ISSN.0972-8406

THE NEHU JOURNAL

CONTRIBUTORS

Vol III No 2,
July 2005

The NEHU Journal
Vol. III, No. 2, July 2005

Production Assistant : Surajit Dutta
Layout and Design: Shongdor Diengdoh

The NEHU Journal

Vol. III, No. 2, July 2005

NEHU

Editorial

This issue of the journal has a clear focus on the region in general and Meghalaya in particular. It begins with the article by Dr. Bengt G. Karlsson, an anthropologist of Uppsala University, on 'traditional political institutions' on which much needs to be debated than what has already been done by the London School of Economics partners at North-Eastern Hill University. I think this article takes the debate further ahead by arguing in favour of the possibility of a new kind of governance based on the wisdom of indigenous people rather than arguing whether or not such governance can be labelled as democratic, liberal or gender-neutral. The article provides one of the latest and most considerate account of the movement of the Khasis towards achieving what the author calls 'indigenous governance'. Although I am personally a little skeptical about the optimism that exudes in his article, I am indeed happy and proud to have this article in this issue of the journal.

The next article by Prof. A. C. Sinha presents a rare account of the search for 'tribes' in colonial and post-colonial India, and the relevance of this search despite the failure of anthropologists to define what a tribe is or delineate its characteristics without running into serious problem with contemporary data. He shows how the tribes represent a spectrum of social, economic, educational, demographic, and technological conditions. He concludes by arguing that this variation may be taken into consideration while derecognizing some of the tribes in India, which has somehow eluded national politics so far.

In the third article, Prof. Badaplin War draws Anthropology and Linguistics closer than by perhaps anyone earlier by bringing in rich data and deep analysis of Khasi folk titles. The Khasi folk titles show how the community once depicted (and still depict) individual personalities on the basis of natural categories. Such titles are not certainly typical of the Khasis, but she reveals the Khasi-ness in them very well, as much as she provides linguistic analysis of the same. It is a pleasure to read this article even if one does not know the Khasi language or has no idea about Linguistics.

The fourth article is by Dr B. P. Sahu of the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education. And his article on the state of water in Shillong is indeed educative. I think every resident of the city, whether indigenous or not, should read this extremely informative article on water.

The fifth article, written jointly by Prof. B. S. Mipun and Ms. S. Purkayastha, both of whom are Geographers, is equally educative about some of the most important issues of public health in the city, and about how the hospitals and nursing homes themselves have been sources of diseases rather than places where people go for treatment of their diseases. Although based on rather limited data, the article is also revealing about the lack of responsibility that the government, the hospitals, and the civil society have shown by allowing the health institutions of the city to pollute the streams and endanger the life and health of people living downstream. I think the merit of this article lies in drawing our attention to a hitherto ignored but very important consequence of unplanned urbanization.

Finally, there are three book reviews, two by Prof. David Syiemlieh of History Department of this university and one by Dr. S. C. Daniel who retired from this university recently after teaching at the Department of Philosophy for many years.

I hope you enjoy reading them.

T B Subba
Editor

Contents

Sovereignty through Indigenous Governance: Reviving 'Traditional Political Institutions' in Northeast India

BENGT G. KARLSSON

Northeast India is perhaps more than anything else known as a place of violent separatism, and has since Independence been the scene of various armed struggles, the most-well known being the still ongoing Naga movement for sovereignty.[1] According to estimates, among the 200 odd ethnic groups in the region there are as many as 60 active "insurgency outfits" fighting for autonomy. Ted Robert Gurr and his colleagues in the comparative Minorities at Risk project refers to a larger "Central Asian uplands" region – consisting of the Northeastern borderlands and the hill tracts of Bangladesh and Burma, and further also Tibet and the Xinjiang province in China – which is said to have the "[T]he largest number of ongoing and prospective ethnic wars anywhere in the world".[2] Autonomy or self-determination, in one form or another, is indeed on the agenda of more or less all mobilized communities in Northeast India. Some organizations pursue a rather low-key type of cultural mobilization, whereas others have taken to arms, to pursue their struggle for sovereignty. The overall logic is that of territorial nationalism, i.e., for each ethnic group or nation to have a land of its own. As the reality on the ground does not provide any ready-made ethnically homogenous territories, this logic spurs what appear to be unsolvable conflicts, not least those relating to boundaries, between communities. It can of course be argued that the present impasse of escalating inter-ethnic violence would require new collective imaginings or serious attempts to think beyond the idea of the territorial nation. There are voices that advocate the strengthening of a multi-ethnic, civic polity in Northeast India, but the entire political logic of the region nevertheless seems to push things towards further ethnification of communities.[3]

What I would like to take note of here is a recent trend in how autonomy

Dr. Karlsson is Director, Nordic Centre for India, New Delhi and Uppsala.

demands are being voiced in the region. First, self-determination demands are increasingly being articulated in the global language of indigenous rights.[4] Secondly, the ethnic organizations struggling for sovereignty insist increasingly on the re-activating of so-called traditional political institutions, claimed to be a superior and more democratic alternative to the modern (Western) institutions that has been put in place after Independence. This turn towards, what I would like to call, "indigenous governance" is an interesting development that draws attention to possible content of self-determination and thus not only focuses on the outer form (i.e. merely insisting on getting their respective ethnic homelands). In this paper, I will discuss a recent attempt in Meghalaya to strengthen the role of traditional chiefs and their councils as governing bodies. This movement is a well-organized urban, elite initiative that increasingly is becoming a visible political force in the state. As the argument of the spokespersons goes, the "traditional institutions" have always been there and they have proven over time to be effective (their very survival is cited as a proof of their efficiency), but that they have been undermined by the new administrative set-up under the state government and the autonomous district councils. Because of the poor performance of the modern institutions of governance, it is high time to recognize and empower the traditional or customary ones. This, the leaders of the movement claim, would ensure genuine grassroots democracy and facilitate real development as well as bring an end to the political turmoil and the insurgency in the state.

Meghalaya is a small hill state situated between the Brahmaputra valley in the north and Bangladesh in the south. The population is roughly two million people and as about 85 percent belong to so-called tribal or indigenous peoples - the main ones being Khasi, Jaintia and Garos – Meghalaya is commonly described as a "tribal state". During last decade there has been a lot of debate in the state about the revival of traditional political institutions. Obviously, far from all share the optimism of the leaders of the traditional institutions movement. The most commonly made critique relates to the absence of women as well as "non-tribals" in the traditional decision-making bodies. Other commentators take the present hype about reviving traditional institutions as just another political gimmick, an ephemeral agenda soon to pass. Perhaps, but, as I will argue, several contemporary actualities might make this revival a more lasting and significant event. The well crafted discourse of the movement seems to resonate with popular sensibilities in the state. In this paper, I give a brief account of how the leaders of the movement make their case. I followed the leaders during an active phase of campaigning, the last months of 2003, and thus participated in meetings and

workshops, made follow up interviews and collected written material. The campaign ended with a grand assembly in Smit, a place of great symbolic significance for the Khasis, on the 14th of January 2004. About 40 000 people took part in the assembly, referred to as the "People's Durbar", which thus turned out the show of strength the organizers had hoped for. The explicit purpose of the assembly was to get people's approval of a massive development scheme that the leaders had developed with the help of a consultancy group in Bombay, based on project proposals which had been submitted by village heads from all parts of the state.[5]

Awakening of the Grassroots

When I talk about the leaders of the traditional institutions movement (the TI movement from now on), I refer in fact only to a handful of persons, which the two most active Laborious Manik S. Syiem, President of the Federation of Khasi States and also the Syiem (traditional chief or ruler) of Hima Mylliem[6] (though presently under suspension, as will be discussed later), by profession a college lecturer, and John F. Kharshiing, spokesperson of the Federation and previous youth leader and social worker from a well-known Shillong family. The latter is also the younger brother of Robert Kharshiing, a member of the Indian parliament (the upper house), who as well is a prominent champion of the cause. Further also, Purno A. Sangma, the most well known political figure from Northeast India, earlier speaker of the Indian parliament and previously one of the top-most leaders of the Congress party. Sangma, who left the Congress party in 1999 as a protest against Sonia Gandhi's leadership[7], has become a vocal advocate for empowering the traditional institutions. Sangma is also member of the Indian parliament (he was re-elected in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections as one of the two MPs from Meghalaya). In his capacity as member-in-charge of the Commission to Review the Workings of the Indian Constitution for the Northeastern region, Sangma also has a special importance here. The report of the commission has become an important document for the movement, as we will see.[8]

The political analysts familiar with the names mentioned above would most likely note the personal motives for them to fish in these waters. One can always assume personal agendas in the pursuit of politics, but we are still left with the question of why leaders try to capitalize on certain issues - and not others - at a particular moment in time. To understand this one needs

to consider the larger social and historical context in which these assertions are being made or through which certain modes of action are made possible and desirable. As a general sociological premise, one should be wary of reducing the significance and meaning of human actions to the intentions or interests of the actor. Actions, as the philosopher Hannah Arendt reminds us, always exceed the actor's intention.[9] The role of traditional chiefs and their council has been a contentious issue since the independence of India, but it has gained an unforeseen actuality during the last decade. The significance of this is what interests us here.

Laborious Manik S. Syiem gives the following account of how the TI movement has developed.[10] Things started to build up in 1993 with the United Nations' year for the world's indigenous peoples. This, as he puts it, became the "eye-opener". "We realized the need to maintain the traditions in order to move ahead, hence our slogan, 'revival for survival'. Dressed up in turban and traditional clothes, along with a group of young boys, he went on a tour around the Khasi Hills with the message to revive the traditions. But the time was not ripe to push things then. It took until the year 2000 for the movement to take a more definite shape. After a series of consultations they arranged a meeting or *durbar*[11] in his *Hima* ("state") to discuss whether people still wanted to follow the customs and traditions. "Should the traditional institutions be kept, or simply be done away with, this was the question we asked". And the answer of the Durbar Hima (i.e., the meeting of the people in the state) was one of full support of the traditions.[12] "From there", he continues, "we thought first about going directly to Delhi, but then realized that to gain strength we need to have the whole state behind us and thus also get the support of people in the Jaintia and Garo Hills". "In the year 2000, the Commission on the Constitution also came up, and we decided to try to influence them rather than approaching the parliament".

These developments relate to what Laborious Manik S. Syiem describes as the first phase of the movement. After this, the District Council intervened and in 2001 managed to get him suspended from his office and replaced by an "Acting Syiem". Some of the other traditional chiefs got scared and feared that they would meet the same fate of being suspended. But as the Federation of Khasi States supported them, they soon got going again. To quote Laborious Manik S. Syiem once more,

> This is our second movement. We call it now "Peoples Movement for Grassroots' Democracy". The political parties can show that they

> have the ballot box. Our movement is people's movement, not that of the ballot box. So, how can we show Delhi that we have people's support? The *durbar* is our base. This is us. This is what we will show Delhi.

As he describes it, it is not only a question of grassroots' democracy, but of Khasi democracy, an unique system that they are proud of and that they want to preserve and develop. Central in this system is that power is firmly grounded with the people through the *durbar*, which is described as an arena free from party-politics that strives for consensus and transparency in all its dealings.[13]

The first objective of the movement is to get constitutional recognition of the traditional governing bodies, which then will pave way for the second objective of getting direct government funding to these bodies. As a way of establishing the necessity of such recognition, John F. Kharshiing has at several meetings during the campaign narrated the following anecdote:

> I have just returned from USA, where I had been invited to discuss grassroots' democracy. All over the world people are talking about grassroots democracy. A Red Indian Chief asked me what we were following. I said, "the Indian Constitution". "Are You mentioned there, are Your chiefs and councils named there", he continued to ask me? "No", I said. "If You don't exist in writing, You don't exist at all", he then told me.

According to Kharshiing, the present invisibility of the traditional institutions derives from a "constitutional anomaly", and this is the very "root cause" of the matter.[14]

This takes us back to the complexities relating the native Khasi States' inclusion into the Indian Union. As Kharshiing explains, the end of British rule over India, on August 15th 1947, did not bring the desired freedom for the Khasi people. The 25 Khasi states had, prior to Independence, started to "prepare themselves for their own form of governance", above all by organizing themselves into the Federation of Khasi States. However what took place, in Kharshiing's words, was nothing but a "betrayal"; that they had been "made to believe" that the Khasi states would be able to maintain sovereignty and political autonomy at the lapse of the British paramountcy, but that they in the end lost all of this and became a part of the province of Assam. The key events in the story, and this goes for Khasi historiography in general, are the shady dealings surrounding the signing of the so-called "Instrument of

Accession" and in addition the pressures on the Khasi States to sign the "Instrument of Merger".[15] The states did finally agree to sign the first but not the latter and, as the story goes, they have thus in legal terms never fully joined India. The Khasi states objected further to the Sixth Schedule and by introducing this without their consent the Indian government violated the terms laid down in the Instrument of Accession. It is here we have the "constitutional anomaly"[16], which is said to haunt the Khasi people ever since and out of which present violence and insurgency in the state emanates.[17]

Independence and the New Administrative Order

The new administrative order that was established after Independence in most parts of the north-eastern hills got its constitutional form through the Sixth Schedule. What are then the central features of the Sixth Schedule? In short, it can be described as an institutional mechanism developed for the (then) hill districts of Assam, allowing a certain amount of political and financial self-governance, while at the same time bringing the different hill peoples of these geo-politically sensitive frontier tracts firmly under the larger Indian administration. The "Autonomous District Council" (ADC), with most of its members democratically elected and only a handful directly nominated by the governor to safeguard minority interests, is the key institution of the Sixth Schedule. The ADC has powers over a large number of subjects relating to public administration, usage of land and natural resources, and is entitled to collect taxes, run its own courts and make laws. The district council is further empowered to appoint or replace chiefs or headmen, something which, as we will see, remains highly controversial. Even so, the ADC commonly appears as a rather toothless tiger, whose *modes operandi* is heavily dependent on the state government. Lack of financial autonomy is often cited as the major limitation of the district councils. The governor of the state has also the superseding powers and can, for example, temporarily adjourn an ADC. Laws passed by the district council have to be approved by the governor as well as by the state government.

More or less from its inception the Sixth Schedule has been subject for critique and debate. For some commentators, it is a most progressive attempt to grant self-determination for tribal or indigenous peoples, whereas others see it as a circumscribed form of autonomy largely because of the powers vested with the governor as well as with the state government. There

is, however, a consensus regarding the very poor performance of the ADCs, i.e., that the councils have not been able to function in a satisfactory way. There are, for example, common charges of corruption or misuse of funds and "bad leadership" in general - that the elected members of the councils bother more about their political career than the welfare of the people.[18] The political development in the region proves that the ADCs did not satisfy the hill peoples' aspirations for self-determination, as movements for statehood soon sprang up in various parts of the north-eastern hills.[19]

The development during 1960s, with increased violence, apparently made it necessary for the central government to re-organize Assam and subsequently to make the hill districts into a number of separate states.[20] As part of this process, Meghalaya came into being as a separate state in the year 1972, then comprising of three ADCs; the Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills autonomous District Councils. When the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos thus got their own "tribal" state, the question thus arose whether the district councils had become obsolete and should be dismantled.[21] The ADCs, however, remained in place, which, as we will see, has led to a rather confusing situation with multiple and overlapping layers of governance.

The previously mentioned National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution points in their report to such an "overlap of authority" and "conflict of interest" between the state assembly and the district councils in Meghalaya. For example, local issues such as road repair, electricity supply or waste disposal is said to be shuffled back and forth between the state and the district council administrations. On top of this, the report further also acknowledges the existence of a third tier of governance, i.e., the traditional ruling systems in Meghalaya, represented by the Syiems in Khasi Hills, the Dolois in Jaintia Hills and the Nokmas in Garo Hills. With the traditional tribal governing institutions, as put in the Commission report, "there are not *two* but *three* competing systems of authority – each of which is seeking to 'serve' or represent the same constituency" (2001: paragraph 2.2.30, emphasis mine). Interestingly, the commission recommends a strengthening of the traditional political institutions as a measure to ensure self-governance and to thwart militancy. "For this to happen", as said in the report, "the traditional systems of governance will have to be included and given specific roles and opportunities, instead of being marginalised as they have been for decades" (2001: paragraph 2.2.37). This statement is of great political significance, in that it supports and confirms what the TI leaders are saying. It may be recalled here that the Commission for Northeast India was also chaired by P. A. Sangma, who prior

to this engagement had taken a public stand in favour of the empowerment of the traditional chiefs and their governing bodies.

To favour the traditional institutions is commonly taken in Meghalaya as a critique against the district councils, as these two bodies have been in conflict since the latter came into being. With the district councils, the powers of the chiefs were radically reduced as discussed above. The traditional chiefs, as political scientist L. S. Gassah puts it, are today treated by the ADC as "its subordinate officials".[22] That the ADC is empowered to appoint and remove chiefs and headmen is and has been one of the most contentious aspects between the two bodies. From the perspective of the tradi 'onal bodies, these are matters exclusively for the respective *durbar* to decide upon. The ADC should have nothing to do with this. But as things stand today, the "Appointment and Succession of Chiefs and Headmen Act, 1959", passed by the Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, authorises the district council to intervene in this process. Laborious Manik S. Syiem calls this Act "a draconian piece of legislation", of which he himself is the latest victim. His suspension has for the last years been taking ever-new turns and is now awaiting a settlement by the Guwahati High Court. Without going into the many intricacies of this case, it is rather obvious that Laborious Syiem's political engagement plays an important role in his suspension. The Executive Committee of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council has recently also issued a warning against traditional chiefs' involvement in politics, and particularly in any "anti-district council activities". The Executive Committee states that such involvement is illegal (referring to the above mentioned Act) and could lead to the removal of the chief. In this context, the district council authorities even threaten the Syiems for their membership in the Federation of Khasi States, claiming that after the Sixth Schedule was introduced the Khasi States have ceased to exist, and that the continued activities of the Federation goes against the Indian Constitution.[23]

Traditional Institutions

There are certainly many who would not go along with the recommendations of the Commission and, thus, in different ways refute the governing potential of the traditional political institutions. It is important to note that "traditional institutions" is a term that is used in the debate by the actors themselves and thus not a theoretical or analytical concept I have introduced. Most commonly

the term is applied in a generic sense without any details about these institutions. In this way, a great variety of customary arrangements, functioning in different ways in different parts of the state, are being brought together under the notion 'traditional institutions'. There are important differences between the three main ethnic communities – Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo - but also within them. These institutions have also undergone changes over time and might function in a quite different way from how they are supposed to function. This is obviously not the place to provide any such details, but let me just very briefly touch upon what is commonly talked about as the traditional political institutions among the Khasis.

In general it is a question of a three-tier system spanning the village council (*Durbar Shnong*)[24], an intermediate level (*Durbar Raid*) and the state level (*Durbar Hima*). At each level there is a presiding officer, headman or *Rangbah Shnong* on the village level, *Sordar* on the *Raid* level and *Syiem* on the *Hima* level. Like with the Garos, the village council consists of the adult male members in the village, preferably one from each household. Women do not participate in the village *durbar* or the higher-level *durbar*s. Even though much has been written on these institutions it is difficult to find any detailed ethnography or accounts on how the durbars actually function today. What we commonly get is instead elaborate outlines of how they ought to function or supposedly functioned in the past. A commonly highlighted feature is the centrality of the durbar, that decisions are taken by the durbar and not by the presiding officer, be it headman or Syiem. As the historian David R. Syiemlieh puts it,

> The highest decision making bodies in the political and administrative set-up among the Khasis were the *Durbars*. There is no written law about the functions, composition and working of the *Durbars*, for they work according to *Ka Riti*, a constitution which has grown out of past usages and practices. Every stage of administration from the village to the state has its own *Durbar*. The Khasi *Durbar* even today is a solemn affair. There is no walking out of a *Durbar*. Decisions are unanimous. Should there be a disagreement the issue is dropped.[25]

On each level there are a number of different functionaries, which like the presiding officers are appointed by the *durbar*. The procedure varies in different parts of the Khasi Hills, but in general it appears that most positions are reserved or prioritised for persons belonging to certain clans or lineages, commonly the original or founding clans in that particular area.[26]

The exclusion of women and the reservation of executive functions within the *Durbars* to persons from certain clans are often quoted as examples of the democratic deficit of the traditional institutions. Particularly the first is used as an argument against the claims of the TI movement; i.e., how can the traditional institutions provide an avenue to grassroots democracy when half of the population, the women, are excluded from these bodies?[27] The common response by the TI leaders is that the traditional institutions are flexible, they allow change and are indeed changing, and further that women today have started to participate in the *durbars* and even holding executive functions within them.[28] This, however, is still an exception. But again, it is important to note that lack of female participation is not a problem solely for the traditional institutions, but is a more general social feature that applies to the ADCs as well as the state assembly. As the sociologist Tiplut Nongbri argues, even if women in the matrilineal Khasi, Jaintia and Garo societies in several aspects have a better position than Indian women in general, there is nevertheless a strong ideological prejudice against their involvement in politics.[29] Another point of critique against the present functioning of the traditional governing bodies is the lack of transparency and accountability. For example, in financial matters it is said that the taxes, royalties and fees that these bodies collect are never accounted for. How in this "age of scams and corruption", the well known journalist Patricia Mukhim asks. can the *durbar* be "exempted from public auditing?".[30] Another problem that people have raised is that many of the local headmen lack education and appropriate skills to function in a modern bureaucratic setting. Those headmen who have education often choose to leave their village and settle in urban areas. Most of the local persons that have expressed such critique to me would still hold that the traditional institutions do have a place and a role to play particularly as a local level governing body. It is then more a question of transforming these institutions, to make them more inclusive and thus allowing women as well as persons from other communities to play an active part in the *durbars*, and further to make the *durbars* accountable and open for public scrutiny.

An interesting exemption from this as well as a fundamental rejection of the governing potential of the traditional institutions is in the recent work by Apurba K. Baruah, professor in political science at North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. Together with colleagues, Baruah is carrying out a research project on the functioning of these institutions on the local level. The project is a collaboration with the London School of Economics' "Crisis States Programme". Baruah's overall argument relates to the non-democratic

nature of the traditional bodies, that they besides excluding women and "non-tribals" in general are based on communitarian principles that are incompatible with "modern liberal democratic values".[31] John Harriss, the LSE partner, states similarly that "the traditional political institutions are not democratic" and further that these institutions above all have to do with "tribal identity" and as such become drivers of "separatism" and "conflict".[32] (2002:5).

Indigenous Governance – Towards a Conclusion

In the words of the mentioned Commission report, the political future of Northeast India hinges on people choosing "self-governance" rather than "separation" (2001: paragraph 1.6). In the case of Meghalaya, the report as mentioned recommends that the traditional system of governance be strengthened to achieve the former and thus to pre-empt militant separatism. This, then, is basically what the TI movement claims, but very much the opposite of what Baruah and Harriss argue. The discussion on traditional institutions is commonly framed in such black and white terms, i.e., whether the traditional institutions are good or bad, democratic or autocratic, fuelling or containing separatism, and finally something worth preserving or something that should be discarded altogether. As a researcher one needs to move beyond such simplifications and, at least temporarily, abstain from value judgements. In this paper, my concern is more why the traditional political institutions have become such a contentious issue today, than whether this is something good or bad.

As I indicated at the outset, there are several larger processes behind the turn towards "indigenous governance", that is, to seek sovereignty through traditional governing institutions. In short, I believe that the most important ones are the overall crises of the developmental state (its failure to deliver) and the overall questioning of the state as a benevolent regulator of social life[33] and, in concordance with this, the emergence of the global indigenous peoples' movement and the increased international recognition of indigenous rights. The main aspiration of indigenous peoples world-wide today is self-determination, in most cases through peaceful means and within the parameters of existing nation-states. As Ronald Niezen argues in a recent book on international indigenism, self-determination is largely to be achieved through "constitutional reform and the implementation of treaties and agreements between indigenous and state governments".[34] This is also true for the TI movement in Meghalaya, which sets it apart from the

insurgency organizations in the state who seek self-determination through armed struggle. The TI leaders in Khasi Hills stress the need to rectify the injustice following from the violation of past agreements between the Indian government and the native chiefs through constitutional reform, that is, recognition of the traditional political institutions in the Indian constitution. According to Niezen, the main issue for indigenous leaders is not whether their people will be led "wisely or foolishly", but rather whether their people will be able to determine their own future or "will continue to be ruled by outside powers".[35] To govern oneself is thus the prioritized goal, regardless of whether this would turn out to be the most effective or liberal form of governance. The state government as well as the district councils are in the hands of the tribal or indigenous peoples of Meghalaya. In such a situation, one would assume that further stress on self-determination is superfluous. But, arguably, this is not the case. The TI leaders advocate increased sovereignty through the traditional political institutions. According to them, the *durbar* represents a superior form of governance, free from the deceitfulness of modern party politics. The headman and his council are said to be closer to the grassroots and thus better placed to cater the needs and aspirations of the people. And as such, these bodies are claimed to be more effective and democratic than the governing structures put in place after Independence.

One can certainly question these claims and, as mentioned, read the turn towards indigenous governance as a worrying sign that spells further social cleavages and ethnic conflicts in these troubled north-eastern borderlands. But there are also other contingencies to be explored. It could be argued that an unforeseen outcome of the TI movement could be a shift of focus from ethnic territoriality and the politics of boundaries to what the historian Arif Dirlik calls "place-based imaginations"[36] and, possibly, explorations of new forms of locally grounded sovereignty. The traditional councils need, as the critics stress, to be reformed and made more inclusive in order to get democratic legitimacy and if such a change eventually will come about, the empowerment of these institutions can indeed bring about a widening of civic space in Meghalaya. The point here is not to argue for any of these scenarios, but merely to suggest that the revival of traditional institutions is a more complex and socially significant event than what most commentators and scholars seem to believe.

ENDNOTES

[1] The Naga people's independence movement is the longest armed struggle in India, beginning soon after India gained Independence in 1947.

[2] T. R. Gurr, *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2000).

[3] See B. G. Karlsson, 'Indigenous Politics: Community Formation and Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Self-Determination in Northeast India, *Identities*, Vol. 8, No 1, 2001, pp 7-45, and further S. Baruah, 'Citizens and Denizens: Ethnicity, Homelands, and the Crisis of Displacement in Northeast India', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 16, No 1, 2003, pp 44-66.

[4] The English term "indigenous people" has come into usage in India during the last two decades, often used along with and synonymous to the more well-known terms "tribal" and "adivasi". The importance of the term, however, is the new global context it speaks to (draws on) with increased recognition of indigenous peoples as collective rights bearing subjects under international law. See B. G. Karlsson, 'Anthropology and the "Indigenous Slot": Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples' Status in India', *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 23, No 4, 2003, pp 403-423.

[5] See, "Meghalaya tribal lobby in fund hunt", in *The Telegraph*, 16 January, 2004.

[6] *Hima* is the name of the traditional Khasi states, i.e., Hima Mylliem is the state of Mylliem. I follow the common practice of translating *Hima* in English as "state", though this might be questionable from a political science point of view.

[7] Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin is the main problem for Sangma.

[8] The report or Consultation Paper by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution relating the Northeast is entitled "Empowering and Strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions/ Autonomous District Councils/ Traditional Tribal Governing Institutions in North East India", dated December 21, 2001 (it is available on the internet – http://lawmin.nic.in/ncrwc/finalreport/v2b2-9.htm).

[9] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition, 1998[1958]), p 233.

[10] Interview in Shillong, 8th December, 2004.

[11] *Durbar* (alt. *dorbar*) refers to meetings of the traditional councils that is organised on different political levels as will be discussed later. These *durbars* have little in common with the elaborate court rituals associated with the Mughal durbars, which the British later transformed and made use of to assert symbolic authority over the Indian subjects. For the latter, see B. S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in (eds.) E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp 165 - 209.

[12] According to estimates as many as many as 5000 people representing 700 villages were present at the Durbar (see, for example, a later report in *Grassroots Option*, Monsoon/ Autumn 2002).

[13] This latter was a central theme of a talk that Laborious Manik S. Syiem gave at a seminar on 'Urban Governance and Traditional Institutions' at North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, December 2, 2003. See also his paper 'Khasi Democracy: an unwritten constitution' (unpublished, dated 15 June, 2001).

[14] The citation is taken from a paper entitled 'The Struggle for Recognition', which John F. Kharshiing presented at a workshop in Shillong, 31st May, 2001 and later presented a copy to me. Most of these themes have also been brought up during the campaign, though in a less elaborate form.

[15] See, for example, H. Giri, *The Khasis under British Rule* (1824-1947), (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998), and D. R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1989).

[16] "Constitutional anomaly" was first time used by Mohammad Saadualla, who pointed out in a meeting of the Constitutional Assembly, September 1949, that placing the Khasi states under the Sixth Schedule without any settlement with the Khasi Chiefs that had signed the Instrument of Accession, amounts to a "constitutional anomaly". See S. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North-East India* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1973), p 87.

[17] See, for example, 'Memorandum', by the Federation of Khasi States to the National Commission for Review of the Working of the Constitution, signed by President Laborious Manik S. Syiem (Syiem of Mylliem) and Secretary Dr. B. S. Syiem (Syiem of Khyriem) (22 July, 2000), p 4.

[18] For a wider discussion, see S. Chaube, op. cit, Ref. 16, pp 96-98, and J. Dasgupta, 'Community, Authenticity, and Autonomy: Insurgency and Institutional Development in India's Northeast, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 56, No 2, 1997, pp 364-365. In case of Meghalaya, see particularly S. K. Dutta, Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Autonomous District Administration in the State of Meghalaya, Vol I & II (Shillong: Meghalaya Government, 1984).

[19] The Naga leaders rejected the Sixth Schedule outright, sticking as it were to their demand for full sovereignty.

[20] The Indo-Chinese war in 1962, probably also pressurised India to find solutions that could prevent further outbursts of violent separatism. See S. Baruah, op. cit., Ref. 3, p 51.

[21] See S. K. Dutta, *op. cit.*, Ref. 18, Vol. 1, p 100.

[22] L. S. Gassah, *Traditional Institutions of Meghalaya: A Study of Doloi and his Administration* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998) p 7.

[23] See *Shillong Times*, March 9, 2004.

[24] In many places one can in fact also speak about a fourth tier consisting of sub-village or locality within a village.

[25] D. R. Syiemlieh, *op. cit.*, Ref. 15, pp 5-6.

[26] A. K. Nongkynrih, *Khasi Society of Meghalaya: A Sociological Understanding* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 2002) pp 75-76.

[27] This has been the main point of discussion in most of the seminars and workshops on traditional institutions I have participated in, and further also something that people have communicated in private discussions.

[28] Laborius Manik S. Syiem has for example made this point on several public occasions, as well as in personal discussions/interviews with me.

[29] T. Nongbri, *Development, Ethnicity and Gender: Select Essays on Tribes in India* (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003) pp 204-205.

[30] In an editorial, 'Traditional Institutions – a critique', *Shillong Times*, 3 October 2003.

[31] A.K. Baruah has published two working papers under the programme. See, 'Tribal Traditions and Crises of Governance in North East India, with special reference to Meghalaya', Crises States Programme, Working Paper No. 22, 2003 (London: LSE - available at www.crisesstates.com) and 'Ethnic Conflicts and Traditional Self-Governing Institutions: A Study of Laitumkhrah Dorbar', Working Paper No. 39, 2004.

[32] J. Harriss, 'The State, Tradition and Conflicts in the North Eastern States of India, Crises States Programme, Working Paper No. 13, 2002 (London: LSE - available at www.crisesstates.com).

[33] For a larger discussion on present challenges of the state, see, for example, T. Blom Hansen and F. Stepputat (eds.) *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001) and J. Friedman (ed.) *Globalization, the State, and Violence* (Walnut Creek: AlataMira Press, 2003).

[34] R. Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2003), p 194.

[35] *Ibid*, p 195.

[36] A. Dirlik, "Place-based Imaginations: Globalisation and the Politics of Place", in *Review: Fernand Braudel Center*, Vol. XXII, No 2, 1999, pp 151-187.

Book Reviews

Reverend Robert Evans, *The Great Earthquake of 1897 in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, translated by Basil Morris, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp. xvii-40, Rs. 95.

The earthquake of 12 June 1987 struck shortly after 5 pm. It is believed that this was the most devastating earthquake to have struck these parts of the country in recorded history. Its epicentre in all probability was somewhere in the Khasi hills. So calumnious were the tremors, so devastating the effects it had on the land with hundreds of deaths resulting from its intensity, that it has been called the "great earthquake". The Richter scale was not in operation then, but descriptions of the severity of the tremors give us the impression that it was intense, "Category A" in the parlance of the time. Natural calamities such as this have left their imprint in human memory. Many Khasis who experienced the disaster calculated their age and those of their children using the date of the earthquake as a reference. A new and safer form of house construction "the Assam type," became preferred to the earlier stone structures introduced by the colonial regime after that earthquake. So marked was the imprint of this great earthquake that exactly a hundred years after it struck, the people of Shillong, if not elsewhere in the Khasi hills too, were gripped with the fear of another devastation, as if natural calamities return at the centenary!

The paperback booklet under review is a translation of an account of the great earthquake written by Reverend Robert Evans, a missionary of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Presbyterian Mission in the Khasi Hills - 1878-1901. Written in Welsh and published soon after the incident it describes, the account has gone unnoticed outside Welsh church circles till the translation of it into English by Basil Morris. The introduction to the translated publication and the translator's note provides an account of how Morris got interested in locating the original text and getting it translated for publication by the North-Eastern Hill University Publications. The account has seven very short chapters. The first "God and Earthquake" gives a Christian perception of why natural calamities strike. The second chapter will be of more interest to the lay person, as it gives an account of previous earthquakes in the region. One would have hoped the third chapter to have gone into the details of what occurred that fateful late afternoon. This is a disappointment as it gives

a very sketchy account of the disaster. The next chapter narrates the natural effects of the incident while the fifth section provides the spiritual effects in its aftermath. An interesting section in the last but one chapter contains the experiences of several witnesses of the earthquake. The last chapter provides events connected with the natural disaster, particularly the devastation of Shella village on the south face of the Khasi hills.

To those familiar with the accounts of the12 July 1897 earthquake, this booklet is a welcome addition to the existing literature on the subject. However there is nothing very significant of the account it attempts to recapture. Much more details are found in the official report of the earthquake published by the Government of Assam. Other Catholic and Presbyterian missionary accounts have been written with more empathy for those affected than the tribulation of god as Robert Evans projects. Another interesting and more humane account but little used source is the diary of Hajom Kissor, the founder of the Unitarian Church in the Khasi-Jaintia hills. In part it will be this stiff evangelical portrayal of the cause and effect of the earthquake which will deter its use as a more reliable account of the quake.

David R. Syiemlieh
Professor of History, North-Eastern Hill University

Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800-1970, edited by D. Ben Rees, William Carey Library, no place of publication stated, 2002, no price indicated, pp. iv, 259, paperback edition.

The last of the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries left the Khasi-Jaintia Hills in 1969 following the decision of the Government of India that all foreign missionaries leave the region. Though the missionaries who laboured in these parts of the country have periodically returned and their church leaders continued the connection, it was wearing thin until interest was sparkled with the television programme and publication of Nigel Jenkin's *Gwalia in Khasia* in 1995. Since then the exchange between Wales and the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, "their biggest overseas venture" has grown in a variety of ways. One way has been the publication of literature in Welsh, English and Khasi on the connection.

D. Ben Rees' edited work under review is a welcome addition to the literature on the subject. A minister of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, he has researched and written widely on the Welsh missions to the Indian subcontinent. With the support of other church persons he has been able to present a ready reckoner on each of the missionaries who came to India under the Welsh Presbyterian Foreign Mission, as it was then called, the Baptist Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society and some independent missionaries. The volume was compiled for three reasons: his response and reaction to some Welsh TV programmes on the missionary work in North East India; that the work should be ecumenical in nature to include the efforts of denominations other than the Welsh Presbyterians; and to include those who kept the witness in Wales as far as India was concerned.

India, according to the editor, has been in the psyche of the Welsh since the 18th century. This comes out very clearly in the sheer number of their missionaries, among other, who came to India. The biographical accounts of the missionaries are arranged in alphabetical order with large sections given to the more common of Welsh surnames, the Evans, Jones, Williams and Thomas. The name of the authors of the sketches is indicated below the list of references used for drawing up the life of these Welsh missionaries to India. There are entries too on the missionary societies, the presbyteries, some of the larger churches and their mission fields.

The author has however not given much attention to the role the Khasis and Mizos played in the growth of the church in these hills. There are entries on only a few of their pastors and church elders which makes me think that in time it would be a useful exercise were someone to focus attention on the "native". Apparently the author and his collaborators were not in touch with persons in their former mission field. This has resulted in a number of errors in spelling of names of persons and places. The photograph on the front cover which is the only photograph used, shows the last of the Welsh missionaries in the Khasi hills with church elder. (The note at their front piece wrongly indicates that the missionaries were with students of the Khasi-Jaintia hills.)

Church historians, missiologists, persons linked with the ongoing

programmes of the churches in North East India which trace their origins to the Welsh Missions, and readers in Wales are sure to find Ben Rees' *Vehicles of Grace* a useful text.

David R. Syiemlieh
Professor of History, North-Eastern Hill University

Anil K. Rajvanshi, *Nature of Human Thought: Essays on Mind, Matter, Spirituality and Technology*, Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute, Phaltan, 2005, Rs.100/-.

In *Nature of Human Thought*, Anil K.Rajvanshi explores the nature of human thought. He hopes to add to the already existing enormous amount of knowledge on this exciting subject. He believes that remarkable phenomena occur due to the interaction of human thought and material surroundings. He argues that since human thought is produced by brain, it must be physical in nature. Therefore, he comes to the rather uncommon conclusion that human thought is controlled by scientific laws. What are these scientific laws? Finding an answer to this significant question is the avowed purpose of writing this book. An ingenious conceptual framework is proposed by the author to show the intimate relation between deep thought, space, time, matter and universal consciousness. He makes use of the latest brain research and cosmology. He admits that his ideas are conjectural. He is not deterred by this since he believes: "The black magic of today is often the science of tomorrow".

The author has arranged his essays under three sections, namely: basic theme, deep thought and more, and spirituality, technology and sustainability. The first section contains the philosophy of human thought and its interaction with matter, and also the interrelationship of time, space and universal consciousness. It deals with the concept of death and reincarnation, which never fails to arouse the curiosity of people. The second section deals with the fruition of deep thought, while the third with spirituality and technology, which are considered to be effective tools of sustainability. The first section consists of five interrelated essays, while the second and third

sections consist of seven essays each, which take up certain individual issues.

The author bases his thoughts on Patanjali's *Yoga Darshan,* which he considers to be a definitive and scientific writing on the control of human thought.

The author has his own definition of spirituality. He says: "Spirituality is nothing else but understanding ourselves and the laws of universe through the tools of science and technology". (p.59). I have serious difficulties in accepting this 'scientific' definition of spirituality. It seems to me to be completely one-sided, ignoring deliberately the crucial religious dimension of spirituality.

But the topics dealt in this book are not only interesting, but also contemporary. It is extremely readable. It is written in simple and straightforward style. The Sanskrit words and scientific terms are made understandable by giving their meanings in English and simple explanations. The drawings go a long way in making one understand complicated scientific notions. Notes and references are elaborate and very useful. The author's sense of honesty and integrity is exhibited clearly, when he talks about himself with candour. Some of his experiences seem to be surreal. He has a wonderful gift for telling stories. His careful observations, recommendations to school children, suggestions and conclusions are worth considering, especially his recommendation to the students of professional courses. He says very insightfully: "There is a general tendency among students of professional courses to give a step-motherly treatment to humanities but I believe study of such subjects gives one a well-rounded education. Hence I feel that humanities should form a compulsory part of the curriculum in all professional colleges" (p. 85). The author tries to practise what he preaches. There is a certain charm and directness about this book.

Anil K. Rajvanshi has a degree in mechanical engineering from IIT, Kanpur and a PhD from the University of Florida, USA. He has been doing research in the areas of renewable energy, rural and sustainable development and spirituality. It is no wonder that he has been attracted strongly by Mahatma Gandhi and his "experiments with truth" since he was a devoted adherent of sustainable living. His essay on "Mahatma Gandhi, A votary of sustainable living" is worth reading for its clarity, strength and conviction.

The author ends his preface to the book by wishing "Happy reading and thinking". I wish the same for the future readers of this book. I hope that

many such readable and knowledgeable books will come out of the 'stable' of this young scientific thinker of modern era. This book is available from Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute, Phaltan-Lonand Road, P.O. Box 44. Phaltan-415523, Maharastra, India.

S.C. Daniel
Department of Philosophy (formerly), NEHU, Shillong.

DECLARATION

Form IV Rule 8

1.	Place of Publication	:	Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003
2.	Periodicity	:	Biannual
3.	Printer's Name	:	Deputy Director, NEHU Publications
	Address	:	Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003
4.	Publisher's Name	:	Deputy Director, NEHU Publications
	Nationality	:	Indian
	Address	:	Bijni Complex, Shillong - 793003
5.	Editor's name	:	T. B. Subba
	Nationality	:	Indian
	Address	:	NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex, Shillong 793003
6.	Name and Address of individuals who own the journal and partners or share-holders holding more than one percent of the total capital	:	North-Eastern Hill University, Permament Campus, Umshing, Shillong- 793022

I, T. B. Subba, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

T. B. Subba

Indexed in the Guide to Indian Periodical Literature

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

1. All contributions should be sent in electronic form as well as hard copy printed on A4 size paper in double space and with adequate margin on the left side. Notes and references should be numbered in Arabic numerals, with details provided as endnotes. The title of the paper, the author's name and address should be typed on a separate cover-sheet. Telephone & fax numbers and e-mail ID's, if available, should be provided.

2. Non-English words should be italicised or underlined. Spelling should be British. Quotations should be reduced to a minimum and where used should be put under double inverted commas or indented. Quotations of more than 50 words from published or copyright sources should have the permission of the author / publisher enclosed with the manuscript.

3. Contributors shall be given a copy of the journal. Those interested in reviewing books or have received review copies from publishers should write to the Editor with some indication of their field of specialisation.

4. Contributions accepted for the journal are not normally returned. Authors are therefore advised to keep a copy of their articles to facilitate reply to any queries, the Editor and / or referee(s) may have. All articles, book reviews and enquiries should be sent to the Editor, NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex, Shillong- 793003 at tbsubba@nehu.ac.in.

The responsibility for the facts stated and opinions expressed is wholly that of the contributors and the Editor and the North-Eastern Hill University Publications accept no responsibility for them.