest, a patch of thick verdant trees believed to be the abode of spirits and deities and is debarred for human use.
   Law kynjah silent or quiet forest; *Ko* is an exclamation like 'O'
2. *U Ryngkew, u Basa* are the protective deities of the wild

What will happen to the
Trees and shrubs
Spirits and ghosts
Insects and birds
Reptiles and beasts
That harbour in your bounty!

What will become of the hard-earned honour to our land?
One of the bio-diversity hotspots in the world
Don't we care for the irreparable loss?
Is it worth to fritter away our heritage for some quick gain
That spells doom to the earth and humanity?

4.

Sohphoh Nongkhlaw[1]

Sohphoh Nongkhlaw, humble kin of the princely apple
O'er choppy seas and treacherous path
You journeyed to our land
From the Isles of Britain
With its illustrious history of kings and queens
Into distant Khasi Hills
With thatched roofs and overgrown gardens

Were you shocked to find
Behind the weeds and dense jungles
Live a people with a rich legacy
Subjected to none but their own authority
That David your master threatened to destroy?

1. Sohphoh Nongkhlaw is a variety of pear found in the Khasi Hills. According to one version, the fruit was brought by David Scott, Agent to the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam, into Nongkhlaw a Khasi native state ruled by the Khasi patriot Tirot Singh, whom Scott befriended and enlisted for help to obtain the permission of the Khasi Chiefs to construct a road through the Khasi Hills that would link Assam in the North with the Surma Valley (now in Bangladesh) in the South. While the permission was granted, the project could not be completed due to a petty rumour spread by some Indian sepoys that created serious misgivings about the intention of the British in the minds of the Khasi. This was followed by a long drawn out war (1829-1833) between the Khasi Chiefs and the East India Company, which ended in the annexation of the Khasi states and subjugation of the Chiefs to the power of the British Empire. The topography and cool climate of Nongkhlaw suited the English pear so well that in no time it became known by the name of its host country [Sohphoh] Nongkhlaw. Today, the fruit grows profusely all over the Khasi Hills and is an important source of income for poor households.

How did you survive the years of 'revolt'?
When warrior chiefs and their nobles
Took up arms against the might of the Empire
When British soldiers with their deadly weapons
Overran the land, ruthlessly burning homes and fields
To teach the 'errant' tribesmen a lesson in compliance

Did your master invite you to his table?
To celebrate his victory o'er the mountain chiefs
Were you a part of the Viceroy's banquet?
To commemorate the promulgation of the Sanad
And subjugation of the 'enemy'

Were you sad when the 'glorious' days of the Raj came to an end?
Leaving you alone in an alien land
Sans fine linen and glittering cutlery
Condemned to a life of penury
To be plucked for trade
And un-ceremonially carted
In smoked-stained baskets and gunny bags

I salute thee humble pear!
For your resilience and indomitable spirit
Despite the pangs of separation
And loss of your royal connection
You've not only graciously adapted to the alien environment
As they say in Hindustani,
Succeeded to become our very own *desi*[2] fruit!

2. *Desi* is Hindustani/Hindi word for indigenous.

5.

Trucks on GS Road[1]

Like giant ants in a Hollywood flick
They puff and grunt as they make their way up the GS Road
Weighed down by heavy merchandise
Tightly packed in dust covered bodies
They crawl at a snail's pace
Emitting toxic fumes and gasses
On hapless motorists!

As the sun recedes in the sky
And darkness descends o'er the surrounding hills
The roadside is transformed
Into a parking-lot-cum-dormitory
As travel-worn drivers and their handymen
Pull out their makeshift beds
To snatch a few winks under the starry sky

Before the dawn breaks
Perforce, they must hit the road again
To beat the clock at the city gate before it closes for the day
To allow the city folks to go about their work
Unhindered by the convoy of smokey trucks.

But not all drivers and gatekeepers live by the rules
An exchange of notes is all it takes
To loosen the palm and unbolt the gate
And a little *hafta*[2] to the traffic policeman
To ensure smooth passage to the errant cars

1. G.S. Road or Guwahati - Shillong Road is 'National Highway - 44' that connects the state of Assam in the plains and Meghalaya in the hills.
2. *Hafta* - Hindi word for bribe paid on a weekly basis.

While petty officials indulge in their illegal perks
Life for the ordinary citizen has turned into a nightmare
With hundreds of vehicles clogging the city roads
Curses and tempers, pollution and missed appointments
Have become the order of the day!

6.

Enchanting Nongkrem

Enchanting Nongkrem[1],
Home of my forebears
Often do I dream of you
In your lap, learnt I my first words
And the distinction between right and wrong

Though shorn of the grandeur that money can buy
You stand tall in your simplicity
With caves and boulders as your birthmark
And the sacred groves of Mawlynnong[2] as your guard

A village in which different faiths co-exist with ease
Where personal worth is measured not by Degrees
Or balance in the Pass Book
But by the readiness to reach out to others in distress

As I travel to distant lands,
Ravaged by cleavages of caste, class and power
And cutthroat competitions for petty gains
I long for the solace of your world
Where *tip-kur, tip-kha*[3] is the norm
Tip-briew, tip-blei[4] the guiding spirit

I wish the world imbibe the value of these precepts
Handed down the generations by our forefathers
Who unlettered and unschooled
Skillfully designed some of the finest lessons on human relations.

1. Nongkrem is the former headquarter of the Khyrim native state and lies about 14 kilometres away from the city of Shillong, capital of the state of Meghalaya. Literally, Nongkrem means village of boulders due to the large presence of boulders and caves in its vicinity.
2. Mawlynnong is a sacred forest that forms part of Nongkrem village
3. *Tip-kur, tip-kha,* Khasi to know one's clan and one's affines (in other words, to know one's kith and kin),
4. *Tip-briew*, to know man; *tip-Blei*, to know God (that is, one must respect both fellow human beings and God). These two are the cardinal principles of Khasi ethos and values.

7.

Enigmatic North East

They call you the land of 'Seven Sisters'
Where the great Himalayan range stretch out its feet
To catch the warmth of the easterly sun
Where the mighty Brahmaputra lazily flows
Before it meets the Surma below

Yet, many have questioned your identity
Some claim you do not exist:
A mere myth
A colonial construct
Of disparate vales and hills

Peopled by 'savage tribes'
With little history or traces of civilization
Who fought and hunted each other's head
To throw a 'feast' and prove their 'merit'

Your ambiguity has kindled the imagination of men no end
Spewing up innumerable theories about your origin
Like little pebbles from a stone crusher's machine
Some plot imaginary lines on paper charts
Cutting and dividing your anatomy into little parts
To put their stamp of authority o'er you

With all the doubts that cloud your identity
And the scars that riddle your body
To me you're as real as the air I breathe
And the ground beneath my feet
A place called home
And the mainspring of my strength and vitality

A land where hundreds of communities live and breed
With their rich culture and tradition

Unperturbed by the debates they evoke
In institutions of learning
And corridors of power in 'far-away' Delhi
Or the harsh realities of their existence
Silently get on with their lives
Lending their synergy to the mosaic called India!

8.

A tribute to Irom Sharmila[1]

Iconic Sharmila!
Fair maiden of Manipur
Who would have guessed that under your petite frame
Lurks an indomitable spirit stronger than steel!

What powered you?
To singlehandedly take on the might of the State
With its garrison of 'order-driven' men
And the deadly AFSPA machine!

In a land famed for mighty kings
And the collective strength of the *Meira Paibis*[2]
It's ironical that in your quest for peace for your people
None dared to accompany you

1. Irom Sharmila is a human rights activist from the state of Manipur who has been on fast for over ten years against the Indian Government's imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) in the state as a counter-insurgency measure. The Act empowers the Army to shoot and kill on mere suspicion that a person is engaged in anti national activities and conferred with immunity from legal prosecution, provisions which have resulted in serious human rights violations. To maintain public order, Sharmila has been arrested several times and put on forced feeding through a nasal tube.
2. In Manipuri, *Meira* means torch, *Paibis* mean women; *MeiraPaibis* are Meitei women's organization/s that initially started off as groups of mothers with a torch in hand patrolling the streets and keeping night vigil to prevent drunkenness among men and to protect their sons and husbands from being harassed/arrested by security forces. It has now grown into a widespread movement with the organisations taking up issues relating to human rights violations, territorial integrity, development, etc.

How do you manage to resist the temptation of the table?
For ten long years
Denying your body its basic sustenance
And the sheer pleasure of an ordinary existence
What drives you to sacrifice everything for a cause?

How do you cope with the tube permanently attached to your nose?
How do you deal with your handlers who keep you caged
Like an animal in the zoo
How do you maintain your sanity and faith in democracy?

I take my hat off to you, brave sister!
For your unflagging spirit and the courage you show
In a world torn by violence and self-seeking politics
You're our only beacon of hope
To jolt the sleeping conscience of our nation
And save the North East and India from destruction!

9.

Cry of the 'Field'

They come from far and wide
Men, women, scholars all
From world class universities
Armed with proposals, questionnaires, and schedules
To map my life and tap the grains of knowledge buried in my soul

Overnight, I'm transformed from a vibrant being with an identity of my own
Into an inert object to be dissected, vivisected, and classified
Like specimens in a laboratory
By the hallowed tribe of knowledge seekers
Who care little for my true self
Only for what they could get out of me

To them I am just a field
To be dug up, furrowed, and extracted of my essence
A mere lump of data
To be analyzed, theorized and frozen into a text
A subject matter for discourse
In far-away classrooms and conference halls

As learned scholars unsheathe their verbal skills
To sharpen their argument on my dis-embodied self
My heart cringes in agony
At what they've made of me:
A thing without a soul!

10.

Empty promises

They come with tall promises to ask for our votes
In exchange for which
They'll give us schools, roads, electricity and hospitals
From the MLA & MP-LAD[1] schemes

Gullible villagers that we were
Took the politician at his word
Unmindful of our time and energy
Unreservedly canvassed for his victory

With the winning ticket in his pocket
And the ministerial berth in his custody
We celebrated with joy
That our 'rep' has made it to the portals of the ministry

Five years down the line
The roads remain unpaved
The schools unmade
The electricity lines unconnected
The hospitals an empty dream

With the notification of the next election, issued by the EC[2]
Once again they come breezing through the constituency
Another basket of false promises to make
To win the support of the electorate

1. MLA & MP-LAD (Member of Legislative Assembly/ Member of Parliament Local Area Development) scheme is a special fund provided by the State to legislators and parliamentarians for the development of their constituency
2. EC - Election Commission

This is the quality of our politics
And the credibility of our leadership
For many of whom election is but a means
To pursue private dreams and fatten their coffers

Is this the stuff that 'corruption' is made of?
And the root of 'under-development' of our villages
That economists talk about?
I wonder!

11.

Independence Day boycott

Come Fifteenth August
The day the country celebrates its Independence
I'm filled with apprehension
At the consequence

As the Prime Minister solemnly unfurls the Tri-colour
At the ramparts of the Red Fort
And delivers his Independence Day speech to the nation
I'm mortified at my loss of freedom

With cars and people off the road
And threat of reprisals hanging like Damocle's sword
O'er the head of those who dare to violate the curfew
I'm amazed at our gullibility and readiness to be held ransom
By an ideology of hate

Where are our *u kni, u kong*[1]*?*
With their stock of wisdom and gentle counsel
To teach the errant generation the values of non-violence
And that freedom cannot be won by threats and coercion
But through talks and negotiations!

1. *U kni, u kong* - Khasi for mother's brother or elders in the family

12.

Under-aged tea girls

With a kettle in one hand
A bucket of cups in the other
You make your way from room to room
Serving tea and snacks

To learned professors and students
Immersed in intense debate
On complex theoretical problems
Far removed from the world around

I often wonder whether you ever asked
What separates you from the people you served?
Should the roles be reversed
Would you be as blasé as they are?
To the accidence of birth!

You put me to shame, little girl
The double standards of my profession
While we deliver long lectures and write grand papers
On the evils of child labour

We shut our eyes to our own complicity
In your vulnerability
And blindly accept the service you render as our birthright!

13.

Of women and lines

Ours they say is a matrilineal society
A land where women reign
Where mothers have exclusive rights over children
And daughters over property!

Beware sister dear not to exceed your brief
Control and authority aren't yours to keep
For our elders ruled:
'Girls should not concern themselves with complex matters
Or sit at *dorbars*[1]
These things are best left to the boys
Who're born to rule and administer'!

Of course, girls are assets in their own right
Without whom the line will cease
And the legacy passes into another branch
A prospect that many mothers dread!

To continue the line is a woman's primary function
To remain within the fold her bounded duty
These are the *raison d'etre* of her existence
And a source of wealth and happiness to the family!

Never mind, if she thinks otherwise
Or nurtures different ambitions to realize
Her personal aspirations are of little importance
Compared to her divinely–ordained function!

Submit to the demands of tradition a woman must
If she's to retain her 'rightful' place and the lineage saved
Perpetuating the line must take precedence o'er careers and ambition
This is the sacred edict of matrilineality for its women!

1. *dorbar* - An Assembly of elders where important decisions are taken. *Dorbar* exists at different levels of the polity: village, raid (federation of villages) and *Hima* (state)

14.

The tragic love story of Ka Lieng Makaw[1]

Have you heard of Ka Lieng Makaw?
The tragic queen of Khasi lore,
Who jumped into her lover's burning pyre,
In quest of eternal love

Married to a king
Too involved with matters of state
To care for matters of the heart
Saw the queen alone, for months on end,
As her busy consort toured abroad

Braving bouts of loneliness,
Night after night, she paced the palace ground
Immersed in deep sentimental thought
Pining for the king

Till one night,
As the moon gently sheds its golden glow
Wafting in with the breeze
Softly, ever so softly, came sweet melodious music from afar
Setting her senses on fire

1. In Khasi, *Ka* is an article brfore the female gender and *Ko* is an exclamation like O. Lieng Makaw is the name of the queen in the popular Khasi myth '*U Manik Raitong*', on which the poem is based. The myth is about a kinless and penniless recluse nicknamed U Manik Raitong whose expertise on the flute so beguiled the queen, left behind in loneliness by a busy king to attend to matters of state abroad, that hiding her identity she forced her entry into his hut resulting in the birth of a son. On his return from the tour and discovery of the new born infant, the king convened a *dorbar* (assembly) to ascertain the paternity of the child. When proven that Manik Raitong was the father, he was sentenced to death. On his request, Manik was allowed to die by burning himself in public. On the appointed day, as Manik entered the pyre, the queen who was incarcerated in the palace rushed in to join her lover at the burning fire.

'Who can that be? Where can it come from?' She wondered
Like a moth drawn to the flame
Off she sped in the direction of the melody
Only to land at the doorstep of a decrepit hut

She couldn't believe her eyes
When through the gaping walls she spied
There, oblivious to the world
Sat Manik, the destitute, playing on his flute
Transformed from his usual ash-covered self
Into a resplendent handsome muse!

Smitten by the sight,
The besotted queen, throwing all cautions to the wind
And the codes of holy matrimony as well
That bound her to the king,
Forced her way in

As the world slept
And the moon sailed behind the clouds,
In Manik's run-down hut at the edge of the city
A new life took shape,
A legacy of love and creativity

Alas, the joyous moments were not to last
The king's return put an end to the romantic trysts
And death sentence passed on Manik's head
By the highest Assembly of the land
For daring to transgress on the possession of a 'sovereign'

As the world celebrates you as an 'icon of love'
Giving up your precious life for your heart!
I have a question of you, dear queen
That the lore hides from us!

What actually transpired between you and the king?
When your deed came to light
Did you put up a spirited fight?
To save the life of your paramour

Or, perhaps you had no say in the matter
A *persona non grata*!
Without voice and rights
And no place in the hallowed Assembly of elders!

Strangely, why is there no account of your side of the story?
Why is there no mention of your presence at your lover's trial?
Why is a party to the 'crime',
(Without whom there would have been no crime)
Not asked to testify?

Your exclusion from the trial
And denial of a chance to explain your act
Seems there's something amiss in the story!

15.

Darkness at noon

As I went about my daily tasks
Making innumerable plans for the future
Suddenly, a fierce storm broke from nowhere
Wiped out the sunlight from the sky
And threw all my plans out of gear

Immersed in the exacting task of making a living
I had little time to think of life's exigencies
Or the fickleness of human existence
I thought I could chart out my own destiny
By sheer hard work and perseverance

When the storm came striking at the very core of my existence
Realization dawned
How little control we have over our life
How little earthly success and positions count
When faced with the possibility that the end is near at hand!

As I went through the dark lonely days
Unsure what my tomorrow would be
What would happen to my family?
How would they fare without me?
My mind reached out to the power in the beyond
Unseen to the human eye,
O what a powerful and reassuring presence!

Reposing my fears in His mighty hands
Instantly, peace descended over me
The fight against the enemy became easier
Slowly, the sun came back in the sky!

16.

When my soul leaves

When my soul leaves
And life departs
Let there be no eulogy or fine words
To cover up my faults

Let there be no mourning or funeral feast
Just a simple adieu before I leave
Let not my final journey be any different
From my daily trips to work

Let there be no announcement or special gathering to mark my death
Where people talk in hushed tones
Lest my spirit overhears their conversation,
Let there be no elaborate preparations
To dispose of my remains

For what is death?
But a passage into the next phase of being
When the biological clock runs out its course:
The body returns to the elements
The soul to its celestial home!

So, let's not mar the event with misery
But graciously accept the inevitable when the time comes

17.

Bomb blast at Dhemaji[1]

It was to be a day of joy
To celebrate the country's independence from foreign rule,
A day when political parties put aside their differences
To come together as a nation

Defying the militants' boycott call
Mothers washed and spruced up their children
And saw them off to the parade ground
To take part in the drill and express their solidarity with the nation!

In seconds, the joyous celebration turned into mayhem
With bodies of men, women and children
Blown into pieces by a fanatic's bomb
Planted amidst the celebratory air and music
An instrument of death packed with arsenals of hate
And destructive ideology
Designed to kill and bring the nation to its knees!

That the target of the bomb included innocent children
Was lost on the predators
Who, fuelled by hatred and blind ambition,
Failed to see that freedom cannot be bought by violence
Or by robbing families of their children!

1. Dhemaji is a district in Assam where a bomb exploded during the 2004 Independence Day celebration. Apparently, the bomb was in retaliation for people's defiance against ULFA's call to boycott the celebration.

18.

A mother's pain

Can we measure the pain of a mother . . .
Who lost her only son to the bullet of the law-enforcing machine?
Created to provide peace and security
Transformed into an instrument of death
For the weak and the defenceless!

Like any other morning of the week
She was ready to leave for the field, he to college
When came the men in green fatigues
Pulled the youth into the jeep
And off they rode!

Before she could comprehend what happened
She was branded 'mother of a terrorist'
She ran from pillar to post to plead her son's innocence
But all in vain!

Days later, his bullet-ridden body lay by the wayside,
Bruised and mutilated,
With little resemblance to his once handsome face and intelligent forehead
Reduced to a mere statistic in the list:
'Terrorists killed in encounter with the para-military forces'!

Numbed with grief
No sound escaped her lips or tears rolled down her cheeks
Only the pain in her eyes betrayed the agony within
An agonizing pain for her shattered dreams
And her son's blighted reputation
And, for the impunity with which
Those who committed the dastardly crime got away with it!

19.

Deserted village

Not so long ago, your streets were vibrant with life,
As children merrily chatter on their way to school,
Mothers congregate at garden gates
Exchanging pleasantries with one another
And mundane gossips about christenings,
Engagements, and elopement
That called for an urgent meeting of elders
To put the errant couple back on line!

Today, you exude a deafening silence
With boarded windows and uncared gardens
The village council in animated suspension
Too unsafe to live next to the gun-toting regiment
Too meager their earnings
To meet the demands of the 'underground'
Left the village folks with little option
But to leave you in desolation
To seek refuge in alien lands!

But for squirrels scurrying between trees in the garden
Looking for fruits and nuts, not a soul is around,
Emptied of its inhabitants:
There is none to break the winter gloom,
None to welcome the home coming birds
And flowers of spring!

A once thriving village
With tingling sounds of hoes and sickles
Laughter and church bells
Is abandoned to its fate
Because the state, with all the machineries at its command
Cannot protect the life of its citizens
Caught between the cross-fires of the insurgents
And the counter-insurgency machines
A sad plight indeed, for our conflict ridden North East!

20.

Delhi's 'North East'

In the narrow lanes of Delhi's suburban neighbourhood
They create their little 'North East'
A home away from home,
Where the air reeks of a curious mix of bamboo shoots and *alu gobhi*[1]
Where *momo*[2] kiosks and *halwai*[3] shops
Vie with each other for customers
Where sharp-nosed 'Aryans' and high-cheeked 'Mongolians'
Share common stairways and corridors
Defying established norms of social interaction and commensality
Thrown into each other's way by sheer necessity!

In cramped quarters beaten down by the scorching summer heat
A far cry from the homes and fields they left behind
They live and slog
To realize their dreams
And carve out a niche for themselves
In the city's multicultural landscape
Braving bouts of homesickness and racial prejudice
Capricious landlords and overcharging shopkeepers
They bear it all!

Lest they forget their tradition
In the alien ways of the metropolis
They form their ethnic and religious associations
Where once a week, once a month
They come together
In a show of solidarity and friendship
Submerging internal differences of class, status and power
To rejuvenate their ties
And bring alive their communitarian spirit
Quietly deepening the multi hues of Delhi's cultural kaleidoscope!

1. *alu gobhi* - a popular vegetarian dish in North India made of cauliflower and potatoes
2. *momo* - dumpling made of white flour wrapping stuffed with meat or vegetables.
3. *halwai* - a class of people who make and sell Indian sweets.

21.

Multi-faceted Delhi

Enigmatic Delhi, city of many faces and many moods
You never cease to intrigue me!
With your stately buildings and tree-lined roads
Magnificent gardens and multiplexes
High-tech metro and T3 Airport
You're definitely a world-class city
Customized for the rich and the mighty
And the highbrow of society!

Yet, behind the splendour and sophistication
You harbour another civilization
Hidden in the narrow alleys of the walled city
And rundown tenements of the JJ colonies
Devoid of basic amenities or comforts
Live a populace barely able to make their ends meet
Tirelessly toiling in subhuman conditions
To keep you in good shape!

Lying between the two, is yet another world
Inhabited by the 'common man' of Laxman's satirical universe
And the media channel's famed '*aam admi*[1]'
A motley crowd, ranging from the lower middle class
To upwardly mobile professionals
With the class of *mahajans*[2] and *sarkari karamcharis*[3] thrown in between,
A vocal lot that often cries hoarse against mis-governance and corruption
But does not shy away from being part of the rot
If it could accelerate their climb to the higher rung of the ladder
Or ease their access
To the limited, and much sought after public services!

1. *aam admi* - Hindi equivalent of 'common man', a term widely used by the Indian media.
2. *mahajans* - India's traditional business class or community
3. *sarkari karamcharis* - Hindi for government employees

22.

India's under class

As I stopped at the crossing
Waiting for the lights to change
Swarmed by famished mothers
With naked children in their arms, begging for a rupee
I wondered, what happened to the 'trickle down' effect of our economy,
Promised by the experts in the Planning Commission

Six decades of planned development
And several makeovers later
Have failed to take development to the poor
While the middle class celebrates its new found affluence
Life for the poor has reached its lowest ebb in India's history

Where have we gone wrong? What explains this contradiction?
What happened to the socialist doctrine of 'inclusive growth'
And 'growth with equity' for all?
For a country that's produced some of the finest economists in the world
With one of them occupying the Prime Ministerial chair,
India's skewed development graph is baffling indeed!

Is this the price of the much-celebrated reforms of our economy?
Where the interest of the poor can be easily dispensed with
To favour those who can add to the state coffers
Or liberally donate to the electoral fund of politicians,
An economy of the rich, for the rich, and by the rich!

Is it any wonder that the poor takes to the street and beg?
Or use their malnourished babies
To prod the conscience of the rich at the gross injustice!

23.

Alone in the night

I saw you under the neon lights
In front of Ambience Mall
Standing alone and forlorn
Anxiously looking at the passing cars
As if waiting for someone,
To pick you up and take you home!

I looked at the time
My watch read 10:40 PM
No time for a girl to be out alone.
'Who is she?' I wondered
'Where has she come from'?
'Why isn't she with friends'?
There's safety in numbers, I thought

Then realization dawned
You're the same girl
I saw behind the *Lifestyle* counter
Serving customers at the Mall
But before I could walk up to speak
You hailed a passing auto and sped off into the night!

In the security of my car
I drove on and reached home
But sleep eluded me
Unable to forget the solitary figure on the road
And countless others in similar circumstances
Fending for themselves in the 'big bad world' of the city
As they go about their work

Recalling heated demands in TV talks
To provide working girls with [safe] male escorts
Left me grappling with the question
'Who's qualified to do the job?'
As the gravest danger women face
Comes from the male species!

24.

The security guard

In the stillness of the night
As the residents lie deep in slumber
In an alcove by the gate
A solitary figure sits awake

Fresh from the recruitment agency
That allotted him this duty
He's one of the hundreds of security guards
That man the gated colonies of Delhi

An amorphous group of men
Divided by caste, language and region
Pushed by poverty and landlessness from India's villages
They flock to the city, in search of economic security

As he took his rounds on the coal-tarred road
That crisscrossed the colony
Lined with cars of varying sizes and colours
Gleaming under halogen lamps
Installed to secure the life and property
Of the gated community

His thoughts flew to his wife and children
In the nearby *jhuggi jhompri*,[1]
Warding off pestering rodents and mosquitoes to get some sleep
And, to his aged parents in the village
Struggling to survive
On the tiny parcel of land
Mortgaged to the local *bania!*[2]

1. *Jhuggi jhompri* - Hindi for a colony/cluster of squatters, living in makeshift tents without any basic amenities whatsoever.
2. *bania* – Hindi for trader or businessman. Also used as a generic term for the Hindu trading caste/community.

25.

Daughters of North East

Another day, another newspaper headline
Screaming, '*North East girl raped in Delhi*'
Why do you daughters of Northeast
Attract the lust of men?
Is it because of your easy and carefree ways?
That men, reared in the dark alleys of patriarchy,
Can't bear to see the freedom you represent?

Or, is it because of your different looks,
With narrow eyes and high cheek bones
The cultural 'other' from the 'frontier' zone
Who dare to stake their claim on the city
And its innumerable resources
Meant for the *desi!*

Do our countrymen know?
Hidden behind the oriental looks and western attire
Are Mother India's long neglected daughters
Who like million others
Are consumed with a passion, dreams and aspirations
To acquire a degree and build a career
To make their family and India proud!

Do you predators know?
Many of the girls whose body you sullied
And dreams crushed
With your uncouth hands and hate-filled minds
Are the unsung soldiers of modern India
Who silently toil away in cramped offices,
Overcrowded city shops, and hospital wards
So that India attains its magical growth rate
And you, your comfort zone!

Delhi, why are you so heartless?
To allow your errant sons to prey on their own
Why are you so impotent?
To discipline the sluggish law-enforcing machine
For a country that prides itself
To be the largest democracy in the world
Where political parties solicit votes
In the name of national integration
Your indifference to your daughters from the Northeast
Is mind-boggling indeed
To say the least!

26.

At lunch with the Grand Chief[1]

On a late winter afternoon
With the biting cold behind us
In the stately home of the Canadian *Chef de Mission*
We sat to dine with the visiting Grand Chief
Of the world's 'First Nations'

O'er plates of baked salmon and crisp salad,
Red wine and ice cream
Interspersed with small talks about the weather and food,
We exchanged notes on our history
And the challenges of being minorities in our own land!

As I listened to the Grand Chief,
Forced to sign treaties after treaties with the colonisers
To reclaim the shattered fragments of their life,
I wondered what would have been our fate
Had the compass of Columbus's ship not failed,
Had it not taken him to the unknown coast of America,
But to his original destination - India

What would have been the course of Indian history?
Would there have been a Mahatma Gandhi or the 'Sepoy Mutiny'[2]?
Would these names ever be heard of at all?

Perhaps decimated to mere nothingness
Denied of even a chance to be born,
Like millions of our 'Red Indian' brethren in the Americas
Who perished in the mass ethnocide of the world's 'First Nations'

1. This poem is based on the meeting with Stan Beardy, the Grand Chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, representing 49 First Nations (Aboriginal or Indigenous Peoples) of Canada
2. *Sepoy mutiny* - 1857 Revolution, India's first war of independence against British imperialism

Had Columbus reached India,
Would there have been an entity
Called 'Uncle Sam' or the 'US of A'?
That automatically flexes its 'super' muscles
At any one who dares to challenge its self-ascribed authority

As I put down my fork and spoon and folded my napkin
I marveled, how one man's failed compass
Could so drastically influence the course of world history!

27.

Were you here today . . .

Many summers have gone by
Since you took leave of us
Yet each day your absence is felt
With the same intensity
As if it was yesterday
We bid you goodbye

Were you here today . . .
I would not have been so alone
To cope with the loss
Of what would have been
An occasion of joy and celebration
Reduced to mere illusion!

Though long gone, *mei*, *pa*
You remain my source of strength and solace
My best wishers in times of joy
My comforters in times of distress

To you both,
Turn I, again and again
For guidance and inspiration
To walk on . . .despite contrary pulls
And follow the footprints you left behind.

28.

The racial 'other'[1]

"Stop! Don't move, show us your ID"
"What ID sir? I don't have any ID"
"No ID? You *can't* stay in *our* country without an ID!
Take him to the lockup,
We can't allow him to walk free
He's a danger to the Summit
And our honoured guest, Hu Jintao".

It didn't matter to the cops
That the man they hauled up
Had no idea who's Hu Jintao,
Nor is he an alien fleeing from his country
But an Indian from the North East
Eking out a living in the city.

Listening to the experience
Of the unfortunate youths,
I wish our countrymen and women
Respect us for what we are
And not treat us with suspicion
Or reduce us to strangers in our own land
Just because our face is different
From our compatriots in the mainland!

1. This poem is based on the experience of the Northeast youth in the hands of the Delhi Police in the wake of the recent world Summit held at New Delhi where the heads of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) met to chart out common strategies for economic and political cooperation. To preempt the Tibetan refugees from staging their protest before the Chinese Premier against Tibet's 'occupation', the Delhi Police had ordered a crackdown on Tibetan activists in the city. In the process, a number of young men from the North East ended at the police station in a case of mistaken identity. ('NE, Tibet all the same to cops', Times of India, March 29, 2012)

29.

*How I wish**

I wish, O how I wish
We never had to see the senseless tragedy
That snuffed out your young life,
Like a candle blown by the wind
Cutting short career and education
And the dreams and aspirations of parents!

How I wish
We're not forced to take to the streets
Or 'sit in' at Jantar Mantar
To seek safety for our children,
Because the nation into which they're born
Cannot protect [the life and security of] its citizens from the margins!

How I wish
Parliament does not wake up to the problem
Only when the media makes a noise,
Then quietly forgets
When the noise recedes!

How I wish
The promises made by the '2020 Vision Document'
And Ministry of DoNER
Do not remain simply on paper
But translated into concrete action and infrastructure!

* *('City protests Manipur student's mystery death in B'lore', TOI, April 30, 2012*
'Bias against North East students worries Parliament', TOI, May 3, 2012)

How I wish
The much acclaimed 'Look East Policy'
Does not reduce our homeland
To a mere 'transmission corridor',
While benefits are reaped by powerful neighbours!

How I wish
Institutions that make
Tall claims on academic freedom
Do not exclude our culture and tradition
From their curriculum!

How I wish
The names of our heroes
Who laid down their lives
Fighting the Empire's Company
Before the country woke up to the rising call of the 'Mutiny'
Find space in the annals of our nation's history!

30.

Gifts

Gifts, they say, are wonderful things,
They strengthen social relations
And enhance the solidarity of society
By setting the cycle of gift exchange in motion

In which a gift received
Is repaid by a counter-gift
In accord with the principle of reciprocity
That undergirds the transaction

But where does one draw the line?
When gifts are used as means
To procure illegal gains
And circumvent constitutionally established rules
Designed to ensure equality of access to resources for all

Can a transaction that entails weighty obligation to return
Amount to a gift?
Can a relation that is built on expectations of reciprocity
For every good extended
Succeed to foster a healthy social relationship?
Where does a society based on reciprocity leave the under-privileged?
Who have little to repay their benefactor/s with
Except their gratitude

Where is the space for social graces and philanthropy
If we expect a return for every good we do?

31.

The sad truth

Truth, dear reader, isn't always easy to swallow
Especially if it brings out unpleasant things about you,
We'd rather push the dirt under the carpet
Than shake it off
And clean up the mess

This is one of life's ironies
That perfectly sane and intelligent people
Would rather live in delusion
Than gracefully accept the fact
To err is human!

To cover up one fault
Perforce we must commit another,
Our good name to secure,
Forgetting, those with whom we interact
Can see through the deceptive act!

32.

Elusive justice

Do her feelings mean so little to you?
That you allow her predators
Who preyed on her body
Get away with the crime
Because their life would be ruined
If action is taken against them

Is the life and reputation of the culprits
More important
Than that of the innocent victim
Whose privacy and personal dignity
Have been violated by the voyeurism of perverts?

What is the point of having statutory bodies in place
To safeguard the rights of victims
If guardians are to take the law in their own hands
To shield the offenders in the name of humanism

Would you have acted the same way
Had her roots been different?
Would you have been so indifferent to the damage
Caused to her personhood
If she was your own?

Justice, where is thy promise
That none is above the law?
If those who abuse others
Get away with impunity
Because of their proximity to the powers that be!

33.

Mining-scarred Jaintia Hills

The last time I saw you
You were resplendent in your glory,
With the pine laden hills as your crown
And the water of *wah*[1] Lukha
Sparkling like silver at your feet
There was none to surpass your beauty!

Today, I'm shocked to see the change in you,
Your scarred face and disfigured body
Shorn of your crowning glory,
The once sparkling water turned into acid
That is lethal for humans and beasts!

What disease, what virus, did you contract
That has wrecked your health thus?
With your anatomy cut wide open
Bones reduced to commodities
And building materials for cities
What will become of you?

Who are these strange men
And their monstrous machines
Which suck the life out of you?
While like a woman raped
You writhe alone in pain!

Is there none to help you in this predicament?
Where are your *Dalois*[2] and *Waheh Chnong*[3]
Your MLAs[4] and MDCs[5]?
Who're supposed to protect your lands
And territory from unseen foes
Who scout the countryside
For vulnerable victims like you

What is your ADC[6] doing?
To keep the marauders at bay
What about your government?
With its promise of development
And 'single window clearance'
To bring the fruits directly to the people,
To secure their homes and fields
And keep the wolves away

Aren't these meant for you too?
Or is it just another ploy
To hoodwink the innocent
And ensure easier access to the men who loot you?

1. *wah* - river
2. *Daloi* - a traditional ruler in the Jaintia Hills, akin to a chief
3. *waheh chnong* - a village elder or headman
4. MLAs - Members of the State Assembly/Legislature
5. MDCs - Members of the District Council, also see next footnote below
6. ADC - Autonomous District Council, a body constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to protect the interests of tribes and tribal areas comprising elected members from the area of its jurisdiction.

34.

A Lament for the Brahmaputra[1]

They call you the mighty Brahmaputra,
The lifeline of the North East
Today your survival is at stake
With 'Big brother' Chin in the north
Threatening to alter your course
To get the best out of you and top up the score
In the race to supremacy!

Not that [brother] Ind is any less
In his ambition to exploit you,
Using the latest technology
And manpower at his command
He lost no time in coming up
With grand designs of mega dams
To rein you in and stem your flow,
To extract the vibrant energy packed in your body
To light up homes and energize their factories!

While the brothers engage
In their silly game of one-upmanship,
We wait with trepidation in our hearts
At what would be our fate!

For centuries you've showered us with your bounty,
You irrigate our lands and fields
Convert the rugged hills

1. This poem was written in March 2012 following fears expressed by the people of Pasighat District, Arunachal Pradesh, about the receding volume of water in the Brahmaputra upstream coming from its source in upland China. Ten months later, this headline 'China gives go-ahead for three new Brahmaputra dams' in the Hindu's front page (*The Hindu*, January 30, 2013), confirms the people's fears.

And vales into verdant forests
To provide for our needs
And a home for our non-human brethren and spirits!

Alas, man's thirst for wealth and 'power'
Has reduced you from a life-giving force
Into a source of conflict!
With nations and states
Fighting with each other
To gain ownership of you

Failing to see
They cannot trifle with the son of Brahma
Or own him like a commodity
For Brahma's-*putra*
Is not an ordinary mortal
But a divine-driven force!

A universal source of life and sustenance
That transcends time
And geo-political boundaries,
A living inspiration to artists and musicians
Like our very own immortal Bhupenda[2]!

Where would the future poets and novelists
Songsters and artists of the North East
Draw their inspiration?
How would the farmers in the *chars*[3]
And the future generations survive?
If we allow the Brahmaputra to be destroyed
By inter/national power struggles and mega dams.

2. Bhupen Hazarika, doyen of Assamese songs and music
3. *Char/s* - alluvium rich strip of land along the banks of the Brahmaputra left by the receding waters at the end of the monsoon that is popularly used for cultivation by farmers and peasants.

35.

Story of the vanishing cowherds

Have you ever heard the story of the cowherds?
Who serenade the hills with their flute
As they pasture their cattle
On the grassy slopes of *Ri-aiom-ksiar*[1]

Now, they're a near-extinct species
An anachronism
Who belonged to the days of my youth,
When mining and quarrying were unknown occupations
And animal rearing a way of life for many

When children from poor families
Pastured the cattle of the rich
For daily meals and pittance of a fee
To lessen the burden on their family

This is the story of the cowherd of my time
In my ancestral village:

As I watched you come in the morning
To take the cattle out of the pen
To the pasture beyond the hills
I envied you for your freedom to roam the wild
To be at one with the sun and the wind,
Not stuck to a room like me
Forced to learn the ABC!

In my childhood eyes,
Yours represented the most idyllic existence
Unencumbered by the restrictions imposed on me and my siblings

1. *Ri-aiom-ksiar* - Khasi for 'Land of the golden age'

Free of the master's rod
And fear of failure in examinations
Free to feed on the luscious berries of *sohpdung*[2]
That dangerously hovers on rocks on your path
Free to fondle the young calf,
As the mother lazily mows the grass
Under the afternoon sun

Undeterred by the hazards of your occupation,
Or harshness of your circumstance
You bring the hills alive
With your never-say-die spirit
And melodious music

Which reminds me of another
By the name of Krishna
A vivacious cowherd on the plains of Mathura
Who, like you, was an expert on the flute
And often drove his mother mad
By stealing her freshly made butter.

Of course, unlike Krishna, you've no butter to steal
Your *mei* does not have the luxury
To stay home and make butter and cream
But what puts you at an advantage
Is the immense wealth of your countryside
An open school for any student
To amass valuable stocks of knowledge

2. *Sohpdung* is a wild plant with dark green leaves and tuberous roots that usually grows on the face of rocks intermingled with moss. Its fruits of red, white and yellow berries are much relished by village kids. The root is also edible and when chewed with the leaf of another plant locally called *jahynwiat* it produces a blood-red juice, akin to the juice produced by betel, a popular item of hospitality among the Khasi. In the interior parts of the Khasi hills, village children popularly used *sohpdung* in their games to masquerade as adults.

Sadly, when I returned to the village I found you gone
Neither could I find your friends around,
When I asked the crestfallen hills where you've all gone
I was told some disappeared 'underground',
Some held up at the 'under constructed roads'
The rest gobbled by 'stone quarries' and 'coal pits'
That sprouted over the land

'What about the cattle', I asked the hills,
'What happened to them'?
'Don't worry about the cattle,' replied the hills,
'The cattle, along with the goats and sheep,
Have all been *safely smuggled* into neighboring Bangladesh'.

36.

India's growth story

In a posh conference room
Furnished in cool shades of green
They gathered to take stock of the economy
To expedite growth
And put a check on the falling rate of the rupee!

Economists, corporate heads, and special invitees
One by one, they stood up
To pay their respects to the ruling deity
Totally hooked on capital
They made tall claims on the magical powers of growth
Promising to transform the country
Into a land of milk and honey

Denouncing the 'disruptive' roles
Played by the 'reds' and the 'greens'
In one voice they cried:
'This cannot go on,
We cannot allow outmoded ideology
Stand in the way of progress.
The land must be released for growth to take place
The minerals and resources that abound therein
Cannot be allowed to lie unused'

This is the new face of the Indian economy
The 'India Inc' of the 21st Century,
For whom progress is measured
By the standard of living
Indexed by the rich
And the amount of foreign investments
The country can fetch;
Not by the quality of life
Of the ordinary citizens!

As I listened to the jubilant voices
Selling 'Brand India' to the highest investor,
My mind goes to the millions of tribes
Ousted from their hearths and homes
Thrown into the streets
Without any 'resettlement' or 'rehabilitation' provision
To make way for the glorified 'temples' of modern India

How many more tribal lives should we sacrifice?
How many more homes to break?
How many more lands,
Forests and rivers should we destroy?
So that India enters the elite club of developed nations
And a place at the top for our CEOs

Whose interests will this serve?
With the fate of our 'inclusive policy' lying in tatters
And talk of the 'equal benefit-sharing regime' a non-starter
Is it right for the country to sacrifice?
The life and future of innocent tribes
And their peasant cousins
For benefits that accrue
To less than half of the population!

37.

Who am I?

Who am I?
What am I?

These are the eternal questions
That flashed through my mind's eye
As I try to negotiate
The different life worlds that engulf me!

Some say, I no longer have a claim
To the identity with which I was born
As I've transgressed the line
That distinguishes me
From what I'm not supposed to be

'What is that line?'
I asked those who questioned my identity
But they failed to answer me

Grappling with the vexed question,
I asked myself
'What is this thing called 'identity'?
What are its bases?

Is it based on language?
The so-called mother tongue,
That my school back home never taught me,
But in which I continue to converse and think

Is it linked to religion?
Which over 60 per cent of my people
Have abandoned,
Won over by foreign belief
That is highly contemptuous

Of the belief of our forebears

Or, is identity determined by
Where we live or how we live?
Hey, wait a sec! What about India's NRIs[1]?
Why are they so called?
If physical location in the homeland is a prerequisite to identity

The question really is:
Is identity such a flimsy thing that disappears like gas in thin air?
Is it that easy to shed off one's cultural core
The way the butterfly discards its skin?

Is identity a uni-dimensional entity?
That springs from a single source,
Unchanged for all times to come,
Don't we all don different caps
At different points of time

Is it desirable to privilege one identity
And discount others as inconsequential
When diversity is the law of nature?

Frankly, I find the obsession
With identity rather problematic
Why can't we simply be known as human beings?
And do away with all kinds
Of man-made category distinctions

1. NRIs - Non Resident Indians, a term applied to Indians residing outside their home country, India

38.

A letter to money

Dear money,
Can you please tell me
Why people never seem to have enough of you
What secret potion do you have?
What charm?
To seduce the most upright of men and women so
That they lose all sense of proportion
And integrity
In their desire to possess more and more of you

People say you can buy everything the heart desires:
Social positions,
Worldly comforts,
And what have you!
Can you buy me peace and contentment?
And freedom from greed
Can you buy me a piece of heaven?
So that I can sit at my Master's feet
When my life here is done

Everyday we're bombarded
With news of scams and kickbacks,
That many simple folks I meet on my path
Are sick and tired

Can you buy us a world that is free of corruption
And leaders untainted by crime?
Can you buy us cities and towns
Secured from murders and rape of its women?
And a government that delivers
Clean and efficient administration . . .

39.

The Colonial legacy

A hundred and twenty years of your rule was all it took
To destroy institutions
Lovingly nurtured by generations of our ancestors
With one stroke of your pen, you created the 'Inner Line'
Turning one of the great migration routes of humankind
Into a 'frontier zone'
And snapped the age-old lines of communication
That linked the mountain folks to the plainsmen below
As they moved to and fro across the mountain pass
For trade and commerce!

What more can be said of an imperialist
Who nonchalantly combined his military might
With the sacred teachings of the Bible
To subdue the world
And colonize its land, resources, and people

Though you've departed from the scene
Your legacy continues to haunt our lives
The false hope of independence
You created in our minds
With your ingenuity
And exclusionary policies
Has left our homeland in a state of chaos,
With claims and counterclaims
Between the peoples of the NER[1]
And, your successor, the Indian state

1. NER - North Eastern Region.

Whose claim is right has little meaning
To the majority of us in the present generation
The damage has been done,
With serious casualties on both sides!

While the future continues to be hazy
And the process of reconciliation a long and arduous journey
The only consolation we have
Is to pour out our angst and anxiety on paper

Isn't this ironical
That the credit for this really goes to you
For gifting us the Script,
To sculpt our thoughts in words
And document the fragments of knowledge
(We're able to retrieve)
From our vast oral tradition
(Destroyed by your civilizing mission)
Before they fully disappear into posterity. . .

40.

Tell me, dear brethren

In the days of yore
When our territory stretched deep into the plains
Our brave warriors came home
With beautiful maidens as trophies
To found new clans and enhance the race

Then came the Anglo-Saxons
With their administrative machinery and religion
Sowed seeds of distinctions
Between the hills and the plains
The '*dkhars*'[1] and the '*riewlum!*[2]

Today, the descendants of these self-same warriors
In whose veins the blood of the maidens flow
Look at their (ancestral) mother's people with disdain
The cultural other of inferior make
Marriage with who will pollute the race!

Garbed in the guise of ethnicity
And the imperative to protect one's identity
The germ grew from mere intolerance
Into a full-blown disease
Polarizing the society into 'they' and 'we'!

The 'we' itself has become a divided universe
Between the 'purists' of 'full' ethnic blood
And the 'half-breeds' or '*khun shipiah*[3]'

1. *dkhars* - Khasi, for persons hailing from the plains, usually of non-tribal stock,
2. *riew lum* - hill men or persons from the hills,
3. *khun* means child/children, *shipiah* - half a rupee or fifty paisa; *khun shipiah* - a euphemism for children of mixed parentage.

The accursed children of mixed parentage
And a lesser god!

Tell me, dear brethren
How does one reconcile
This man-made dichotomy
With the teachings of the Holy Scripture
That we're all children of the same father?

41.

Death and deliverance

For long, I was petrified of you
Conjuring horrifying images in my mind's eye:
A demon with ferocious looks
And hands of steel
Ready to grab and throw
My helpless self
Into eternal hell!

Now, I see you differently
No longer a foe,
But a passage into a new 'life'
Eagerly awaited,
Like a young bride for her groom
Ready to leave the old world behind
For the vast unknown
Trusting her beloved will not fail her!

So wait I, for you . . .
To release my soul from its embattled frame
Before my limbs and faculties fail:
My selfhood from indignity to save
My loved ones from a liability!

Come, angel of death
Lift me up in your kind embrace
While my breath is yet strong
Fly my soul to God's own world
Where, with my kindred souls gone afore
We'll *bam kwai ha ing u Blei junom la junom!*[1]

1. *bam kwai ha ing u Blei junom la junom* – literally, eat betel in the house of God forever and ever. In the conception of the Khasi, the soul of the dead goes to its celestial abode (similar to the Christian notion of paradise) where it reunites with the spirits/souls of the deceased ancestors in whose company it remains sharing betel with each other as they did in their earthly existence. Betel is a popular article of hospitality among the Khasi. Sharing/eating betel signifies a happy state of mind and harmony

42.

Reminiscing at spring

Come spring, with its soft breeze and green foliage,
Takes me down memory lane
To my schooldays with Sister Catherine
A small energetic nun
Packed with tons of love and talent
An excellent teacher of many subjects
Adept at the piano and the chorus
As running and passing the ball in the field
A teacher who could wipe away a child's tears with her smile
And instill confidence in the most jittery of students!

A teacher of her kind is rare to find
Who puts a child's moral worth above crass competition
Service to others before personal ambition
To whom, values are as critical to education,
As of building the nation
Where Mathematics and Moral Science go hand in hand
As do, History, Art and PT!

Those were the days when school was fun
A place to learn and to run
When education was about all-round development
In extra-curricular activities and scholastic achievements
When education was about knowledge and understanding
Not about 'mucking up' or 'cut and paste'
Or, a race for grades and certificates!

Ravaged by the force of time
What have we now?
Schools slowly turning into factories

Producing robot-like automatons
Fine-tuned to keep their eyes on 'cut-off points'
Sending parents into sleepless nights
Lest their children fail to make the cut

A place in the 'Merit List' is all that matters
Forget value building and character!

43.

Is there space for my story in poetry?

Poetry, I'm told, is about love and aesthetics
A medium for the romantic
To translate the yearnings of the heart into music
Dressed in rhyme and rhythm
Metre and verse, distinctive of the genre
To serenade and win over the beloved!

But the world I live in has no beauty or love in it
Destroyed by the *kalyug*[1] of materialism and militancy
That overtook the human race when man made money and machines
Neither have I the craft
To convert the sights and sounds I see and hear into music,
To share my dreams and angst with kindred souls!

So, must my story go untold and unheard?
Because my life has no beauty or romance in it
And I, no poetic skills to translate it into music,
To win the attention of the romantic!

Is there space for the world of the mundane in poetry?
Or is it an exclusive domain of the idealists?
To celebrate their songs of love for the pristine and beautiful
In the sanitized ambience of *mushairas*[2] and symposiums,
Away from the humdrum and violence of the world around!

1. *Kalyug* - Dark age or Age of darkness
2. *Mushairas* – Urdu word for symposium

44.

Memory

1322 PC, my home for sixteen years
What secrets you hold within your fold
I have no wish to know
As for me, I cherish sacred memories of you
Of moments, tinged with hope and despair
Laughter and tears!

Above all, an oasis of peace
Insulated from the hustle and bustle of the world around
Where love and faith triumphed
O'er worldly cares!

Tho bricks and mortar a home not maketh
The quiet and calm you exude
And the birds and bees in your vicinity
Provided the much-needed balm
When faced with life's vagaries!

I hope you're as generous with those to come
As you've been to me
A refuge from the rain and sun
A solace in times of despair!

45.

Dreams

How dull life would be
Were there be no dreams
To spice up our existence
Wherein we can switch our roles
As easily as we change our garments

A labourer I may be by calling
But an emperor in my dream
Reigning over a kingdom flowing with milk and honey
Where can one have such easy role reversals?
But in dreams, sweet dreams!

In dreams I can realize my ambition
To be what fortune can't offer me
A driver in the saddle of life
A master of my destiny!

Gallop, my dream horse into the horizon
To catch the morning star
Before the sun breaks for the day
And sends the star away!

Some say, dreams are idle thinking
A pastime of wastrels; I say
Dreams are wonderful ways to relieve monotony
And infuse hope in a hopeless situation!

46.

Of rains and flood

For weeks we waited for you
To douse the scorching summer heat
And lay to rest the dust and fumes
That enveloped the city.

As we raised our eyes to the cloudless sky
Hoping for a glimpse of your elusive self
Not a whiff, not a stir anywhere
Only the oppressive heat hanging in the air

After days of speculations
And missed predictions by the met office
Bang, you came with wind and squall
Bringing sighs of relief from one and all

Alas, the celebration was not to last
As the torrents poured
Puddles turned into rivers, and rivers into floods
The long awaited rain became a menace.

With city drains clogged with muck and filth
Riverbanks inundated by homes and offices
The water had little choice
But to stop and stagnate on roads and crevices
Adding woes to ordinary folks

As we lament the fury of nature
And blame the government for apathy
We forget our own role in the sordid affair
If only we had some civic sense
Treating our surroundings with a measure of care and courtesy
Our tryst with the rains could have turned out differently!

47.

Where have thy rains gone, Cherra[1]*?*

High, on the scenic plateau of Khasi Hills
With the plains of Sylhet at her feet
Sits beautiful Cherrapunji
Favoured by the gods
As the wettest place on earth

But no rains found I, as claimed by the record
Only the parched earth and dry gorge
And stray patches of grass wilting in the sun
Dried up and yellowed
As if beaten by age and time

Where are the rains?
The famous Sohra rain
That nurtured the great sacred groves
Of Mawsmai and Mawmluh
And fed the streams of Sngi Thiang and Likai falls
As they hurl headlong into the ravine below

(In)famous rain, which claimed the life of young Anne Jones
Throwing her missionary husband's life into a doldrum
And the point of no return!
Rains, which forced the British administration
To abandon its station
And set up base in Shillong

As the monsoon advanced
And no rains in sight

1. Cherra is the anglicised name of Sohra, a place till recently reputed to have the highest rainfall in the world. In official parlance, the word Cherrapunji/ Cherrapunjee is generally used in place of Cherra or Sohra.

Something must be amiss, I thought
Between the beautiful Cherra and the rain god
Someone must have played a dirty trick
To keep the rain god away from his beloved

As I sought answers
From the surrounding hills
And the stalactites and stalagmites
Of her famed caves, a little bird whispered:
'The rain god has left beautiful Cherra in the lurch
In favour of plain (Jane) Mawsynram"

My heart goes to you, 'wet desert'
I can't help feeling tho, 'twas thine own fault
That led to thy fall
Flirting with the likes of cement plants and lime kiln
Timber logging and coal-mining
Squandering away the rich heritage
The rain god bestowed upon you!

48.

Requiem for 'A child fondly call'd Camilla'[1]

For a century and a half
You lay unknown in peace and quiet
In the warm embrace of mother earth
Shielded from the vagaries of the weather
And iniquities of human nature!

Till came a visitor from yonder seas
Opened up a can of controversies
Besmirching your birth with mud and dirt!

A darling child to someone
You clearly seem'd to be
Snatched from the cradle of love
Like a flower snipped in the bud
Before the petals open up to the sun
To delight the world with its beauty and fragrance!

Tenderly laid to rest, with Milton's poignant line,
'Soft silken primrose, fading timelessly'
As your epitaph,
A testimony of what you meant
To those you left behind!

Can greater injustice be found?
Than one inflicted on a lifeless/defenceless child
By bragging tongues

1. The main title of this poem has been taken from the grave stone of a child by the same name, of undisclosed parentage, marked only by the name, year of death (1843) and a line from John Milton's poem reproduced in the verse below. The grave is nestled amidst a cluster of pines just a few yards away off David Scott's famous bridle path at Mawphlang, East Khasi Hills. Unnoticed for years, the grave gained wide public attention when a Welsh journalist came up with startling disclosures on the supposed parentage of Camilla.

Who, for reasons best known to them
Passed on as evidence unproven allegations
Causing untold damage to names and reputation!

Rest in peace, sweet child. . .
None can touch your soul
For in heaven's eyes
You're more worthy
Than all the saints of the earth
To receive God's glory!

49.

The story that never was

In the stillness of the night
Waiting for the morn to usher the daylight
Alone sat I in melancholy
Drumming my fingers on computer keys
To make words and write a story

As I struggled with the letters
My mind flew to a night, long, very long ago
A night, the moon hid his face behind the clouds
And a beautiful damsel took flight of her house
To keep her rendezvous with the lad next door

'Hurry up,' whispered he from the shadow
As she, shoes in hand, hair undone
Quickly climbed up the wooden-gate
To land with a thud on the ground below

'*Bachao, bachao*'[1], cried a voice from the house
As fast they fled, under cover of the dark
Only to fall in each other's arms
Exchanging sweet nothings in the rundown park

Impetuous soul that I am
My heart went out to the lovey-dovey pair
Daring to do what I never could
Denying myself the joy of youthful escapade!

Never mind my lack-lustre life, thought I
I'll do all I can to help the young things out
And reclaim my lost youth
When a touch on my shoulder woke me up

1. *Bachao, Bachao* - Help! Help! (Hindi, cry for help)

Raising my head from my aching arms,
I drowsily blinked when I heard my daughter said:
'*Mi*, again you slept at the table with your computer on!
Didn't you hear the noise?
A thief broke into the neighbour's house last night'.

'O no,' I exclaimed, under my breath
'There goes my adventure
  Down the Yamuna'!

50.

The nude protest
'Take our naked body and give us peace and security'

What can be more enigmatic than the nude?
An artist's delight
A lover's pride
A taboo for the prude

For some, a political weapon of last resort
When all other means fail
As shown by the brave *Meira Paibi Imas*[1] of Manipur
Who used their nakedness to shame the agents of violence
For atrocities perpetrated on their women

'Come sister', said they, 'let us shed off our *phanek*[2]
And trade our nakedness
For peace to our homeland
And safety for our children
We can't just sit back and watch draconian acts
Run amuck on our land'

Can there be greater tragedy than this?
Forcing mothers to strip to the skin
To protect the honour and dignity of their children
And drive home the point
That a woman's body is not a plaything
To be molested and trampled on!

1. *Meira Paibis* - Manipuri women torch-bearers or activists; *Imas* - mothers. In the idiom of the Meira Paibis, the term *Ima* carries a wider connotation than 'mother' as generally understood. It means mother of the community and rescuers of persons from torture, unlawful arrests, etc.
2. *phanek* – sarong or wrap-around, dress used by Manipuri women

O courageous *Imas* of Manipur!
How many (nude) protests must you carry?
How many Manormas and Piyaris should there be?
For the keepers of the nation to hear your anguished cries
To what extent must you go?
To break the stonewall of silence and apathy
That has thrown your beautiful land into an inferno!

51.

Fearless Nirbhaya[1]

Though your name is shrouded in secrecy
The whole nation weeps for you
Robbed of life and dignity
By monsters on the loose
Prwling behind tinted panes
As the police waited on VVIPs

Words fail to describe the gruesome act
A public transport turned into a gory den of lust
Sending the country into a state of shock
And wars between [women's rights] activists
Armed with banners and slogans
And enforcers of law with their *lathis* and water cannons!

Can we absolve ourselves of your death?
Brave daughter of Bharat!
Pushed into an untimely end
By our collective indifference
To the rot within
Allowing goons and rapists to rule the day!

As the nation mourns your tragic death
Assuaging its conscience by calling you a youth icon
And harsh punishment for your predators
Can these compensate for the horror
And brutalities inflicted on your body
Or the pain and loss suffered by your family?

1. Barred by law to disclose the identity of rape victims, Nirbhaya, which means fearless, is the name given by the media to the 23 year-old paramedical student, who was brutally gangraped on a moving bus in South Delhi on the night of December 16, 2012.

Will our leaders shed off their blinkers?
And stop the empty rhetoric
But gird up their waist
To root out the malaise of corruption
And spiraling crime against women
Perpetrated by a sick mindset and lax governance!

This is the best tribute the country can give
To commemorate your courageous spirit
And cleanse itself of the sin and shame
For its '*theek hai*' attitude
And failure to protect its daughters and sons
From the wolves who hide in sheep's clothing

52.

'Where is my India'?

I woke up one fine morn
To find my India gone
Would anyone have an idea
Who took away my India?

Where is my India?
The land of truth and non-violence
Justice and liberty
Championed by the Buddha and Gandhi

Where is my India?
The 'Shining India'
Glowing with growth and prosperity
Promised by our political parties

Where is my India?
Where the streets and homes are safe for women
Where Dalit, tribes, and minorities
Can lead a life of dignity, free of fear and persecution

As the year comes to a close
Besieged by countrywide protests
Against the heinous rape of a 23-year-old
And hundreds of nameless others

I long for the India of my dream
That's free from fear and hate
An India, where divisive ideology
And distinctions of caste, class, and gender have no place

Will the New Year bring this India to me?
And erase the horror and shame of the years gone by
Come my compatriots, let us shed off our complacency
To usher the change, and build an India we'd
be proud to call our own.

(December 31, 2012)

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