PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA HISTORY ASSOCIATION

SEVENTH SESSION

PASIGHAT : 1986

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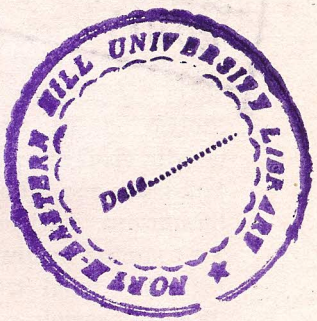

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PREFACE

It gives us great joy to find that the Association has been growing in strength over the years as the premier research organisation in North East India. Our strategies of grass-root research, inter-disciplinery approach, and group orientation for an objective understanding of the nature of socio-economic developments and social formations at different points of time have started to yield the cherished results. The membership of the organisation has been steadily increasing. Our more than three hundred members today are the researchers from the Surveys and research departments and the teachers in the Universities, Colleges and Schools spread over all the seven States in the North-East, besides a few from outside the region. Our members are not from History but also almost all the Social Sciences and Humanities streams, and this is because of our faith in the study of history as a science for socio-economic development. Our annual sessions are major academic gatherings in the region, attended on an average by hundred and fifty delegates from all over the region. A large number of research papers are persented and discussed in the annual session each one of which is a substantial addition to the existing literature. Our proceedings volumes are acclaimed as major references on North East India. We get requests for copies of current as well as back volumes from all over the country and even abroad.

We have also been able to create some enthusiasm about research in the history of the region. The researches in the history of North East India are going on in all the Universities in the region. A large number of M. Phil. and Ph. D. candidates are working in regional history. There are on-going individual research projects by teachers and professional researchers. The seminars are occasionally organised in various institutions. A fair number of research publications have come out in recent years and many more must be in the pipe lines. The under-graduate and post-graduate level courses in the history of North East India are offered in the Universities in the region. Some of the State departments are planning to introduce the study of the history of the concerned State in the schools, and some of our members are cooperating with the SCERTs in preparing the text books. The emerging important functions of this Association are to coordinate the on-going researches, to design a perspective for research, to develop appropriate tools and methodologies, and

to create literature in the history of the region so that it may be possible to prepare a Comprehensive History of North East India in the next few years.

The present volume is the Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat on November 11-13, 1986. Professor J. B. Ganguly, Director, Calcutta University Post-graduate Centre, Agartala presided over the Session which was inaugurated by Shri Khapriso Krong, Minister of Edcation, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Shri B. K. Kakoty, Principal, and Dr. S. Dutta, Head, Department of History, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat did us great honour as Chairman of the Reception Committee and Local Secretary of the Session respectively. Besides its high academic, contents, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the session for warmth of the reception extended by the organisers and the colourful entertainment programme. Our thanks are due to the authorities of the Jawaharlal Nehru Colleges Pasighat and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

I am personally thankful to my coleagues Dr J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P.Kejariwal, Dr. Milton S. Sangma, Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh and Mr. Abhijit Choudhury for the help in editing and publishing this volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research and the North Eastern Council for financial assistance.

Shillong
The 25 September 1987.

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)
General Secretary,
North East India History Association.

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Presidential Address

J. B. Ganguly

Ladies and gentlemen and members of the North East India History Association :

At the very outset I must confess that I did never imagine that I would be called upon by the members of the Executive Committee of the Association to be its President for any of its sessions. I still wonder on what considerations I have been shown this honour which I do not deserve. From my side, of course, I consider this occasion as a great opportunity for me to renew my association with Pasighat, the cultural capital of Arunachal Pradesh, if I may say so, where I had worked as the head of the premier seat of learning, namely, Jawaharlal Nehru College, from 1966 to 1971. That period was a very crucial period in the history of this Territory. When I came here in 1965 memory of the 1962 debacle was still fresh in the minds of the people, doubts were being expressed on the correctness of the "Philosophy for NEFA" as propounded by Verrier Elwin and the system of administration built up in the North East Frontier Agency was also being questioned. Reacting to the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru's announcement at Tezpur that "the philosophy of NEFA" might undergo "some changes in detail" Elwin wrote : "Even before the Chinese aggression I had been revising the third edition of my book *A Philosophy for NEFA,* for in the light of experience and the rapid changes that have affected the frontier in the last few years, various minor adaptations and modifications have become necessary." (*The Statesmen,* Calcutta, 12 December 1962).

During my stay here I saw the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system in NEFA in 1969 opening the door for participation of the people in administration at the local level. Cultural revival movement was set in through institutionalisation of the celebration of different local festivals, such as, Solung, Mopin, Dre, etc. I still remember with what great enthusiasm we used to take part in social services, for clearance of jungles, opening of roads, etc. as also in the community feasts as a part of the Solung festival here at Pasighat. Even in the remote villages I used to go and take part in the hoisting of Solung flags and community feasts.

During this period again the decision of the government to shift the headuqarters of NEFA from Shillong to somewhere within

the Agency was announced and the search for the location of the Capital was initiated. All these changes culminated in the emergence of NEFA as the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972, first with a Territorial Council and later a Legislative Assembly and a responsible ministry. I speak about all this not just in a reminiscent mood but also to point out that Pasighat has played a leading part in bringing about such changes.

I may disappoint the members of the Association by my ramblings on history which may appear to them as pedestrian in approach, but I am sure that Pasighat has been rightly chosen as the venue of this seventh session. The delegates will greatly enjoy the breathtaking scenic beauty of the town with its sylvan surroundings, lofty mountains overlooking it from the north and the mighty Siang flowing by it. They will be also overwhelmed, as I can assure from my past experience, by the traditional warm hospitality of the town.

Even more importantly, Pasighat has a distinct historical identity. Accordingly, it has a right of its own to be the locale of this meeting of the historians who would be interested in peeping into the past of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Pasighat, on the river Siang, was the first administrative centre of the British rulers in the north-east frontier of India. In 1912 a new district called, 'The Central and Eastern Sections, North-East Frontier' was formed with two Sub-Divisions, namely, Sadiya and Pasighat. The latter was the seat of administrative centre for the Sub-Division after its own name. How old is Pasighat village settlement, it is difficult to say. The first official reference to this place is traceable to 1858 when, in the course of a military expedition to Kebang village, about 50 km further up from Pasighat, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur district received 'the deputations from the Pashi, Meybo and Pado communities' at Pasighat.

I took some of your time to speak about Pasighat, partly out of nostalgia, no doubt, but more importantly, to impress upon you the historical importance of the town. Pasighat was not only the first administrative centre of the British in the north-east frontier, it was also the place in and around which the colonial power encountered very stiff resistance from the Adis while extending their rule to this frontier region.

May I now turn to give a brief outline of the changes that the basic structure of the tribal economy has been undergoing in the north-east frontier of India since the early decades of the nineteenth century.

II

Professor H. K. Barpujari, the founder President of the North East India History Association, in his presidential address at the first annual session at Shillong in 1980 had lamented that no worthwhile work was being done on social and economic history of Assam and the tribal areas. What was being done were "on the beaten track". He further observed : "mere narrations of customs, manners, dress, ornaments, etc, will not bring out the main trends and developments of the socio-economic life of the people. What is needed is an integrated approach covering a period of years on different aspects of a community undergoing a process of change".

Neglect of research in social history is not a unique lapse on the part of the scholars of the north eastern region. Sumit Sarkar, in his Presidential Address to the Modern India Section of the forty-fifth session of the Indian History Congress at Annamalai in December 1984 had also deplored that a considerable gap still remained.

"Between our understanding of the basic structures and tendencies of colonial economy - considerably deepened today by recent research and the much-explored hisiory of political movements in late colonial India, generally subsumed, .. under the rubric of nationalism.."

"The gap is obviously related also to the very evident lack of fruitful dialogue between history, sociology and social anthropology." (*Economic and Political Weekly,* June 22 - 29, 1985, pp . 1082-83).

Such a lacuna also exists in respect of the NER where a large number of field works have been carried out by anthropologists on the tribes of this region which provide the necessary materials for research on social and economic history of the tribal areas. Unless this gap can be filled up it will not be possible to understand and interpret the reactions of the people to the structural changes in social and economic organization of production that have been set in motion since the fifties. Without such research work the existing tendencies of explaining economic and social changes in terms of some over-simplified dogmas will continue and distort our understanding of the past and cloud our vision into the future.

It is to be noted here that the shift from writing political history to social and economic history occurred only in the recent decades. How can we account for this ? For an answer we may refer to the famous George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered

by E. H. Carr in the University of Cambridge in 1961 which were later published by Penguin Books under the title, *What is History*? Carr observes : "The historian's interpretation of the past, his selection of the significant and the relevant, evolves with the progressive emergence of new goals. To take the simplest of all illustrations, so long as the main goal appeared to be the organization of constitutional liberties and political rights, the historian interpreted the past in constitutional and political terms. When economic and social ends began to replace constitutional and political ends, historians turned to economic and social interpretations of the past." (p. 124) The new goals are the achievement of economic development with social justice and the removal of poverty and inequalities.

I am not a historian by training. My basic discipline is economics. While working on the problems and prospects of socio-economic development of the region I have realized that without knowing the history of changes in the conditions of living, social institutions and the system of organization of production of goods and services and their distribution, it is not possible to understand clearly the problems of today and to formulate models of development for the future.

Out of such an interest I have attempted at constructing an analytical model of the economy of the NER in the pre-plan period. In a paper on the economic conditions and change in north-east India that I had presented at Shillong some years back which has been recently published in the *Assam Economic Journal* (Vol. V No. 1) I had stated that in the pre-plan period the tribal areas of NER represented a typical example of the static circular flow of economic life ; year after year, in normal conditions, the producers produced goods either entirely for self-consumption or for exchange at values equal to the values of means of production used up in the process of production. The basic organization of production was slash-and-burn system of cultivation, free collection of forest products including games and free fishing in the streams. The economy represented a stationary state without any endogenous impulses for growth, where productive activities of the individuals were conditioned by the means and methods of producton inherited from the previous period in respect of every period. The tribesmen were entangled, so to say, "in a net of social and economic connections" which they could not easily shake off.

Since such a state of things continued over a long period of time, that is, until the colonial administration penetrated into

their areas, the question that naturally arises in one's mind is : was the system a harmonious one based on equality so that all members of the society were fully reconciled to it and were equally interested in its continuation ? In a seminar on tribal demography and development held at North Eastern Hill University in 1985, one tribal leader candidly pointed out that the tribals were happy and contented in the pre-plan period. They had few wants and they had no need for development of roads, schools, health services, etc. It was the government, in its zeal for bringing about planned development, that made them feel the need for all these facilities and services. But in the process the villagers came to grief as their newly felt needs were not being adequately matched by the provision of the necessary infrastructure. This was at the root of the woes of the tribal masses most of whom lived in the villages.

Another line of dissatisfaction found expression in the atavistic demand for preserving the tribal customary laws and practices in order to insulate the hill people from the modernization process which has been causing poverty and sufferings among them.

It cannot be denied that many tribal villages are not yet provided with the necessary rural infrastructure and that the earnings of the villagers are not rising significantly to meet their growing needs of non-traditional articles of consumption and services and not even their basic need of food. Poverty and inequality are stark realities in many tribal villages. It is also a fact that their customary socio-economic relations are dying out and a new structure of social, economic and political relations based on private ownership of property and sharper stratification of the society into economic groups having contradictory interests in productive activities has been emerging.

In a paper on *Economics of Development of the Tribal Villages of North-east India* that I presented in a seminar in Shillong, I have discussed how the process of peasantization of the tribal economy has been leading to growing inequalities among the tribal households and even pauperisation of some households. This has been the outcome of the strategy of development and restructuring of organization of production that are being followed. But it is also to be noted that no social economic change can represent a complete break with the past. All such changes must have historical roots. A search for the roots of inequalities and poverty of the tribal people leads one to analyse the social and economic organization of production in the tribal villages in the past. Here I confine myself to the tribal peoples of the north-east frontier of India, that is,

the area that now comprises Arunachal Pradesh.

III

For our knowledge about the conditions of the tribal peoples and their habitats in the north-eastern frontier of India in the nineteenth century we have to depend mainly on the writings of the administrators, soldiers, missionaries and explorers. Verrier Elwin in his introduction to the book edited by him entitled, *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century,* which contains a selection of passages from such writings up to 1900, has rightly claimed that these writings having a bearing on the history, people and problems "are of unusual value, for they give us a picture of the country as it was before it had suffered any external influence.." (p xv).

From these writings it is evident that each village was a separate and almost independent political unit. The Gaonboorah, or the village chief, was there but he did not have absolute powers. All major decisions were taken by the village council constituted by all the adult male members of the village. The village evolved its own system of allowing its members access to the productive resources of the village, mobilization and employment of labour for production, distribution of products in some limited spheres, etc. Customary laws and conventions were also evolved to deal with social relations of the individuals and families. Evolution of social and production relations had to be in harmony with the environment in which they lived. "All human civilisations", writes Madhav Gadgil, "are intimately related to the resources of the lands they inhabit and lands and waters they have access to. ..Human societies are therefore strongly dependent on their resource base, and changes in this resource base and in technologies and social modes of resource use as well as conflicts over access to resources are important elements of human history. ("Towards an Ecological History of India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, 1985, p. 1909).

Since the tribes of the north-east frontier lived in the hills under thick vegetation, any given plot of land on the hill slope could be used for agricultural production only by clearing of forests and depending entirely on the replenishment of soil fertility through the natural process of regeneration of vegetative cover over the same plot. The option of getting soil fertility replenished through 'flooding and deposition of nutrient rich silt by' any river was not

open to them. Within such constraints, practice of *jhuming* (slash and burn agriculture) was the obvious method of agricultural production. It was also natural that hunting was an important complementary occupation of such cultivators. For in the regime of shifting cultivation, different plots of land would be under forests of different levels of growth abounding in game animals, particularly ungulates, much more than in virgin forests (ibid, p. 191). Fishing in the streams was another produtive activity.

The tribal people also reared poultry, piggery and the semi-domesticated *mithun*. These were not only an important source of food, but also the stock of assets as the life span of these animals exceeded a single jhum production period. Since these animals have natural growth, the stock also grows on its own. But the growth of its size would be limited by the availability of food that the animals consume. The pigs and poultry birds were fed some grains produced in the agricultural field. But for the major part of their food these depended on the wastes available in the village and some vegetative products available in the vicinity of the village. Therefore the size of their stock would not grow without limit. The *mithuns* depend entirely on forests. Yet the size of the stock of *mithuns* had to be kept in check not only to conserve forest resources but also to protect agricultural crops from being plundered by them. The practice of frequent feasts and celebrations with chicken, pork and mithun's meat not only provided protein in the hillmen's diet but also helped keep the livestock population in check to conserve resources.

The hill people collected building materials, firewood and various eatables, such as, roots, shoots, fruits, berries, nuts, etc of plants and trees. The tribes living in the hills had, therefore, a heavy stake in conserving the forests and soil on hill slopes for their survival and well-being. Consequently they developed various conservation practices, such as, maintaining sacred groves, regulated use of communal groves, etc. Captain Dalton observed that the Padams and the Hill Miris, whose villages he had visited, had the 'wholesome prejudice against breaking up forest grounds so long as their *gra* (fallow) was sufficient. They dreaded "offending the spirits of the woods and forest by unnecessarily cutting down trees.' (Elwin, op. cit., p. 152 & 252).

Though shifting cultivation was generally practised by the different tribes, settled cultivation was also not unknown. A few tribes, such as, the Apa Tanis, Monpas Khamtis, etc grew crops on permanent fields and terraces arranging appropriate system of irrigation.

Economic growth and development presuppose the process of accumulation, that is, production of surplus over consumption needs and means of production used up in the process of production and mobilisation of the surplus for expanding productive activities. In the tribal economy of the north-east frontier in the nineteenth century there were three sources of surplus-earnings. Though *ihuming* was practised on common village land, some privately owned plots of agricultural land which were cleared and developed by the owners concerned were there. Even from *jhuming* surplus could be produced under certain favourable conditions. Since *ihuming* is a highly labour-intensive operation; the size of the yield from *jhuming* depended on the quantum of labour employed for the purpose other things remaining unchanged. One source of employing labour was slave labour. From all accounts it appears that the total tribal population was more or less static for many decades although there is no historical evidence of suffering from their shortage of food in any period. Inter-tribal feuds, which were very frequent, kept the population in check. Therefore, it was the common tendency among the tribes to capture as many persons both male and female - from the enemy villages as possible. These captives were reduced to the status of slaves and employed for all kinds arduous and productive activities. This way, once the institution of slavery came into being, its remifications became complex. As Elwin has pointed out; there were the following categories of slaves in the tribal society. "They were captured in war. They were purchased. They were used to repay a debt. Many were born slaves. Sometimes a man became a slave because he had committed a serious offence against the community and could not afford the fine demanded." (V. Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA,* 1957, p. 100). Elwin has also recorded that slaves were generally treated well by their masters. All the families in a village did not own slaves, only a few did. These families could produce surplus by employing slave labour. Even then the tribal economy was not a slave economy because the system did not vitally depend on the employment of slave labour.

The second source of surplus generation in the economy was from trade. Contrary to the early belief that "trade is sterile", it is now generally agreed that surplus may arise in trade and commerce. From the accounts given by the explorers, missionaries and administrators; it is clear that in the pre-colonial period; the tribes of the north-east frontier had trade relations both with Tibet and the plains of Assam. What is significant is that they imported

goods from Tibet not only for their own consumption and use but also for reexporting to Assam. There were also trade relations with Bhutan. The Akas of Kameng bought from Bhutan clothing, warm blankets, daos, swords and silver ornaments paying prices in rupees. They earned rupees by selling rubber to the traders from the Assam plains. As recorded by J. Butler, the Mishmis exchanged their " *bih* (poison), *gathewan* (one odoriferous root), *manjeet* (madder), and *teetah* (a bitter root greatly esteemed for its medicinal qualities) for Lama cattle, brass pipes, gongs, and copper vessels." These things bought from Tibet were exchanged for cloth, cattle, colour beads, etc. from Assam.

The goods traded were not only agricultural produce and collections from forests but also some manufactures, such as daos, Adi quilts (*(miri gin)*,etc. Among the goods exchanged, items like manjeet, Mishmi teeta (Captistia), *gertheanu* and rubber were produced (i.e., collected) mainly for exports. Though emergence of a distinct class of traders was not in evidence, there were some tribes, such as, the Miris and Nishis, who acted as the intermediaries between two tribes or between the tribes and the plainsmen. H.M. Crowe in his "Account of a Journey to Apa Tannang Country" referring to the Apa Tanis' dependence on the Nishis for having trade with the plains remarks : "The frontier tribes are interested in preventing the remoter clans from visiting the plains, as they make a profit out of hillmen and plains traders by acting as intermediaries." (Elwin, *India's North-East Frontier*, p. 196).

There was considerable volume of inter-tribal trade also. The Apa Tanis, for example, produced surplus rice which they traded for salt supplied by the Nishis (who got it from the plains) and for surplus cotton produced by the Adis.

All this suggests that the tribal economy was not a completely closed system, trade with transactors from outside the system formed a part of it and yielded surplus.

The third source of surplus was the forcible collections of agricultural products, cattle, cloth, slaves, etc from the Assamese villages in the foot-hill areas. During the later days of Ahom rule the government was unable to stop the tribal people from exacting the things they needed from the villagers by force. The tribes claimed these plains as their own territory and hence they had the right to collect a share of the produce of the villagers in the plains. The recognition of the right of the tribes to collect the produce from their respective 'mahals' came to be known as 'Posa'. The Adis even got a regular share of gold dusts collected by the gold-

washers from the plains in the Dihong, Dibong and other tributaries of the Brahmaputra as also a share of fish caught by fishermen in those rivers. In economic terminology, income from 'Posa' was a sort of rent, the whole part of which, if the cost of collections is ignored, was a surplus.

The question that arises now is : were such surpluses mobilized for accumulation and growth ? For an answer to this we have to look into the system of ownership of property and individuals' access to productive resources. For practising jhuming individual families had equal access to the village forest land. Since the forest land was conserved by the community, there was hardly any scope for enlarging the area of forest land annually cultivated. Accumulation by individual families could take the form of raising and expanding the stock of poultry birds, pigs, *mithuns*, etc. From different accounts it is noted that in every tribal village there were some well-to-do families owning a large number of birds and animals, particularly *mithuns*. In fact, the wealth of a family was reckoned in terms of the number of *mithuns* it owned. Building up of stock of foodgrains produced, mainly rice, was also another form of accumulation. But in both these cases there were obvious limits on the size of accumulated stock.

There were examples of reclamation of land for settled cultivation by some individual families. Investments on such expansion of productive activities were mainly in terms of labour. Since all families had access to productive resources, mainly forest land, for cultivation no class of agricultural labour emerged. Therefore labour could not be hired by any individual family on wage payment although the system of throwing feasts by a well-to-do family to fellow villagers seeking their participation in work on the former's field was there. But this was not a very recurring feature in the tribal villages. Of course, employment of slave labour for cultivation was there. Even then, the scope of accumulation in acquiring more and more land for settled cultivation was limited.

The absence of use of money was another limiting factor of accumulation and growth.

On top of all this was the tribal ethos of egalitarianism which implied that the surplus product whether from agriculture, or from hunting or even collected from the villages in the plains was to be shared by the community. Too many and too frequent community feasts, stocking the village granary with surplus produce to help the needy in times of distress, etc were also the indications of such an ethos.

All such conditions notwithstanding, some accumulation of wealth in the hands of individual families was taking place in the nineteenth century even in the pre-colonial period. The surplus generated in the tribal economy was appropriated by some members, mainly the chiefs and other leaders. This is confirmed by various accounts of the visitors to tribal villages revealing the wealth and influence of the chiefs which were in contrast with the commoners. Such accumulation did not lead to depletion of forests which were conserved so that the potential for maintaining the level of production was not diminished. It was something like a 'Self-sufficient natural economy' even as it generated, albeit in moderate degree, inequality in the distribution of social wealth.

IV

When the colonial period started, that is, the British Government established contact with the tribal peoples of the north-east frontier from about 1840 some significant changes took place. The first thing that the British did was to replace the system of *posa*, that is, the tribal chiefs' right to tribute payable by the British subjects living in the plains, by the system of payment of annual sum of money by the government in lieu of all their demands. With the Adis, the Government made an agreement for payment of several articles of consumption to them every year.

The Government also followed the policy of developing closer trade relations with the tribes. As a result the volume of trade with Tibet gradually fell while that with Assam increased. Use of money in such exchanges became more common. Annual payment of sums of money in lieu of *posa* also injected money into the tribal economy. Though this did not immediately lead to widespread use of money for internal exchanges, savings could be stored up in money and the accumulated stock of money could be invested for productive activities in some cases. W. Robinson wrote about the Mishmis that they exchanged their produce for salt, cloth and money, "When a sufficient sum of money is procured they lay it out in purchsing buffaloes, and the country cattle.(Elwin, op. cit.p.314).

To promote increased flow of trade between the hills and the plains the Government organized a number of trade fairs at different places annually from the middle of the nineteenth century. The British were mainly interested in finding out an expanding outlet for goods manufactured at home. Importance of these fairs can be assessed from the account given by Elwin (op. cit. pp 353-4). According to Elwin, an annual fair was held at Udalgiri where the

Sherdukpens and Akas exchanged ponies, sheep, dogs, salt, a little gold, blankets, yak's tails, musk, chillies, spices, wax, madder, oranges and walnuts for Englsih and Assamese cloth, yarn, rice, betel-nuts, brass and iron utensils, bar iron, hoes, etc. It is recorded that in 1875 and 1876 the fair was visited by 2,000 and 3,000 tribesmen respectively.

The biggest annual fair was held at Sadiya where the main transactors from the hills were the Miris, Mishmis, Khamptis, Singphos and Adis. "In 1876, 3,000 tribesmen were present and the numbers rose in later years. In 1874, they brought down over Rs. 25,000 worth their own articles and took home goods to the value of Rs. 17,630. In 1876, the turnover was much greater : they sold Rs. 49,100 and bought Rs. 44,475 worth of goods." This indicates that the hills were having a favourable balance of trade that is, their exports exceeded imports, leading to inflow of cash, (Indian rupees) into the tribal economy. Goods sold by the tribesmen where handicarfts, hand -woven cloth, rubber, Coptis Tita (Mishmi Tita), elephant tusks, rhinocreros horns, various other forest products, etc. Goods purchased by them at the fair were English yarn, English pottery, salt, brass pots, iron, tea,s ugar, oil gur, opium, etc.

It is significant to note that in 1879, according to the Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for 1878-79, 40 Europeans took part in the fair,for exchanging goods with the hillmen. (ibid). The British were actually looking for opening of a trade route to China through these hills. The plan was to export broadcloths, etc to Yunan through this route. It was finally given up when it was found that it would be cheaper to send exports to Yunan via Rangoon "as water communication by the Trawaddy is facile". (ibid, p. 403).

The trade fairs helped boost up production of various primary goods and products of handloom and handicarfts in the tribal villages. This became a source of generating surplus in the tribal economy. But one disastrous effect of the growth of trade relations with the plains was the reckless use of natural resources for increased earnings. S. E. Real in his report on a visit to the Nongyang Lake, on the Burmese Frontier, in February 1879 noted : "Kaiyas, or Marwari merchants, or their agents, are now seen at every place of importance, they exchange opium, brass-ware, and clothes for ivory, rubber, and such like. Indirectly, they have been the cause of the extermination of the rubber-trees over large tracts ; the ready sale for ivory has also added to the natural tendency among

the Nagas to hunt and kill elephants for the sake of their flesh. (Elwin, op. cit., p. 103) C. R. Macgregor in his 'Notes on the Akas and Akaland, also observed : "Rubber is the chief source of wealth of the Akas.....At present the rubber supply is large ; but the reckless way in which the Akas treat the trees will probably soon lessen their source of supply." (ibid, p. 453). His forecast came true in no time ; the hills became denuded of rubber trees.

Establishment of colonial rule over the tribal peoples of the north-east frontier meant the gradual breakdown of the relative closeness of their village economy. Their economy became linked with the economy of 'the rest of world'. Resources of the tribal villages thus became exposed to the pull of external demand. The tribesmen became the victims of the colonial mode of trade so far as they rapidly lost their natural resources without having been adequately paid for them. Forest resources like rubber, madder, Mishmi Tita, wild life, timber, etc were rapidly used up.

This was possible because the community interest in conserving resources was submerged by individual interest in earning more income and acquirng more wealth by exploiting or disposing of natural resources without compensating the community for the permanent loss it suffered because of exhaustion of resources. This development engendered inequality in the society because it was based on the changing pattern of unequal command over land and natural resources by individual families.

An important source of leakage of resources from the tribal villages was the import of opium from outside. It is noted that opium constituted an important item of purchase by the hill-men. As recorded by Elwin, in one year at the trade fair at Sadiya the value of opium sold to the tribesmen amounted to Rs. 30,300. (op. cit., p. 354). From S.E. Real's report (already cited above) also it is learnt that the Marwari traders regularly traded opium for local products of the hill-men.

From the reports of the explorers it is evident that many tribesmen of the north-eastern frontier became addicted to opium in the nineteenth century. The Singphos, Khamptis and Padams even cultivated the plant. Exactly when they started taking an interest in this intoxicant and from whom they first learnt about the plant and its product are required to be enquired into. From the fact that the tribes bordering Burma were by and large more addicted to this intoxicant, it may be presumed that they acquired this habit through their contact with the people on their east, that is the Burmese. The latter in their turn imported the commodity from

the people in their north, that is the Chinese. In India and Asia Minor opium was first produced and from these two areas the commodity was exported to other countries. According to the Chinese historians, "Before 1767 , China's opium imports from India had not exceeded 200 chests a year..... In 1773, the government of British India adopted the criminal policy of large-scale opium exports to China and granted the East India Company the right to monopolize the opium trade in India. To ensure the implementation of this policy, in 1797 it also gave the company the sole right to manufacture opium. (*The Opium War*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1976, pp. 8-9). By 1800, opium sold to China reached 2000 chests. China's objection to sale of opium in that country led to the Opium War of 1840-42. This affected the sale of opium by the British opium dealers in China. For maintaining the volume of sale of opium they, therefore, turned to find out new outlets including the north-east frontier of India. It is historically confirmed that in the early period of their contact with the tribal people of this region the British did encourage the tribal people to satisfy their urge for opium-smoking. This is evident from the fact that in the agreements the British entered into with the Adis under which the latter received annual payments included opium as an important item (vide, Elwin, op. cit. p. 268). British officials visiting the tribal villages presented their hosts with opium besides other articles. (ibid, p. 425).

It was the policy of the colonial rulers not only to earn profits from opium traffic but also to keep the frontier tribes subdued and morally and physically weak by encouraging them to be addicted to opium-taking. The growing habit did cause demoralization, indolence and poverty of the addicts. Commenting on the prevalence of this obnoxious habit, Verrier Elwin said : ".. in my opinion, opium-addiction is a greater evil even than head-hunting ..... The Noctes, Konyaks and Mishmis addicted to opium are poor, thin, miserable, caught in a vicious circle so that the poorer they grow the more they turn to opium for relief, and the more they smoke the poorer they become." (*A Philosophy for NEFA*, pp 108-9)

Since opium-addiction cripples the productive capacity of a man, there should have been communal protest against this ruinous habit. But it did not happen, which indicated that communal concern for individual's welfare was slackened. This was an unmistakable sign of growing inequalities and poverty.

For the extension of their rule over the tribal villages, the colonial rulers depended much on the influential individuals of those

villages who were regularly paid rewards both in cash and kind. Such inflow of resources into individual hands from outside also set in motion the process of growing inequalities in income and wealth in tribal villages.

In the past, when inter-village strifes were frequent, the question of security against outside attack was the prime consideration that called for village solidarity. This largely accounted for the system of community ownership and conservation of village resources and mutual help and cooperation in carrying out productive activities. With the penetration of the colonial rule into the tribal villages, the threats of attack faced by any village from any other village greatly eased. This outcome of foreign rule slackened the solidarity of the households of any village and encouraged individual families to think somewhat exclusively in terms of their respective gains and losses rather than that of all the families in the village. This was still another factor contributing to the emergence of inequalities in tribal villages.

The process of growing inequalities was even facilitated by the inflow of money into the village economy. It was very convenient to accumulate wealth in the form of stock of money by converting surplus produce into money and also directly saving out of money income earned through contact with the foreign rulers. It generated inequality since these opportunities were not equally enjoyed by all the families in a village. The ease and convenience of accumulating assets in money inspired the better off and the influential elements in the village to try to appropriate as much of the surplus produce of the village as possible.

The rigour of inequalities was, however, mitigated by certain factors, such as, very low rate of accumulation of wealth on account of low rate of savings out of income (which itself was very low in absolute terms) and low rate of investment, low level of technology of production and continuation of the egalitarian ethos, even though in somewhat diluted form. All this even concealed the nascent signs of inequalities so that to any casual observer from outside; the tribal society still looked like an equal society.

Development of inequalities, however, got an impetus after Independence, particularly after the planning era commenced when the main approach to development of tribal villages was to encourage the emergence of peasant families owning separate plots of land suitable for settled cultivation. I have explained this process in detail in my paper on the economics of development of tribal villages in north-east India to which I have already referred to earlier.

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Before I conclude I must call upon the young historians present here to take up further studies in the historical roots of inequality and poverty in the tribal society. The essential process of theorising involves formulation of hypotheses based on empirical data with the objective of verifying, modifying or even refuting them by making further inquiries into the facts having a bearing on the hypotheses. It is in this light that my hypotheses narrated above are to be taken. Any hypothesis is fruitful if it points the way to further inquiry and fresh understanding.

To know about the historical roots of inequality and poverty is not to accept this as an inevitable historical process but to be able to control, check and even reverse the process, while ensuring the total income and wealth of the people to rise, by conscious action. Formulation of working hypotheses of the historical process is needed to enable man to bring about changes in the desired direction by deliberate action. In this context let me quote E. H. Carr with whom many of us will agree :

> "The primary function of reason, as applied to man in society, is no longer merely to investigate, but to transform ; and this heightened consciousness of the power of man to improve management of his social, economic and political affairs by the application of rational processes seems to me one of the major aspects of the twentieth-century revolution." (*op. cit.* p. 142).

In the earlier centuries starting from the seventeenth, man had made great advances in his understanding of the 'world around him and of its laws' and surrendered himself to those laws which were not of his own making. But in the twentieth century man "became fully conscious of his power over his environment and over himself, and of his right to make the laws under which he would live." (ibid, p. 135) This change in man's perception of the uses of his reasoning faculty is indeed revolutionary. And we all must have trust in the power of man to make progress.

I think I have taken much of your time in spelling out my ramblings on an economic history of the north-eastern frontier of our country. May be, I have even taxed your patience too much. If so, I beg to be excused. I would, however, like to express my profound gratitude to you all for giving me a patient hearing.