NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

New Series
76

Against State, Against History: Rewriting the pasts of the tribes of North-east India

Jangkhomang Guite

Department of History, Assam University, Silchar

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2015

NMML Occasional Paper

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 978-93-83650-77-4

Price Rs. 100/-; US $ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

Against State, Against History: Rewriting the pasts of the tribes of North-east India*

Jangkhomang Guite

This paper concerns with the population, or rather communities, who lived at the margins of the states over a long period of time. In other words, this paper concerns with revisiting the history of the hill tribes of North-east India in relation to the dominant civilisational discourse and in the long view. It is necessarily a revisionist intent that strives to defocus the existing notion and refocus them from the hill perspectives. The author's adventure across the highland massif, criss-crossing its landscape, convinced him of drawing serious doubt on the dominant civilisational narrative of the highlanders. The notion of 'tribe' in general and particularly of drawing a parallel of them with 'primitive society' is particularly striking. This doubt is already in the air of scholarship since some decades and the narrative should now be disowned.[1] Renouncing the old notion is one; giving an alternative explanation is yet another, often neglected road. This paper mainly concerns with the latter path.

James Scott has done a great job for all of us who have a stake of interests in the studies of the communities at the margins of

* Lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 3 February 2015.

[1] See for instance, Adam Kuper, 2005, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth*. London: Routledge; Morton, H. Fried 1975, *The Notion of Tribe*, California: Cummings; James C. Scott, 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

states in general and the tribal societies in particular. Therefore, taking a cue from Scott's recent studies on the Zomia highland this paper takes the position that the so-called tribal societies that we see in the North-east region were, instead of being the 'remnants' of primitive societies as we are made to believe in dominant colonial discourse, the offshoot of and/or the 'effect' of the valley state-making projects in the valleys of Assam, Bengal, and Burma. Instead of living in splendid isolation from the valley surroundings, they are shaped and fashioned in relation to the latter. In this context, the two societies are closely related to each other although they manifested a stark contrast in their overall cultural patterns. Thus, in contrast to the common place notion, the close relationship between the hills and valley societies may be best described as a relationship that is inversely symbiotic.

Symbiotic, because they were closely interdependent on each other in many ways, especially in their economic transactions. Central to this symbiosis was the significant presence of an overlapping and shared zone of territory and sovereignty at the margins of the valley over which both the hills and valley polities claimed authority and from which both collected revenue on mutual consent. This zone which we called *posaland* acted both as a conduit to facilitate transactions and a buffer against extension of valley state authority into the hills. Due to the friendly relationship it is seen that the hill 'warriors' quite often fought for the valley state potentates in their war against the enemy. Inversely, in most cases of exchange and transactions one is tempted to see the essence of the hill systems from its valley contrast; they are inversely shaped and fashioned in relation to the valley systems for its practices, ideas, ideologies, symbols, and identities. As the hill practices are peculiarly the reverse of the valley systems, one can only see this amazing contrast from the point of its close relationship rather than the simplistic view of, a geographically deterministic understanding of, disconnectedness and isolationism.

What seems to be critical in the formation of the hill society was the importance given to freedom from control and oppression,

a freedom that is culturally relative but nonetheless a monolithic concept that differed in degrees from tribe to tribe and yet played a central role in the making of the hill society. In this context, the so-called tribal belt, the non-state space, in the region may be considered not only as the 'region of refuge' but also the region of 're-assembling', or of what is now understood as a 'contact zone' and a zone of interaction and integration but, nonetheless, a zone that is shaped inversely. This work, therefore, examines the exchange and transactions between the hills and valley societies and/or state and non-state spaces. It shows how the hill society was shaped and sustained by the changing pattern of relationship with the valley societies over a long period. In this pattern, the coming of colonialism in the nineteenth century was inarguably a watershed. It strikingly illuminated new patterns, new norms, ideas, and practices which were in most cases different from, and in conflict and contestation with, the indigenous systems.

This paper illustrates the situation before, and what follows, the coming of colonial regime in the region which roughly ran during the nineteenth century. If the roving culture and agriculture of the highlanders manifested what Scott has called the 'culture and agriculture of escape' the pinning of the landscape of tribal universe into the world of measurable bits and borders of rule under colonial regime produced a strong sense of conflict between the two. It was within this parallel contestation and contingency that one may locate the resisting culture in resilience *within* the broad paraphernalia of colonialism. While the forms of resistance in the shape of 'raids' and 'rebellions' are often the flavour of writing history, the presence of a similar sense of dissent or more appropriately a resilience of such practices *within* the colonial apparatus or that of the new cultural adaptation, say, to Christianity, of ethnicity/nationalism and so on, are generally invisible and neglected. It is to such practices that this study is making a humble attempt, if not striving, to be authoritative in any sense of the term.

Peopling of Promised Land, Starting a New Life

If the objective of the study is to see into the various hill practices as 'culture and agriculture of escape' against the valley state control and appropriations, then one must first seek to locate the earlier home of the hill people. To make the point straight, the study begins with examining the origin and migration history of the hill tribes. This endeavour would take one to a pleasing surprise. That the earlier home of the hill people was not in the preceding mountain ranges but somewhere *down* there in the state space. It is striking that most of the tribes in North-east Indian highland traced their earlier home in the plains that surround their present habitats: Burma, Assam, and Bengal plains. Some of the tribes in the sub-Himalayan region are traced to the plateaux formation in Tibet. We are aware that both the areas, either the plains or that of the Tibetan plateau, were historically the favourite haunt of state-making projects since the ancient period. Tribal legends had very well illustrated the existence of the state-making process in these areas and in most cases clearly spelt out that they escaped to their present habitats against such a state-formation process. While tribes like Garos talk of 'Assamese King', or Karbis to Kacharis-Jaintias states, or the Chin-Kuki world spoke of Shans and Burmese, most tribes give reasons like 'great flood', 'great fire', 'great darkness', or of 'powerful enemy', and so on, all connoting the fact that an oppressive state-building project was at the heart of such historical metaphors even if the force of nature cannot altogether be omitted. Some tribes even claim that they had, or had lived in, their own 'kingdom' under their own 'kings' which was destroyed by a 'more powerful' enemy. Some tribes even possessed a very strong millenarian concept of rebuilding, or of going back to, their valley 'kingdom'.

A relatively well documented history of the Kacharis is given here as a telling case for all the other tribes in the region. Evidences from legend, written and archaeological remains, show that the 'Kachari race' had been routed by invaders from the west and the east after living in the Brahmaputra valley for several centuries. Edward Gait, and latter studies on Kacharis, have given

a vivid account of how the western part of Kachari kingdom was destroyed by the Kochs. The Ahoms and Kacharis (Chutiyas) struggled for supremacy in the Upper Brahmaputra valley for about 150–200 years. The Ahoms finally expelled the Kacharis to Dimapur, then to Maibang, and finally to Khaspur in 1750.[2] Legend has it that the 'Kacharis' were the rulers of ancient Kamarupa (Kamruli) and being worsted by their enemies they crossed over the Bid river (Brahmaputra) in which a large section of them were washed away.[3] The group that crossed the great river later built their capital at Dimapur whereas others who could not escape across the river migrated to the *terai* foothills of the Himalayas in the north and still another section of them, the Garos, were driven up to Garo Hills. The Dimasa Kacharis were the last bulwark of the 'race' who fought against the Ahoms and finally withdrew to the hills in North Cachar. The Tiperrahs were the advance group of this southward movement and had migrated to Barak valley in about the thirteenth century.[4] Endle puts this Kachari dispersion precisely:

> It may be that, whilst the great body of Chutiya (Kachari) race submitted to their Ahom conquerors, the stronger and more patriotic spirits among them, influenced perhaps by that intense clannishness which is so marked a feature in the Kachari character, withdrew to less favoured parts of the province, where their conquerors did not care at once to follow them up, i.e., the southern section of the race may have made its way into the districts known as the Garo Hills and North Cachar [Hills]; while the northern section perhaps took up its abode in a broad belt of country at the foot of the Bhutan Hills, still known as the 'Kachari Duars', a region which, being virtually 'terai' land, had in earlier days

[2] See Edward Gait, 2008 [1905], *History of Assam*. Guwahati: EBH Publication; J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991, *Social and Polity Formations in Pre-Colonial Northeast India*. New Delhi: Vikas; S.K. Barpujari, 1997, *History of Dimasas: From Earliest Times to 1896 A.D*. Haflong: N.C. Hills District Autonomous Council.

[3] Bhattacharjee, *Social and Polity Formation*, p. 178.

[4] See Gait, *History of Assam*; Bhattacharjee, *Social and Polity Formation*.

> a very unenviable reputation on the score of its recognised unhealthiness.[5]

This was also the case with Khasis who once lived in the Brahmaputra valley, of the Nagas who came from both Assam and Burma, of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes who came through Upper Burma valley, of the Tanis of sub-Himalayas who came from either Assam or Tibet, and so on.[6] Their migration history, therefore, points to the fact that they are indeed what Scott has called 'state evading populations in the hills' who had escaped to the 'unviable' terai landscape or that of mountainous highland where their conquerors did not care to follow them. The goodness of such landscape was not so much to the abundance of honey and milk (which were indeed dearth and known as the 'less favoured parts of the province') but to the abundance of free air, free spirit, against control, and oppression. Such stateless spaces, therefore, became their promised land, the safe haven, to those populations who have many reasons not to be oppressed and be free. Hence, freedom was the calling that guided them over the course of their history.

As the state-evaders flew over the inaccessible mountain ranges they began to fashion a new way of life that would not

[5] Sidney Endle. 2010 [1911]. *The Kacharis*, New Delhi: Akansha, p. 8.

[6] For Khasis see H. Bareh, 1985 [1967], *The History and Culture of Khasi People*, Spectrum Publication Shillong; for Garos see M.S. Sangma, 1981, *History and Culture of the Garos*, University of Michigan: Books Today; for Nagas see J.H. Hutton's, 'Introduction' to J.P. Mills, 2003 [1922], *Lhotas Nagas*, Delhi: Spectrum; R.R. Shimray, 1985, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, Delhi: Private circulation; for Chin-Kukis see B. Lalthangliana, 1977, *History of Mizo in Burma*. Aizawl: Zawlbuk Agencies; Sing Khaw, Khai, 1995, *Zo People and Their Culture: A Historical, Cultural Study and Critical Analysis of Zo and Its Ethnic Tribes*. Lamka; Vumson, 1986, *Zo History*, Aizawl: Private circulation; for Tanis see Stuart Blackburn, 'Memories of Migration: Notes on legends and beads in Arunachal Pradesh, India', *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, 25/26:15–60 (203/2004); J.N. Chowdhury, 1990, *The Tribal Culture and History of Arunachal Pradesh*, Delhi: Daya Publishing House; T. Nyori, 1993, *History and Culture of the Adis*, New Delhi: Omsons; Sachin Roy, 1997 [1960], *Aspects of Padam Minyong Culture*, Itanagar: Directorate of Research.

only permit them to live in the harsh geography and rugged terrain but also help them in preventing the control and appropriations of the valley states and someone who is ambitious to become ruler in the hills. In this endeavour, the core concern of the state evaders was to evolve practices that would not only provide them what they wanted but also what they needed to be a free man. For this, mobility of a person was one sure instrument of evasion. Unless an individual is enjoying the rights to move freely from one place to another his freedom is under constraint. Thus, the new practices that the state-evader fashioned in the hills can be best understood in terms of permitting him maximum mobility as an instrument against control and oppression. For this reason, mobility has become one of the core concerns of the state evaders. Most of the hill practices that we see are, therefore, drawing their essence in this core principle of state evasion, a principle often described as 'illegible' practices to states. A few of these practices have been examined here to see how they resisted and survived the onslaught of colonialism.

Of the hill practices, attention is first drawn to the hill population distribution and settlement pattern. What becomes explicit from this spatial order was the existence of a very strong sense of safety and security in which the notion of friction of distance is very profound. Truly, from the point of its origin and essence the hill village set-up was peculiarly political in nature. This is because the general setting of hill villages gives the impression of a defensive posture; strategic considerations were certainly uppermost in the minds of most village founders. All the earlier colonial observers agreed in describing the hill villages as, without exception, situated on the top or spur of precipitous hills with a commanding view of all approaches. They were generally fortified by a ditch or succession of ditches studded with *panjie*s (pieces of sharp bamboo stuck upright in the ground) having a stockade or palisade on the inner side. The sides of the hills were also frequently scarped where the pathway winds round a shoulder of the hills overhanging a steep precipice, a breast-work or flanking defence being erected here to defend the pass. The entry to the village was by a narrow gate of single profile,

day and night guarded by the 'warriors' from the village youngmen's dormitory (*morung*).

The village was usually surrounded by a zone of thick forest of a mile or so in diameter beyond which one came across the *jhum* lands for shifting cultivation. Beyond these jhum lands was a vast tract of 'uninhabited' and 'uncultivated' forestland which is often pronounced as 'hunting ground' but in essence it was a buffer or a screen against enemy. In the foothills, along the border with the valley settlements this 'hunting ground' became profound, sometimes extended up to several miles, often a hundred or so, encompassing large tracts of the lower ranges and that of the margins of the level plains upon which the hill polities claimed authority. This uninhabited and uncultivated 'hunting ground' protected them from the valley raiders and marauders in a big way by adding the friction of distance. Most colonial observers, especially of the various expedition reports, clearly noted the existence of this 'hunting ground' between the hills and valley settlements. Wilcox, for instance, noted the existence of such a huge tract of 'an uninterrupted jungle to the foot of the hills' from Sadiya towards the north side of the river. To the south of the river till the Naga Hills, he also saw few villages forming 'mere specks in the widely spread wilderness'.[7]

Similarly, Butler also found no 'vestige of any habitation or a human being' between Mohung Dehooa and Dimapur in southern Assam, a distance of 30 miles which he described as 'dreary gloomy desolate wilderness … totally devoid of man, beasts, or birds, a death-like stillness everywhere' and the 'view being confined to a few paces before us, the earth excessively damp, the sun not having pierced the forest probably for many

[7] R. Wilcox, 'Memoir of a Survey of Assam and the Neighbouring Countries, executed in 1825-26-27-28', in *Selection of Papers Regarding the Hill Tracts between Assam and Burmah and the Upper Brahmaputra*, Govt. Press, 1873, pp. 1–83, quotation in p. 27. See also the map of of North East Frontier of Assam comprising the country inhabited by Abors, Mishmis, Singphos, & Khamtis, 1879 (based on Duffla Expedition Map of 1874, Capt. Woodthorpe's Survey 1877–78 and Capt. Beresford's Exploration Party 1879). Assam State Archives (hereafter ASA), Dispur, Map Section, No. 413.

years'. It was 'very depressing', he expressed.[8] Lister and Edgar also found the same situation in the Bengal frontier with the Lushai Hills which they described as 'a confused mass of broken and irregular hill ranges ... covered with dense jungle, of swampy cane-brakes, and of streams with steep high banks and muddy beds' and which was 'uncultivated and uninhabited'. Few of the tea gardens which came up during this time were but 'merely specks in the great forests that surround them'.[9]

It was through this 'uncultivated and uninhabited' tract of jungles popularly known as the hillmen's 'hunting ground' that most British expedition parties had to brave through with the help of a strong axes of 'road cutters' and sapper brigades before they could reach the first hill village. No sooner as they 'punished' the recalcitrant hill villages, this path which they cut through during the expedition and which eventually carried a glowing name like 'political path' became a jungle the following year. It needed to be cut every time an expedition was sent to the hills and in fact became one of the most troublesome affairs which the pre-colonial states generally chose to avoid. The difficulty in passing through this tract surely provided a powerful screen to the hill villages against valley state marauders and conquerors in a big way. In this context, it was the purveyor of their independence in the hills against the valley state control and appropriations. This 'hunting ground' was a deliberate creation of the hill polities as shown by the fact that the tract was generally claimed by them as part of their territory where every encroachment from the plainsmen was usually resisted.[10]

[8] National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI), Foreign Political Proceedings (FPP), 23 May 1846, No. 31: Butler to Jenkins, 16 Jan. 1846. See also the maps of Sibsagar, Naga Hills, Naga Tribes, 1878 and the sketch map of Naga Hills showing the localities of the various tribes, 1877. ASA, Map Section, Nos. 15 & 509, respectively.

[9] J.W. Edgar to Secy. Govt. of Bengal, 5 June 1872, as reproduced verbatim in A. Mackenzie, 2001 (1884). *The North-East Frontier of India*. New Delhi: Mittal, p. 472.

[10] I have discussed this in the case of the Bengal frontier in J. Guite, 2014. 'Colonialism and Its Unruly?—The Colonial State and Kuki Raids in Nineteenth Century Northeast India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48 (5): 1188 – 1232.

Along this 'hunting ground' towards the plains one again found yet another settled zone by plainsmen over which both the hills and valley polities claimed authority and from which both collected revenue on mutual consent. Such payment to the hill polities was known in Assam as *posa* and hence we used the term posaland to locate this zone. We have noted that it was the shared and overlapping zone of territory and sovereignty that ensured mutual trust and tranquillity in the frontier. To the hill polities the zone acted both as a resource conduit to channel the valley goods and a buffer against further encroachment of the valley states. To the valley polities, it was indeed a peace-zone where its rippling power to punish was least felt because it refrained the hill people from raiding the plains. The hillmen's 'hunting ground' and its posaland may be schematically represented in Figure 1.

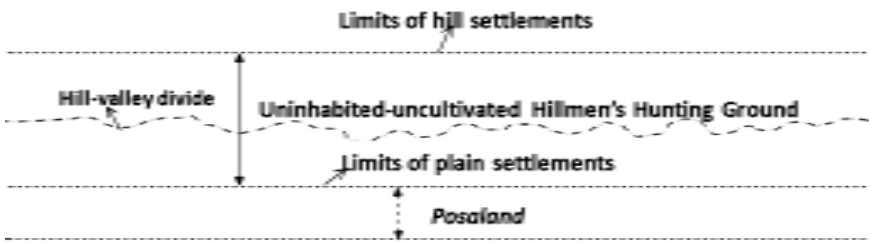

Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the hillmen's 'Hunting Ground'

As to their population distribution pattern, it is a well established fact that, instead of grouping themselves at one large village, they are spread out and scattered across the hill landscape, each separated by a very strong friction of distance, independent from one another, and each having a clear demarcated boundary, and sometimes shifting fairly frequently. We are lead to believe that this pattern is a necessary acclimatization to the natural setting of the hill landscape. But a closer examination of this distribution pattern shows rather a peculiar pattern that contradicted the notion of complete natural ordering. What becomes explicit from this distribution pattern was that while the less fertile and more rugged terrain of the interior hills were more

thickly populated, the more fertile lower hill ranges along the frontiers of the plains were relatively thin or sometimes completely void. Its distinguishing feature was such that when one moves away from the plain toward the interior parts of the hills one is struck by the increasing concentration of population and settlements.

To the early colonial officers who led an expedition into the hills, they first encountered the impassable wild and desolated jungles at the margins of the plain, commonly known as their 'hunting ground', along the foothills followed by a tortuous ascent to lower ranges for few days where they would find few scattered hamlets as if they were the 'guard villages' of the hills. As they moved inside, after abrupt ascents and descents of the great mountain ranges, they encountered the gradual increase in the number of settlements and of population until they reached the interior parts of the hill country.[11] Most of the bigger villages would be found in this interior part of the hills capping the high ridges of several heights, closely grouped and often encircled by number of smaller villages. In Angami Naga Hills, for instance, concentration of population and of large and powerful villages like Mozomah (300 houses), Khonomah (500), Kohima (820), Kekremah (1,000), Jotsoma (600), Kheghamah (1,600), Sopomah (2,000), and Lohjhemah (1,000) were found in the interior parts. Butler and Vincent, for instance, noted at least 12 large villages, whose houses were 500 and above, located in the interior part of the hills whereas to the exterior part of the hills toward the plains they found few small and scattered villages, often disconnected.[12] This was also the case among the so-called 'eastern Nagas' and

[11] The various expedition and survey reports in Naga Hills (say the accounts of Peal, Grange, Butler, Vincent, Neufvile, Charton, and Woodthorpe, for instance); or that of the accounts of Lister, Edgar, Lewin, and other expedition diaries and reports in Lushai Hills and Chin Hills, or of the accounts of Wilcox, Griffith, Cooper, Dalton, Hamilton, and others in the sub-Himalayan ranges; or the various expedition reports in Khasi and Garo hills, all give a clear account of population and village distribution in the hills.

[12] See John Butler, 1978 [1855], *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of fourteen years*, Delhi: Vivek, pp. 27–75, 140–

also in the Garo Hills, Khasi Hills, Lushai Hills, Chin Hills, and those of the sub-Himalayan ranges.[13] This peculiar settlement and population distribution pattern is schematically represented in Figure 2.

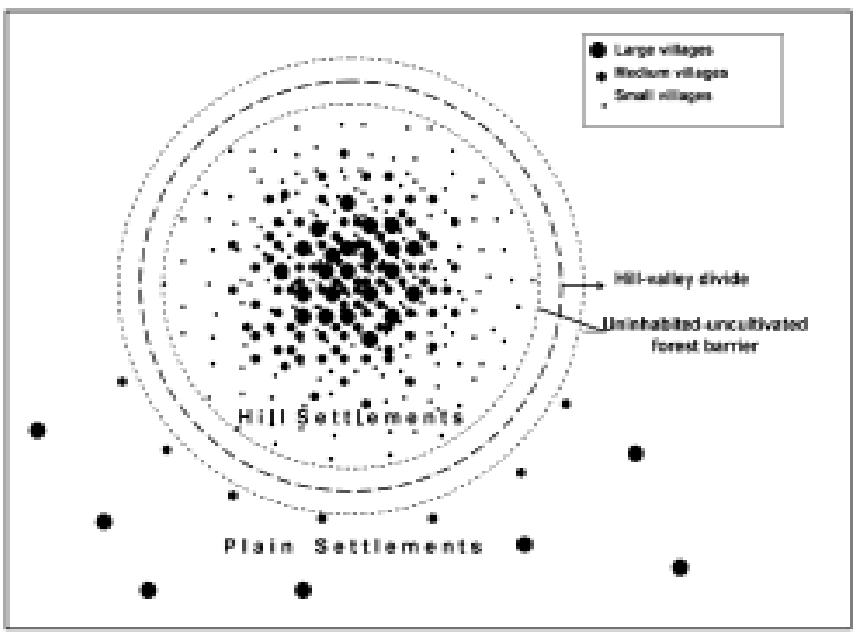

Fig. 2. Schematic representation of hill settlement and population distribution pattern

142; ASA, East Bengal & Assam Secretariat, 1850, File No. 639: Lieut Vincent's Diary of the Expedition to the Angami Hills in 1849. For the location of these hill villages see 'Indian Atlas, Sibsagar, Naga Hills, Naga Tribes, 1878' and 'Sketch Map of Naga Hills Showing the Localities of the Various Tribes', 1877, ASA, Map Section, Nos 15 and 509 respectively.

[13] For eastern Nagas, see S.E. Peal and Lt. Brodie's accounts of Naga Hills in *Selections of Papers,* pp. 284–333; for Khasi Hills, see Mills, A.J. Moffatt. 1985 [1853]., *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills*, North Eastern Hills University Publications, Shillong; for Lushai Hills, see reports of Lister (1850), Lewin, and Edgar (1872) in West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Kolkata, Judicial Proceedings (JP): 27 Feb. 1850, No. 36 and Aug. 1872, Nos 212 & 220; Woodthorpe, *Lushai Expedition* (1873), London: Hurst and Blackett; J. Shakespear, 1975 [1912], *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute (TRI), p. 19; A.S. Reid, 1976 [1893], *Chin-Lushai Land*, Aizawl: TRI; for Chin Hills, see B.S. Carey and H.N. Tuck, 1987 [1896], *The Chin*

This pattern explains the existence of a very strong sense of friction of distance in the spatial ordering of the hill population and settlements. This sense is also evident in other forms. Take the case of, for instance, their vernacular mode of measuring distance between two given places. Here distance was not measured in terms of actual measurement but the time taken and potential difficulties involved in crossing it. Vernacular measuring scale based on sun, day, or that of usual biological time scale such as number of tobacco pipes smoked, of betel-nut (*pan*) chewed, of number of rests taken while carrying certain goods in a journey, or time between meals, of cock crows, and so on. They are often a more efficient way of expressing distance than that of the colonial 'as the crow flies' maps as they take into account the critical factor of distance and friction of the terrain. Besides, we also found that the connectivity between the hill villages was generally made 'difficult' and 'repulsive'. Wherever paths existed, especially between two friendly villages, they were a mere narrow footpath, passable by a single profile, mostly seasonal and slippery, and in most cases easy for ambuscade. Between two rival villages, no connecting path existed but the pathless jungle tract between them was normally 'studded with pitfalls and panjies'. Such pathless settlements became more pronounced in the thinly populated and scattered villages in the lower hills near the plain where the so-called paths were of 'very worst imaginable description, always excessively narrow and overgrown by jungle in all directions'. In the Mishmi Hills, Griffith noted that 'no attempt is ever made at clearing them, any obstruction' and he rightly noted that 'the natives seem to think that the more difficult paths the better, a greater security being thus obtained from foreign invasion'.[14]

Hills, Delhi: Gian Publishing House; for sub-Himalayan ranges, see Wilcox 'Memoir of a Survey of Assam' and W. Griffith 'Journal of a Trip to the Mishmi Mountains, from the debouching of the Lohit to about 10 miles east of the Ghalums', both in *Selection of Papers*, pp. 1–83 and 110–133; and Needham and Hamilton accounts for Abor Hills; Cooper on Mishmee Hills, and so on. For the location of these villages see 'Topographical Map of Lushai Hills, Manipur, Tipperah and Chin Hills (1853–1894), 1899', ASA, Map Section, No. 663.

[14] NAI, FPP, 6 Mar. 1837, No. 67: W. Griffith to F. Jenkins, 20 Jan. 1837.

If few 'difficult and dangerous' paths existed in the frontier which may be taken to reach the hill settlements, the lower hill villages, the 'guard villages', would do anything to discourage any valley party to make their way into the interior parts of the hills. The progress of most of the valley parties were usually stopped or warned at the foothills not to proceed further. The parties were often told that the 'vengeance of the tribe [in the interior] would fall on them' if they dared to permit their advance into the hills. Besides, every effort to procure guides was also refused. Griffith, for instance, noted that his attempt to reach the frontier of Tibet 'prove completely futile' since 'no tribes, no promises would induce any of the chiefs to gives me guides even to the first Mishmee village belonging to the Meezhoo tribe' and 'without whose assistance in this most difficult country, I need scarcely say that all attempt to advance would have been made in vain'.[15] Whenever such hill guides were obtained it was the same story; these guides would invariably take the party along 'the most impassable routes', possibly in keeping with the idea of harassing the party differently. Thus, we can see that all efforts were made to discourage, or even resist, if possible, the entry of 'foreigners' into the interior parts of the hills as such an entry was generally taken to be a 'preliminary' survey for future control and 'collection of revenue'.[16] Besides, we see that among certain tribes their villages were small, scattered, and constantly shifting from one place to another despite the possibility of grouping them together in one big and permanent village. This system is practiced among the Mishmis, Mikirs (Karbis), Dimasas, Lushei-Kukis (of Manipur and Lushai Hills), and so on. They were often compared with the 'bird of passage' who has no intention of settling down in a permanent village.

How might we explain this peculiar behaviour of the hill people then? If the hillmen established their village in relation

[15] NAI, FPP, 6 Mar. 1837, No. 67: Griffith to Jenkins, 20 Jan. 1837.

[16] This is often noted in the report of various topographical surveys in the hills. See, for instance, NAI, FPP-A, Oct. 1875, No. 261: Lt. Col. J.M. Graham to H. Luttman-Johnson, 15 Mar. 1875; NAI, FPP-A, Dec. 1875, No. 92: Capt. J. Butler to H. Luttman-Johnson, 30 Apr. 1875; NAI, FPP-A, Jan. 1877, No. 148: Woodthorpe to Badgley, 15 June 1876.

to a constant threat from raiders and marauders, ordered their space to provide them maximum friction between their villages and in relation to the plain settlements, dispersed their population so that they are far away from the valley populations, did anything to prevent the valley parties from entering the hills, and constantly shifted their small villages from one place to another, then we can say that this behaviour least explains the so-called 'internecine warfare' among them as we are often led to believe but it rather takes us to the conclusion that such spatial ordering was created against the valley state control and appropriations. As such dispersive distribution is in its essence 'irritating' to state formation it was also an instrument to prevent any attempt to establish state system in the hills. While the strong friction of distance makes conquest difficult the small and constantly shifting villages make the hills, villages unattractive, formless, and amorphous in the eyes of state builders. Truly, they are, to use Hutton's apt term, 'administrative nuisance' and 'not calculated to endear him to a district officer'. They are what Sidney Endle has rightly noted of Kachari dispersion as 'Divide et impera'. It is, in this context, a pertinent political manoeuvring at the outset.

If the hill settlement and population distribution pattern was evolved against rule or that of control and appropriations, we can see that the hill social and political formation process was also tuned towards achieving the same objective. Broadly the hill social and political formation process may be best described as plural, porous, and fluid. 'Of the Naga alone,' noted Damant, 'there are not less, and probably more, than thirty different tribes, all speaking different languages, and mutually unintelligible one to another.' In some instances, he noted, 'a few may be reduced to the rank of dialects, but in the majority of cases they are essentially distinct languages, and often no connexion or similarity'. Such a 'multiplicity of tribes', he further noted, makes it 'almost impossible to define the limits of each tribe with any approach to accuracy, or even to say precisely how many tribes there are'.[17] Although some tribes comparatively showed inherent

[17] G.H. Damant, 1880. 'Notes on the Locality and Population of the Tribes Dwelling between the Brahmaputra and Ningthi Rivers', *Journal of the Royal*

unity than the Nagas, this situation of plurality in Naga Hills depicted the general disposition of the hill societies in the region. While this character of plurality was a well-recognized system among the hill tribes we are made to believe that such multiplicity was isolated, disconnected, and compartmentalized over the centuries. Truly, evidence suggested an otherwise social situation in the hills of North-east India.

The notion of disconnectedness certainly overlooked the strong presence of a porous and fluid social system in the region. Woodthorpe, for instance, noted that the Naga villages were so 'mixed up together' that the distinction between different tribes are very 'slight' and as such he doubted whether any 'tribal limits could ever be successfully adopted'.[18] This situation was best described by Capt. Butler in 1873:

> These various tribes all dovetail into each other in a most remarkable manner, and it is impossible to assign to them any hard-and-fast limits, or to say that beyond certain limits a tribe does not extend; for not only do we often find men from two or even three tribes living in the same village but in many cases villages belonging to the same tribe are separated from each other by those of several other tribes.[19]

He went on to say that 'portions of the dialect, manners, customs, and dress of any one tribe we may like to take up will constantly keep cropping up in other tribes as we go on'.[20]

This 'dovetailing' ethnic situation becomes more visible among the Chin-Kuki tribes. In the Lushai Hills, for instance, Shakespear noted that before the Lusheis came to the Hills it was entirely occupied by 'many consanguineous communities scattered over the hills, living under the headmen of their own

---

Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, New Series, 12 (2): 228–258, *http://www.jstor.org,* quotation from pp. 229–230.

[18] NAI, FPP-A, Jan. 1877, No. 148: Woodthorpe to Badgley, 15 June 1876.

[19] Ibid.

[20] As quoted in verbatim in Mackenzie, *North-East Frontier*, p. 85.

and each using a dialect of their own' but the 'greater part of these were absorbed and now form the majority of the subjects of the Thangur [Lushei] chiefs' and 'all more or less adopted the language and customs of their rulers'.[21] British effort to disentangle them failed. During the census of 1901, noted Shakespear, an unsuccessful attempt was made to get a complete list of the clan families and branches. The reason for this was explained in terms of 'the ignorance of the people themselves as to what clan or family they belong to and the tendency to claim to be true *Lusheis*'.

> Everyone knew the name of the branch to which he belonged and as a rule the family name would be correctly given, but in many cases the clan name was altogether omitted or *Lushei* was entered against families which had no real claim to that distinction.[22]

Forgetting and/or omitting one's clan name and entering the other's clan against it was but an expression of extreme fluidity. J.H. Green even remarked that some tribes in Burma change their languages 'almost as often as they change their clothes'. He rightly noted that languages are changed 'by conquest, by absorption, by isolation, and by the general tendency to adopt the language of a neighbour who is considered to belong to a more powerful, more numerous, or more advanced tribe or race'.[23] Therefore, extreme fluidity of identities, multiplicity of speeches, and diversity of cultural dispositions had become the rule rather than the exception.

Plurality, porosity, and fluidity were, indeed, the gels that upheld individual freedom. Plurality provided maximum choices, porosity the channel for mobility, and fluidity the possibility for social engineering. These perhaps may be considered the essence of the hill society. By choosing freely one could promptly emancipate himself from any feeling of threat. Thus, every

[21] Shakespear, 1998 [1912]. *The Lushei Kuki Clans*. pp. 5, 40–41.
[22] Shakespear, *Lushei Kuki Clans*, p. 41.
[23] *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. II: Burma, part II, p. 245.

individual got the freedom to shift from one village to another or from one clan/tribe to another on his own consent, and no one, including the chief/headmen or the tribe as a whole, had the power to restrict him. Therefore, when a weaker tribe/individual has the tendency and/or the freedom to choose/claim and appropriate the identity of a more powerful tribe, and has indeed become and/or are becoming one of them at ease, we cannot therefore say that each tribe was isolated, disconnected, and compartmentalized.[24]

A multiple, porous, and fluid social formation process was conveyed and sustained by yet another set of plural and pliable social institutions quite different from a homogenizing state system we found in the valleys. With varying degrees of differentiation we may reduce them into two broader types often described as 'democratic' and 'despotic'. Egalitarianism or 'democratic' form of social organization in different degrees was the dominant system, say, among most Nagas, Khasis, Abors, Dufflas, Mishmees, Karbis, Dimasas, etc.[25] Under this system some tribes have a 'nominal head or chief' who posseses 'no absolute power over the people' or 'to take cognizance of offences against the person or property of individuals'. His distinction as 'headman' was generally conditioned by 'his personal character' such as wealth, bravery, skill in diplomacy, powers of oratory,

[24] We can see that many tribes of the region have already lost their identity today and new identities have been formed over time.

[25] For Nagas, see for instance, Butler, *Travels in Assam*, pp. 145–46; R.G.Woodthorpe, 1882. 'Notes on the Wild Tribes Inhabiting the So-Called Naga Hills, on Our North-East Frontier of India. Part I', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 11: 56–73, *www.Jstor.org* (accessed: 16/07/2010). For Khasis and Abors see William Robinson, 1975 [1841]. *A Descriptive Account of Asam*, Mittal, Delhi, pp. 410–11, 359; Wilcox's 'Memoir' in *Selection of Papers*, p. 51. For further account of Abors 'Councils' at the Morung (*mosup* in Abor language) see, for instance, the reports of Wilcox, Dalton, and Needham. See *Selection of Papers,* pp. 49–51; E.T. Dalton, 1872, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Office Superintendent of Government, Calcutta, pp. 26–33; NAI, FE (A): March 1885, No. 253: J.F. Needham to Dy. Com. Lakhimpur, 27 Oct. 1884. For Karbis see C.J. Lyall, 1997 [1908], *The Mikirs: From the Paper of Late Edward Stack*, Spectrum, Delhi, p. 22. For 'old Kukis' see Butler, *Travels in Assam*, pp. 81–2.

and so on. His 'orders are obeyed so far only as they accord with the wishes and convenience of the community', for the business of the village government was 'transacted at public meetings' at which 'subjects affecting the welfare of the parties, are canvassed, opinions advanced and maintained' by the people who assemble in the council. The questions were decided by a majority where every member of the council has equal vote. Among some Nagas, and also among the Karbis, it is seen that even when a question is decided by the majority 'the minority will not hold themselves bound in any way' by such a decision. This takes us to the conclusion reached by Butler and Woodthorpe in the case of Angami Nagas that 'every man is his own master, and avenges his own quarrel' and 'virtually every man does that which is right in his own eyes, and is a law unto himself'.[26] In this context, the so-called 'headman' or 'chief' were 'simply *primus inter pares*, and often that only *pro tem*'.

This 'democratic' form of social organization is perhaps the most effective way to prevent tyranny and control. 'The great difficulty in dealing with the Naga tribes is,' noted Macgregor, 'that there is no recognised head, and that each village is often divided into three or four parties.'[27] Wilcox also noted that there were certain influential persons among the Abors through which the gaining of any point at issue with them can be made but 'the extreme jealousy of the "Raj," and vigilant watchfulness to preserve their democratical rights, render it a matter very difficult to manage to bribe these influential men'.[28] That is the shield and shelter of an egalitarian society that permits relative freedom within and renders it 'very difficult' to control from without. MaCabe even suggested that government should encourage the hill chiefs to become 'despotic' as 'it facilitates the extension of our control'.[29]

[26] Woodthorpe, 'Notes on the Wild Tribes', pp. 56–73.
[27] NAI, FPP-A, Oct. 1878, No. 21: Diary of Lt. C.R. Macgregor in Naga Hills, 1878, quotation from 2 Feb. 1878.
[28] Wilcox, 'Memoir' in *Selection of Papers*, p. 51.
[29] NAI, FPP-A, July 1888, No. 122: R.B. MaCabe to Secy. to Chief Commr. of Assam, 24 May 1888. It was in the context of control that colonial state

In what was understood to be 'despotic' chieftainship system, the case of Kukis is instructive. At the dawn of the nineteenth century John Macrae noted the existence of 'elective' system at the village level. But during the later part of the century we can see that the position of the chief became 'hereditary' and in most cases was described to be 'strictly monarchical' and 'absolutely despotic' who collected 'taxes', enforced labour, obtained obedience, and above all his words were taken to be the law. Basing it from the power of the chief the village community were often described to be living in a state of 'semi-slavery' or mere 'tenants' under 'feudal Baron'.[30] Such a notion of 'oriental despotism', however, overlooked the very substantial element of Kuki chieftainship system which would otherwise define the system in completely different manner. Thus, behind the glowing power of the chief one find this critical element composed and intact over the ages. It is meant the customary rights of an individual who has all the powers to shift or transfer from one village or chief to another village or chief as and when he felt it was necessary. In such a case the so-called 'absolute despot' had no power to stop him unless s/he is his slave or bonded labour.

Truly the despotism of Kuki chief was only in theory due to this very critical element of what is called a safe-conduit to tyranny. Shakespear rightly noted this fact in the Lushai Hills. In theory, he said, the Kuki chief was a despot, 'but in reality his power was very much circumscribed, and his subjects could so easily transfer their allegiance to some rival chief'. He went on

recognized a certain person as 'Gaonboorah' (headman) in each village after annexation who should look after the civil and some criminal cases brought to him, collect 'taxes' due to government with 20 per cent commission, and occasionally attend a meeting with the district officer. See NAI, FPP-A, Dec. 1866, No. 138: Col. H. Hopkinson to Secy. to Govt. of Bengal, 14 Sept. 1866.

[30] See for instance, J. Johnstone, 1896 [1987]. *My Experience in Manipur and Naga Hills*. Delhi: Gian Publishing House; p. 27; R. Stewart, 1855. 'Notes on Northern Cachar', *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal,* xxiv(3), pp. 625–27; Shakespear, *Lushei Kuki Clans*; B.S. Carey, and H.N. Tuck. 1987 [1896]. *The Chin Hills: A History of the People, British Dealings with Them, Their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of Their Country*, 2 Vols, Delhi, p. 201.

to say that:

> A strong ruler, who governed mainly according to custom, could do almost anything he liked without losing his followers, but a weak man who tried petty tyrannies soon found himself a king without any subjects.[31]

Thus, what is 'customary' invariably excludes 'petty tyrannies' and in case of any tyrannical rule the custom also permits any person to shift to other village(s) without the consent of the chief and at his own will. Certainly, this is a constraint against 'despotism' so much so that Lewin was stunned to see a Lushei chief speechless before his drunken villager who seized his neck and shoved him off the path for standing on the way. The chief's explanation of the incident, that he was an equal fellow to his villagers except on the warpath or in the council, was even more explicit.[32]

No matter to what extent the hill people were subservient to their chiefs the point is to show how they strived to preserve, and/or asserted to attain individual freedom and to prevent tyranny in the long run. The 'chief' or 'headman' or 'king', whatever may be the designation, in both the systems, became a mere *leader* of the village due to what Pierre Clastres has called his 'technical competence' alone, or sometimes by virtue of birth, whereas his words did not carry the force of law because he can only 'persuade' and his 'prestige' did not signify power because the people would not allow him to change his 'technical superiority' to 'political authority'.[33] Thus, when the hold of the chief over his people was 'nominal' in all respects, this in the nutshell

[31] Shakespear, *Lushei Kuki Clans*, p. 44.
[32] T.H. Lewin, 1870 [1978], *Wild Races of South-Eastern India.* Aizawl: TRI, p. 132.
[33] This 'technical competence' includes his oratorical talent, his expertise as a hunter, his ability to co-ordinate martial activities, both offensive and defensive. See Pierre Clastres, 1977 [1974], *Society Against the State,* trans. Robert Hurley, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 175.

typified that the hill society was deficient of any channel through which control from above and from the centre could be affected.

In this context, the hill's 'social contract' was not so much a submission to the so-called 'common/public interest' but rather a submission before the altar of individual rights and freedom. It was an individual world conceived perhaps to counterpoise the social contract projected in the state space. It was decidedly a social formation that allowed self-realization and self-actualization to the extreme, to both the individuals and the hill society at large. It was an organization, a system that is '*matrix*' in nature and substance. This broad social pattern was glittered with much more variegated and fussy social customs which evolved so as not to endear the district officers from having any interests in them. They are, therefore, a deliberate political choice at the margins of the state rather than something *given* by nature. They are chosen to preserve their relative autonomy and to prevent any oppressive control, not only from the valley state potentates but also from those hillmen who might want to establish their rule in the hills. It is, therefore, again a political choice at the margins of the states to prevent any oppressive control from within and without.

Another important aspect of the hill practice that draws our attention is their economic system. Deriving its ideas from the dominant civilizational discourse, the hill economy was generally described in colonial discourse as a 'primitive' and 'subsistence' economy. This is because it *lacks* many of the 'civilized' economy's parameters. It lacks time, technology, and surplus. Hence, they *lack* money, market, and merchants. On the other hand, these *lacks* were shown to be caused by their 'habits' of indolence. In this context, four important aspects become profound in the colonial discourse on the hill economy which centres around jhum cultivation. First, the hill tribes were shown to be perpetually at backbreaking works throughout the year as if they were not having any time for leisure. Even during the off-season, they had to work. Second, they engaged in such strenuous work for a 'bare subsistence' livelihood. They had to work also

during the off agriculture season 'in order to add to an otherwise meagre and unvaried diet' they gained from their jhum. Therefore, despite having no daybreak and no break day round the year (except on 'genna' or taboo) they were not able to produce enough food for survival. Hence they lacked surplus and such an economy was but a 'subsistence economy'. Working a 'pretty full day' just for a 'bare subsistence' is but to represent the hill people in the image of a perpetual 'destitution of the savage'.

Third and fourth, the colonial discourse depicted the hill society living in such a sorry state of destitution partly due to their inferior technology of husbandry and partly due to their habits of indolence akin to the notion of 'savage is lazy'. Few of their agricultural implements such as *dao*, axe, hoe, sickle, and a few of wood or bamboo implements were disdained to be of 'inferior' technology which compelled them to struggle hard against their 'stubborn soil' to procure their 'meagre and unvaried diet'. Interestingly, the lack of time, technology, and surplus was ascribed to their 'laziness'. 'Such is the idleness of the people,' noted Cooper in the case of Mishmis, 'that they are often reduced to great straits for want of food.'[34] This is often found to be especially true in the case of the male folks who passed their days in complete leisure, loafed about the village, lying in the sun, assembled round the fire, smoking, drinking, telling stories, and talking scandal. After their crops were reaped, the village folks were found to either resign themselves to the 'unrestrained' indulgence of feasting and dancing where drinking, dancing, and excitement went unlimited, where the blood of animals flowed freely, where a series of games played were uncontrolled, and where the morose of monotony had been demolished and flattened. They also often planned expeditions against enemy villages. The idea was that the male folks, unlike the women, were not engaging themselves in any productive activities; their families were not able to produce enough food or any surplus. The contention is that had the indolent habits been given to some

[34] T.T. Cooper, 1995 [1873]. *The Mishmee Hills*. New Delhi: Mittal, pp. 206–207.

industry their situation of destitution might have been avoided. In this way, the hill people were characterized to be extremely indolent, wretched, and broken.

The pertinent question, however, is to see whether the hill people really lacked time, technology, or even surplus. Were the hill people really lazy, idle, and indolent? In other words, was the hill society really reduced to perpetual destitution as the 'savage'? Clearly, the assertion that the hill people practiced 'subsistence economy' on the one hand and at the same time they were idle and lazy who spent much of their time in leisure and resigned themselves to the unrestrained indulgence of feasting and dancing and so on, is but a self-defeating statement. Truly, one cannot have both. Either one leads a life with subsistence economy and spends most of his time in search of food and works 'pretty full day' everyday round the year for a bare subsistence, or else he does not practice subsistence economy and enjoys an affluent lifestyle that allows him prolonged hours of leisure and in the socialization of the tribal universe. In fact, the rich ethnographic materials produced during the colonial period itself defeated their own notion of 'subsistence economy' by providing ample amount of evidence which otherwise speaks against its dominant discourse. There was sufficient evidence to show that the hill economy was, instead of 'subsistence', an economy which may be best described as affluent. If the term 'surplus' is not appropriate, plenitude is something which may best describe the hill villages.

Evidences suggest that the hill economy in general was, instead of 'primitive' and 'subsistence', an economy that was different from what we found in the valleys. For one, the hill people were, instead of a wretch, half-starved, and overworked population, an affluent community who reaped sufficient food supply to eat, to feast, to pay, to feed, and to propitiate, from their jhum land. They generally ate three full meals in a day. Rice beer flowed from their pots throughout the year. Mass feasting seems to have been unlimited. They also usually paid their chiefs. They fed travellers, the poor, and destitute. They paid large amounts

of their produce to appease the pang of their ever demanding malevolent spirits. If the term surplus applies to something beyond one's daily meals, then what we can see from the evidence of the hill people shows an economy that is studded with surplus. All these expenditures were borne by their jhum cultivation. It is surprising to note that the hill societies hardly witnessed famine. Mills, for instance, noted that among the Ao Nagas 'though times of scarcity occur, real famine is rare or unknown'.[35] Playfair also noted of the Garos that 'real famine never touches them, for even if the rice crop fails, they have so many other cereals and edible roots on which to fall back, and the jungle supplies them with so many more of the latter, that it must be a bad year indeed when the Garo has to go hungry'.[36]

On the question of time and technology, evidences have suggested that the hill people spent very little time in their jhum field to procure sufficient amount of food supply for a year. For instance, most ethnographic evidences suggested that the hill people had at least five months of free time in a year to keep themselves away from their mainstay jhum field. The field study in the hills of Manipur also found that the total workdays in a year for a single individual in the jhum field comes to the tune of 100 to 130 days.[37] This, they ably did it with the existing level of technology and method of husbandry. If efficiency and satisfying one's needs are a benchmark to measure the superiority or inferiority of technology, then it does not appear that the hillmen's technology expressed any sense of inferiority. In any manner, the above evidences suggested that the hill people have sufficient time beyond their usual production level which they can use for surplus production, if they wish. But instead of giving

[35] J.P. Mills, 1926. *The Ao Nagas*, London: Macmillan, p. 107.
[36] M.P. Playfair, 1998 [1909]. *The Garos*, Delhi: Low Price Publication, p. 4.
[37] This is the result of my field work in the four hill districts of Manipur undertaken in 2014 under a UGC major research project. Considering the depleting forest resources due to population pressure this figure may be taken as conservative in relation to the better placed nineteenth-century situation.

this free time in productive activities for surplus, they spent it in leisure and idleness as noted above.

Two peculiar economic behaviours of the hillmen draw our attention here. First, we can see that they have a 'rooted disinclination' to produce surplus for markets, money, and merchants. They would select land just sufficient to provide them enough food for a year but in case of surplus production due to unexpected bumper harvest they invariably dumped them in the jhum field only to be devoured by wild animals. Second, they seemed to imbibe certain rules in either accepting or rejecting new crops, implements, or methods of cultivation. Whereas New World crops like maize (Indian corn) and sweet potatoes, or implements like sickles and axes, or weapons like firearms, or of pottery and textile technology, and so on, were received with much excitement, other items of the same genre were found to be stiffly opposed. This evidence becomes clear during the colonial period when we see that all the efforts of the colonial administration to 'improve' and 'enrich' the hill country failed. New crops like tea, wheat, potato, cotton, apple, all-fruit trees, and garden vegetables had been introduced without success. In certain places plough cultivation was introduced but in vain. The new projects failed mainly because the hill people refused to cultivate or adopt them in their general economy/agriculture.

How might we understand this peculiar economic behaviour of the hill people? If the hill people could produce sufficient food not only to eat but also to feed, to feast, to pay and to appease for a year with little amount of labour and within the existing technology of husbandry and if they had a 'rooted disinclination' to produce surplus beyond these requirements and refused to adopt certain crops, implements, and methods while receptive to others, then we can say that such behaviour is an expression of something else. Here, the contention that the hill people were state-evading populations becomes instructive. Arguably, the hill people refused to produce surpluses as part of their political manoeuvring as state-evading populations in the hills. Surpluses are, in principle, against their political calling in the hills because

it was undoubtedly one potential source of inequality, of oppression by the haves upon the have-nots, and of bait to valley states, raiders, and marauders. The failure for the various colonial projects was mainly because they were not receptive to the new ideas which would invariably make them dependent on the markets not only as the outlet for the new crops but also the source of supply for their staple food. Depending on the markets was certainly a prelude to political control which they have avoided over the centuries. Some new crops or implements entered the hills with ease as they enhanced their autonomy in the hills against the valley markets.

The invention of jhum was indeed a significant landmark in the history of the hill people because it fulfilled their economic, social, environment, and political concerns in the hills as state-evading populations. It mechanically dispersed the population across the hill landscape into small hamlets. The simplicity in its agriculture technology and the requirement of little capital sink to start a new field ensured mobility to householders and hence promoted their freedom. Its flattened wealth ensured social equality as each family had to work for their livelihood and produce no surplus for markets. Due to its character of shifting, jhum also sustained the forest covers which not only provided them the required natural friction of distance but also made land environmentally and economically sustainable. Above all, jhum cultivation was part of their social universe that begot and conveyed most of their socio-cultural practices. The strenuous works in jhum was, to them a 'pleasurable toil'. For these reasons, they rejected any attempt to change or substitute their mainstay economy with other methods. Hence, the notion of 'food sovereignty' and what may be called green sovereignty found its permanent imprints in the hills. In this context, we can say that jhum economy is again a pertinent political manoeuvring at the margins of the state in which the choice of safety and security, not wealth, becomes evident. It was because of this choice of relative freedom that they remain materially poor.

Colonialism and Its Malcontents

The coming of colonial state in the region was indeed a watershed in the history of North-east Indian tribes just as it was in other parts of the world. We can see that in the pre-colonial period the hill–valley relationship was broadly defined as symbiotic, interdependent, and peaceful in nature. However, the coming of colonialism with a new notion of power that was coterminous with a definitive geography of space and the sovereignty attached to such space changed the traditional concept of space, territoriality, and power in the region. The changing circumstances bred varied responses from the hill people. The effect of the colonial gigantic movement was already felt even before the hills were annexed into the Empire. The symbiotic hill–valley relationship that we saw during the pre-colonial period was transformed into confrontation. The pre-colonial peace-zone turned into a zone of conflict and contestation driving the frontier into confusion. What had been the source of support in the pre-colonial period eventually turned into a source of dreaded outrages. Truly, the advent of colonialism was a major factor in the history of the hill tribes.

Before the hills were annexed the colonial effect was felt in the form of changing notion of power and authority in the hills. We have seen that the hill polities in general were without authority in which power was equally distributed among the people where everyone was his own master. But the coming of colonialism in the region directly and indirectly helped in channelling power and authority into the hills. On the one hand, it helped and encouraged the local state potentates such as Manipuris, Tipperahs, Kacharis, Burmese, and so on to infiltrate into the hills. On the other, its series of expeditions and tours into the hills advertently and inadvertently proliferated power and authority in the hills. In both the cases, the hill people were excited either to fight against the infiltration or establish power in the hills with their support. The play of power was rampantly displayed in the shape of soldiers armed with earth-shaking firearms, killing people indiscriminately, burning their houses and

granaries, and destroying their standing crops. It eventually compelled the hill people to submission and forced them to pay a stipulated tribute annually as a sign of obedience; we cannot therefore say that they remained silent spectators.

The entry of power and authority, or more exactly the re-assembling of power in the hills, excited the hill people to the extent they had never experienced before. It not only generated a massive struggle and contestation among few of the power potentates who acquired power but also between them and those who detested it. This is visible in most hills in the form of what was often described to be 'exterminating warfare'. One significant aspect of this changing power nexus was the emergence of some powerful '*Rajah*s' in the hills. War, conquest, subjugation, displacement, and so on studded the hills and changed the political, social, and demographic landscape. The situation in Chin-Lushai Hills and Naga Hills was a telling case. The rise of Falams, Hakas, Siyins, and Suktes in Chin Hills, of the Sailos chiefs in Lushai Hills, or that of Thadou chiefs in Manipur Hills are clear cases of the rising tide of what is often considered as 'Chiefdom'.[38] The entry of firearms in these hills was critical in understanding the new rising tide of power and authority here.[39]

In Naga Hills, the infiltration of three valley states—Manipur, Cachar, and British—excited the Nagas and stirred up the hornet's nest. With few exceptions, all Angami villages were found to be divided into two groups—one attached to Manipur (*Mukpreemah*) and another to Assam/British (*Tippremah*) or Cacharis. The Vincent expedition (1849), for instance, clearly noted this:

> There are two Parties in Angami Naga Hills—one who called themselves the clans men of the 'Tippremah', i.e. the British

[38] See, Carey, *Chin Hills*; Mackenzie, *North East Frontier*; Lewin, *Wild Races*; Shakespear, *Lushei Kuki Clans*; and R. Brown, 2001 (1873). *Statistical Account of the Native State of Manipur*, New Delhi: Mittal.

[39] J. Guite, 2011. 'Civilisation and its malcontents: The politics of Kuki raid in nineteenth century Northeast India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48 (3): 339–76.

> Government—the other who called themselves the clans men of the 'Muk-preemah' i.e. Manipur Government—into these every village is divided and they are only inclined to give assistance to either Government—in due proportion to the assistance they expect in return in crushing their own enemies.[40]

The competition and contestation for power and domination between these two parties changed the social and political landscape of the Hills. The two parties now separately allied themselves to each other for both defence and aggression. The party in smaller villages normally allied itself to those of its party in the larger and powerful villages so that some sort of larger political clichés eventually emerged across the hill landscape that centred around the authority of the powerful villages.[41] This situation had already been witnessed in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the eighteenth century possibly in the face of the stressing political pressure from the surrounding valley states of Bengal and Assam.[42]

The contested conflict among the various power potentates in the hills did not only transform many of the hill practices but also often spilled-over into the plains in the form of 'raids'. The new notion of kingship and authority in the hills changed the concept of leadership, warfare and warrior, human-head and slave in big way. Now a leader was not only a leader in war and village council but also a chief, a Rajah, who fought for people, power, territory, and domination. Similarly, war was fought for the same purpose. Thus, Jubeelee, the chief of Mozemah in Naga Hills, and an ally of *Tippremah* or British/Assam, was found to be running from pillar to post, both in the hills and in the valley to Nowgong, Gauhati, Golaghat, and North Cachar in 'his effort to make his power paramount'. On the other side, his rivals Niholly of Mozemah and Pelhoo of Khonomah were doing the same as

[40] ASA, EB & AS, 1850, File No. 639: Lieut. Vincent's Diary of the Expedition to the Angami Hills in 1849.

[41] See for instance Butler, *Travels in Assam*.

[42] See for instance Pemberton, 1835, *Eastern Frontier of India*, Delhi: Mittal.

the allies of *Muk-preemah* or Manipur.[43] The rapidity of power formation process in certain areas such as in the southern hills, say, among the Kuki-Chin tribes, was mainly entailed by the deployment of the earth-shaking weapons and firearms in the warfare. The confusion the new power regime had wrought on to the hill society was tremendous. The expansionist policy now employed by the emerging Rajahs in the hills led to the death of several people and the subjugation and absorption of a much larger number of them. True to its state-evading spirit, larger number of the hill population, on the other hand, fled to other places to evade the control of Rajahs. To those who were subjugated, their attachment to the new Rajahs was fraught with uncertainties as the old tribal ties had been broken not only because the new relationship was governed by coercion but also because the traditional social relation could not hold much water in the new scenario.

As the traditional social compact was broken, the new power potentates had to rely on two sources to sustain their growing power—a strong group of fighting men and a strong group of coerced labour power for production. To encourage large numbers of men to take the path of a great 'warrior', the traditional concept of 'warrior' as killer of big games or of occasional hunt for heads for the spiritual well-being of community and crops was now transformed into killer of foes. Evidences have suggested that 'raid' is now taken to attack and kill the enemy, not to procure heads. In other words, war is now directed towards the enemy, not against guiltless villages or 'any person' as it was often felt. Now warriors fought the foes for fame and glory, of human vanity, rather than spiritual contentment. He brought heads and captives of the enemy not so much for prosperity of the land and community but as a 'proof of prowess' for which the community would confer him the highest distinction. The glorification of killing the foes was so great that any man who could not kill one would be condemned as 'boy', 'girl', or 'women' and associated

[43] ASA, EB & AS, 1850, File No. 639: Lieut. Vincent's Diary of the Expedition to the Angami Hills in 1849.

only with women.[44] On the other hand, one who could kill would receive the distinction of a 'warrior', the number of enemies killed being the measuring rod in the social ranking of the warriors.

Nevertheless, flaws and uncertainties soon appeared within the new setting. On the one hand, the assertion for masculinity and the glorification of manhood as 'warrior' reduced the womenfolk into a mere labour machine who had to carry the whole weight of work on their back. Men now felt 'effeminate' to work like women. Thus, the notion that men are to fight and women are to produce emerged very strongly. On the other hand, when large numbers of the hill population fled against the Rajah's control and the loyalty of those whom they subjugated was also fraught with uncertainties, and when the available womenfolk were not able to support the rising tide of polity formation process, the new power potentates began to reduce their 'subjects' into a state of 'semi-slavery'. This situation, instead of enhancing the loyalty of his 'subjects' further augmented the uncertain situation. To overtake these growing uncertainties in the hills, the Rajahs eventually banked on their naked force to reduce the traditional 'charity houses' into an abode of 'slaves'. Slavery as an established practice has been evident from the rich colonial ethnographic materials. But the hill slavery was quite different from what we see in the surrounding valleys and that of the classical system. Since the idea behind the formation of the so-called 'slavery system' in the hills was to create a group of loyal attendants in the face of a pliable and uncertain social relation, it is not surprising that the 'slaves' were treated quite well and 'kindly' as members of the chief's/master's house. This situation was noted by all colonial observers. Thus, Lewin was, for instance, stunned to see that most of the hill slaves who were captured from the plains refused to be released during the great Lushai Expedition 1871–72. He noted that all the rescued slaves 'unite in describing the treatment they received [from their masters] as kind in the extreme'. The captives given up by the Southern Howlongs had to be taken by force. They 'clung to their

[44] In Lushai Hills such people are known as *toi*.

Lushai friends', noted Lewin, 'weeping piteously and entreating that they might not be made over to us'.[45]

Labour was, therefore, transformed into wealth, not only to construct, enforce, and sustain a Rajah's authority but also to overcome the constraints generated by the non-state behaviour of his 'subjects'. The scarcity of labour power in the hills due to displacement and flight eventually induced the new power potentates to accumulate 'slaves' from the plains or other hostile tribes through the instrument of 'raid'. Thus, raid was, in this context, an expression of hill politics and necessarily represented power and authority in the hills.[46] 'Raid' is in itself a broader term which encompasses multiple meanings and also multiple causes. Another interesting aspect of raid in the North-east frontier was that it was a response to the colonial frontier policy in general. This may be broadly seen in two ways: raid as the spill-over of contested conflict among the hill power potentates and raid as a resistance against colonial encroachment into the hill territory. For instance, raids in the Assam frontier with Angami Hills were often ascribed to be committed by the so-called Muk-preemah or Manipur group. The fact is that this group was in conflict with the other group (Tippremah or British/Assam group) who were considered as 'friendly clans' by the British and spared from 'punishment'. Hence, whenever a British expedition was sent into the hills the Muk-preemah group would always consider it as coming to assist their rival, the Tippremah group. Therefore, in response of such drastic measures, the former would invariably raid the British territory in revenge.[47] In Cachar and Manipur frontier, the raid was often found to be an extension of the conflict between the 'enemy' hill Kukis and that of 'our Kukis' who had been settled and protected by British in different *punjee*s or 'sepoy villages' at the margins of the valleys.[48] In this context, the raid

[45] WBSA, JP: August 1872, No. 212.

[46] I have discussed this aspect of raid in J. Guite, 2011. 'Civilisation and its malcontents', pp. 339–76.

[47] This aspect of raid had been noted by Butler and Vincent reports of the Naga Hills.

[48] See Mackenzie, *North East Frontier*.

was but a spill-over of the contested conflict between the two rival groups in the hills.

The raid was also caused by the conflicting notion of space and territoriality between the colonial state and the hill polities. The pre-colonial notion of shared and overlapping territory and sovereignty in the frontier had no place in the new colonial circumstances. Space was seen as quantifiable and measurable resources. Driven by its economic imperative the vast forest tract of what we called traditional 'hunting ground' of the hillmen was now seen as a source of a variety of timbers, bamboos, rubbers, and war elephants. When tea was discovered as indigenous to Assam and especially in this tract all possible means were enunciated to take over such land even if they knew that the hill polities laid claim to it as part of their territory. The dubious history of the pre-colonial past was interpreted and pronounced to suit the colonial interests, and then, defined and legitimated in terms of colonial notion of space and territoriality. The definitive geography that resulted in the process under the new regime extended its neatly defined boundary deep into the hills and ultimately took away the purveyor of the hill autonomy, their 'hunting ground'. Wet rice cultivation was extended to the base of the hills and tea gardens proliferated until they could be profitably cultivated. This invariably incited resistance from the hill people which came in the form of a 'raid'.[49]

Raiding and expeditions were just one part of the dizzy situation the new colonial project had wrought in the frontier region. Colonial intervention in the area triggered warfare among the hill tribes and militarized the border areas by setting up police and military outposts and distributing firearms to border populations. It also transplanted the bewildering mass of population in the form of cultivators, tea planters, and labourers and settling refugee population from the hills, bringing many of its malcontents in the frontier. It also replaced the age-old shared

[49] I have discussed this aspect of raid in J. Guite, 2014. 'Colonialism and Its Unruly?—The Colonial State and Kuki Raids in Nineteenth Century Northeast India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48 (5): 1188–1232.

forest cover with privately owned agrarian fields and tea gardens or 'reserve forest' under the state and eventually altered the prevailing symbiosis in the frontier. Above all, it replaced local polity, society, and even culture with the colonial one. Raiding, was therefore, instead of a mere 'cold weather amusement', employed as a last resort by the non-state people to resist the state encroachment, and appropriations and burning the villages or mercilessly killing the inhabitants was a mere strategy to terrorize and draw the attention of the state to refrain from doing what it was doing.

If 'raid' is a definite response to colonial intrusion before the hills were occupied, such resistance movements were understood differently with another equally derogatory term 'rebellion' after the hills were annexed into the Empire.[50] It is now a well established notion that all such resistance movements were understood as 'freedom movement', not 'rebellion'. It is true that people fought for their 'freedom' but it is altogether another matter to see what kind of 'freedom' people were fighting for. In common place notion, 'freedom' is often understood with freedom from colonial rule or more accurately 'independence' from colonial regime. Recent historiography, however, problematized the idea of one-size-fit-explanation of freedom which is unable to explain the multiple facet of meanings and forms of freedom fought by different sections of the population in different parts of the country ranging from castes, classes, creeds, communities to gender. For instance, the peasants and tribal fought against the established authority for different reasons just as different tribal or peasant groups fought for different grievances and goals. However, what is often taken for granted in such discourse was that all these sections fought against colonial authority and aspired to replace it with non-colonial indigenous state. Thus, one state is to be replaced by another state, the only difference being the people who should man such a state, the colonizer or 'native'.

[50] We have good numbers of 'rebellion' or 'uprising' against colonialism such as, say, Khasi Uprising, Jaintia Uprising, Garo Uprising, Naga Uprising, Lushai Uprising, Chin Uprising, Kuki Uprising, and so on.

State is, in this sense, a monolithic structure, omnipotent, omnipresent and there seems no other alternative to it.

It is suggested here as seen in the case of pre-colonial North-eastern hills, that while the hill people were certainly not fighting for the formation of another state but simply to attain freedom from all forms of control and oppression. The case of 'rebellions' in the hills of North-east evidently suggested this aspect of freedom in the nutshell. It is seen that the North-east highland was till the colonial period a 'region of refuge' from the control of state and its re-assemblage was largely oriented towards achieving relative freedom from control and oppression. It was the colonial state which brought this highland within the state structure and since that time massive reform has taken place. The hill people resisted colonial state intrusion but it held no ground in the face of the mighty empire. What visibly becomes evident in these centuries of struggle was the preservation of their freedom from state control and oppression which acted as the guiding principle through the ages and it now makes sense to think that the so-called 'rebellions' or 'uprisings' during the colonial period were a struggle for the same purpose. What has become explicitly clear from these 'uprisings' was that the people generally fought against oppression by state authority with a view to end such a rule. We hardly find them fighting for and imagining an alternative state system to replace it.

Somehow, the conventional wisdom of statelessness gradually faded away in the consciousness of the hill people towards the end of the colonial rule. This is well explained by the emergence of what is popularly known as 'ethno-nationalism' or simply ethnicity at the close of colonial regime.[51] This process is often seen as a 'backward movement' or tribalistical. But this is certainly not tribalistical for one significant reason. Ethnicity is a movement away from tribal society or of statelessness towards a homogenizing state society. It has been noted that the hill social

[51] See, for instance S.K. Chaube, 1999 [1973]. *Hill Politics in Northeast India*, Delhi: Orient Longman.

formation process was towards social and ethnic fissioning, the 'atomization of tribal universe', not towards fusion. But what is seen is that new process of ethnicity and ethno-nationalism was towards a fusion process in which the tit-bits of tribal universe had been pulled together to form a larger body of named people often pronounced as 'nation'. In this context, it is a modern phenomenon and in its essence is moving towards modernity. Truly, the emergence of a larger body of named ethnic identity different from its pre-colonial originals was the outcome of colonial mania of classificatory order and its ethnic mystification. To this extent, the 'roots' and development of ethnicity were located within the complex stratum of colonial state-making and modernization process in the region. The colonial state, as a prelude to occupation, began contacting the hill people through frontier trade, official tours and expeditions, and then mapped and defined them into different units of named tribes on the basis of a definitive geography and ecological setting. Such definitive geography which mapped and named different 'Hills' prefixed with the names of certain tribes (such as Garo Hills, Khasi Hills, Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, Chin Hills, Mikir Hills, and so on) eventually produced the idea that all the tribes living in such Hills were 'one and the same' people. Such a projection was purely a construct as the colonial knowledge on the hill tribes at this stage was more imaginative rather than real. However, such imagined demographic areas later created not only the basis of administrative 'districts' but also the basis of ethnogenesis in the hills.

Reconstruction of identity was affected through the process of what Peter Robb has called 'substantialization' in which the disparate masses of hill populations were 'lumped together' under chosen defining similarities.[52] This especially took the form of a complicated, and arbitrary, social engineering process of

[52] 'Substantialization' involved the arrangement of certain 'chosen defining similarities' or characteristics of a group which are 'assumed to be standard within the group, and, on that assumption, they identify it' as their identity. See Peter Robb (ed.), *Society and Ideology: Essays in South Asian History,* Delhi: OUP, p. 3.

throwing-back to the past to make their sense of existence, codifying them under the powerful classification order, and finally enforcing it through its administrative machinery. This complicated process of homogenization and simplification not only proposed new identities but also assumed the basis and the idiom of political contestation and competitive self-assertion in the post-colonial situation. This has now become the way of life, the way people think, imagine, feel, and fight. Perhaps this is one of the biggest legacies of colonialism in the hills and conceivably the most interesting phenomenon which had taken the state-evading population in the hills by surprise.

Another important aspect of change under colonialism that draws our attention is the cultural movement toward Christianity. It is significant to note that the Christian missionary movement had a very successful story among the hill people. This success story has been explained in different ways.[53] From the spiritual point of view it was seen as a 'miracle', the spirit walking among the people with fruitful results. Some even went to the extent that such progress was possible due to the colonial state's support. But why the same spirit could not convince the population of the plains? In other words, why Christianity progressed among the hill tribes where the impact of colonialism was least felt but not among the plainsmen where colonial apparatus was well in place and where more efforts were made by the missionaries? With this, scholars began to look for the non-spiritual, non-state contents of Christianity. Several explanations resulted from such investigations, ranging from the differences or similarities between the 'salvation' religion and that of the host society to the role of both natural and man-made 'calamities' which had brought us out of a 'crisis of conscience' in the existing beliefs/system. While such studies explained the mutual interaction between the new religion and that of the host society, mainly from

[53] Perhaps the studies on the Christian missionary movement in North-east India have produced one of the richest literatures in the researches on the region's history in recent times signifying the fact that it constituted one important landmark in the regional history.

the perspective of the latter, it could not give a suitable explanation to all sections of the populations, especially to the plainsmen where such disastrous calamities occurred more often than in the hills.

What comes out quite profoundly from the existing literature on missionary movement in the region was a clear religious-geography base on the plains and hills, a success story in the latter and failure in the former. This evidence speaks volumes in relation to conversion. It is simplistic to see this division only in terms of religion, say, Hinduism and Islam in the plain (the 'great tradition') and tribal religions in the hills (the 'little tradition'). This division also expresses the political contours of the hills to that of the valley or what can be called state and statelessness. It was observed that the hill people adopted practices which were 'opposed to' or 'illegible' to the state. This aspect has been recently noted by James Scott in his study on Zomia where he shows that Christianity or those of the Buddhist heterodox sects in the surrounding valleys found a fertile ground in the hills as a bulwark in positioning themselves against the dominant culture in the surrounding valley spaces.[54] This seems to provide a suitable explanation in the case of the North-east India where the dominant culture in the surrounding valleys in Bengal and Assam was predominantly a Brahmanical Hinduism or Islam. It was in relation to such a dominant culture in the plains that the hill societies might have adopted a different religion.

If this was the case, then we can say that the coming of Christianity in the hills would have certainly found a fertile ground as an alternative to valley religion. Yet a caveat appears here. If the hill people in general were opposed to the state system which the colonial state represented in a much more visible form than that of the pre-colonial valley states why Christianity, which was considered to be the religion of the colonizers, found any fertile ground in the hills. Truly, the hill people were against colonialism in particular and the intrusion of state system in

[54] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed.*

general. Evidences have suggested that they also see Christianity as part of the colonial system. Therefore, Christianity in its original shape was opposed by the hill people. We have a series of trials and tribulations in the history of missionary movement in the region where the hills were studded with events of persecution and opposition against the missionaries. This especially came from the chiefs and powerful section of the populations who considered such a movement as a prelude to political domination making the way not for God's kingdom but for the colonial state. No wonder, we have few instances of indigenous socio-religious movements against missionary–colonial state domination in the region, sometimes taking a political tone. Pau Cin Hau's *Laipian* or *Beeltungmutpawl* prophet movement in the Chin Hills, Jadonang's *Hiraka* movement among the 'Kacha' Nagas (today Zeliangrong) in Manipur, Nagaland and North Cachar of Assam, and Sambhudan's *Millenarian* movement among the Kacharis (Dimasas) in North Cachar, are telling cases in this respect. Truly, the missionaries were worried to a great extent by such movements although in certain cases it paved the way for Christianity. While Pau Cin Hau's movement created the way for Christianity with its renunciation to traditional 'superstitious' religions, the other two movements created a barrier against the progress of Christianity with their promotion of traditional religion.[55] Overall, the progress of Christian missionary movement among the hill tribes may be described as triumphant. How was this possible then?

If generalization is given the chance to speak for Christian conversion movement in North-east India we would call intrusive nativism in the new salvation religion as one important ground.[56] The Christianity that we witnessed in the hills is quite different from and even opposed to its originals in the West. In this context,

[55] For a discussion on Pau Cin Hau's movement see Pum Khan Pau 'Rethinking Religious Conversion: Missionary Endeavor and Indigenous Response among the Zo (Chin) of the India-Burma Borderland', *Journal of Religion and Society,* Vol. 14 (2012), pp. 1–17.

[56] Truly, generalization is one problematic tool to write history but it is often an indispensible one for clarity in academic discourse.

we may use the term Hill Christianity which is the result of a synthesis of Christianity and a non-Christian tribal past. In other words, Hill Christianity is the outcome of a mixture of the resisting culture of the hills and that of the Christian religious tenets. This is not necessarily the unintended outcome of missionary teaching. Away from the colonial state, the missionaries have struggled hard to evolve Christianity in the hills that is often 'friendly' to the hill people as a means to convert the 'natives'. For instance, to evade any opposition, the name of the local reigning deity was usually adopted to name the God of Christianity. Worship services were generally conducted broadly in a 'native' way. Similarly, the general contour of the hill cultural practices such as feast and festivals, of marriage and kinship, and so on, have found their proper places within the cosmological blaster of Christianity. Thus, within the cloak of Christianity one can see the practices which are more 'native' than Christianity.

If the successful intrusion of the 'natives' within Christianity eventually set a fertile ground for Christianity to spread or to be acceptable to the hill people it does not appear that the new salvation religion was soon adopted by the general hill population until the close of colonialism. Evidences have suggested that mass movement to the new religion took place after India's independence and under the 'native' missionaries or 'preachers', not during the colonial period and not under western missionaries. The stunted growth during the colonial period and a sudden rush after that draws our attention. Truly, their opposition to colonialism in general must surely have a role in this respect but it does not appear that such opposition satisfactorily explains this peculiar behaviour. The strong assertion for named identity and a communitarian politics which has become a significant feature in the North-east since the 1940s might also have a role in this respect. The evidences of Naga, Khasi, Garo, Lushai, and Chin Hills districts are a telling case. The notion of 'being' Khasi, Garo, Naga, Kuki, Mizo, Chin, and so on would certainly have paved the way for Christianity to grow as a common ground of reminiscing to members of the named identity. Thus, one is tempted to say that the advent of ethnicity or ethno-nationalism

in the hills, has something to say about the mass movement towards Christianity.

Another problem appears here. If 'nativism' was an effective strategy to bring in the 'natives' toward Christianity, and if 'ethno-nationalism' was another factor paving the way for Christianity, then why we do not see another success story among certain tribes in the region. We have already noted why Christianity does not make much headway among the hill Dimasas and Zeliangrongs but in the case of Karbis (Mikirs), Bodos, or Tipperahs the story is different. Although there was no counter movement against Christianity among them, the strong presence of 'great tradition' in the shape of Hinduism would have been a barrier against the new salvation religion. Evidences from other parts of India show that Christianity found a hard ground to germinate whenever there was an established religion, say, Brahmanism or Islam. The said tribes had been in the process of the so-called 'sanscritization' when the missionaries came to the region. Thus, Christianity seems to have found a hard ground although a similar strategy to incorporate the 'native' practices were taken.

There was another caveat. The impressive growth of conversion in Lushai Hills during the colonial period in contrast to the general growth process in other hills requires a slightly different explanation. From the first convert in 1896 it grew to 45 (in 1901), 2,461 (1911), 27,720 (1921), 59,123 (more than one half of the population) in 1931, and 178,000 (91 per cent) in 1951.[57] Here, the role of natural calamities in the form of recurring famines locally known as *mautam* and *thingtam* was profound. The devastating famines in 1910–11 and 1930–31 would surely have resulted in a mass movement in Lushai Hills.[58] The role of intrusive nativism and the 'national' consciousness in Lushai Hills

[57] See *Census of India: Assam,* 1901–1931. J.H. Lorrain in his 'Farewell Notes' in the Visitor's Book at Tlabung Inspection Bungalow, 17 Feb. 1932, puts the figure of Christians in Lushai Hills at 56,000 persons (more than half of the population).

[58] For this bamboo flowering process and its impact on local society see Sajal Nag, 2008. *Pied Pipers in North-East India: Bamboo-flowers, Rat-famine and the Politics of Philanthropy (1881–2007)*, Delhi: Manohar.

which had become quite active since the formation of Young Lushai Association (later changed into Young Mizo Association) in 1935 leading to the formation of Mizo Union in 1946 cannot be altogether dismissed. The strong presence of resisting local culture within Christianity and the looming assertion for named identity together paved the way for Christianity as a monolithic structure posing itself in opposition to colonialism and that of the valley societies.

The gist of the whole argument on change, and in the consciousness of the hill people, may be gleaned from the perspective of Vanlawma, a Mizo Union leader, during his negotiation with Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam and Chairman of the Sub-committee on the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas. He asserted:

> Chin Hills Regulations and the Inner Line Regulation are *protecting* us from … the *plains people*… We are *mongoloid* people and coming from the *east*, we are *ethnologically* different from you who came from the *west*. We are now *Christians* … Our *customs* are distinctly different from yours … we are *financially weak* … We are a *small nation*.[59] [Emphasis mine]

Here, we can see a strong sense of 'We', i.e., the hill people positioning themselves away from, and against to, the 'plains people'. The hill societies were seen to be 'mongoloid', coming from the east, practicing different customs, economically weak, 'small nation', and eventually 'Christians' in contrast to what one found in the plains surrounding them. Thus, our contention that the state-evaders as far as possible resisted change, and when they could not, they adopted them quite differently from the way it was intended by the initiators of change.

Conclusion

The above discussion leads us to the conclusion that the world that we seek to describe was, in the long view, the abode of state-

[59] As quoted in verbatim in Vumson, 1986, *Zo History*, Aizawl: Private circulation, p. 250.

evading populations who had escaped to the highland massif to evade the oppressive state-building project in the surrounding valleys of India and Burma. The North-east region was, by default, a 'zone of refuge', a 'contact zone', and a zone of reassembling. It was a world that produced infinite frameworks and constraints to make sense of their living as state-evaders. From its conceptualization it was a region that was but a 'comfort zone' of emancipation and a relatively 'liberated zone' away from the fury of state control and oppression, away from concentrations of power and population, protected by the magnificent hill fortress, by the friction of rugged terrain, by the roving culture of dissent, and by the thriving economics of plenitude. It was a 'shattered zone' of population dispersal and disparate social formation, and also a 'silent space' of micro 'rifts and reversals'. Above all, it was a zone of 'silent revolution' against all forms of control and oppression. Such a revolution took the form of not only evolving the 'culture and agriculture of escape' but also strived to remain resistive and versatile in the face of several odds and omissions which witnessed a watershed with the advent of colonialism in the region. Colonialism was already felt much before the hills were annexed to the Empire. It was resisted tooth and nail but the Empire prevailed at the end. Nevertheless, within the general contour of colonialism and modernism one could see the survival instinct and versatility of the non-state practices in various forms. It was this set of non-state practices and structures that continue to struggle within the state system. This makes the North-east tribes unique and uncompromising. Such resilient cultures, inside and outside the 'Great Tradition', that continue to resist change, are indeed the forgotten kingdom in the studies of North-east tribes which throws ample scope for future investigation.

Acknowledgement

This paper presents the broad findings of a major research project under University Grants Commission. Part of the material used here had been collected earlier under Indian Council of Historical Research's travel-grant scheme. I am grateful to both UGC and ICHR for the support.