

THE NEHU JOURNAL

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EDITORIAL

This volume contains six articles, one report on an environmental movement in North Sikkim, and four book reviews. Of the four book reviews, the one by Dr. Prasenjit Biswas can actually be called a review article rather than a book review. The report on North Sikkim written in the form of a travelogue by a Lepcha postgraduate student of the university is worth appreciating because it not only brings out the different voices from within her community which is engaged in the movement but also distances itself from all of them to the extent it is humanly possible to do so for a young student.

Of the six articles included in this volume the first is by Prof. C. R. Agera, who teaches philosophy at NEHU. His discourse on culture and religion, on Clifford Geertz, and on what the narratives can do is something anthropologists would be much jealous about. But I am glad that two anthropologists, Prof. P. K. Misra and Angela Rangad, have very ably demonstrated in their article the power of narratives in the context of Khasi society. These two articles complement each other and I am glad that the two could be published together.

From the two complementary discourses the journal moves on to performance of public sector banks which are expected to play a new role in the era of globalization and liberalization. Jaynal Uddin Ahmed, the author, brings out certain dichotomies in this sector on the basis of his study in Barak Valley of Assam covering the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. In the next article, the journal moves to an issue that is important from the human rights point of view. Arun Kumar Singh, who teaches law at NEHU, deals in particular with the problems of protection of witnesses under criminal justice administration in India. He deals with various cases, constitutional provisions, special statutes like TADA and POTA in the country and compares the situation here with situations in Australia, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The fifth and sixth articles are focussed on Meghalaya. The fifth article draws our attention to the unused potentials of tourism development in Meghalaya. The author Benjamin F. Lyngdoh also brings out the direct and indirect opportunities related to tourism sector and

the problems that this sector is facing now. In the sixth article two PhD students of Geography Department of NEHU, Shembhalang Kharmawlang and Saveyna Dkhar, bring out the legal position of various kinds of forests in West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya and the impact of the ban on tree felling imposed by the Supreme Court of India on the people of the district.

I wish all our readers a very happy reading.

T B Subba
Editor

Sacred Grove, Khasi Society and Worldview

P. K. MISRA AND ANGELA RANGAD

The “Sacred Grove” phenomenon has finally begun receiving scholarly attention in India. This attention has led to a number of studies on sacred groves focussing on their different dimensions. Whatever be the reasons for preserving certain patches of forest as sacred, the consequences of such a practice have been positive from the point of its impact on environment and maintenance of biodiversity.

“Sacred Grove” Phenomenon

The growing literature on sacred groves indicates many broad concerns. One of them is to find out the status of those forests which are set apart in the name of some deity. The other is to find out what functions such forests have in the lives of the local communities, their rituals and the taboos associated with them. There have been speculations on the origin of sacred groves and their history. These concerns have resulted in many field studies in different parts of the country. These studies show that sacred groves are found in various parts of India (Gadgil & Vartak 1981, Roy Burman 1991, Tiwari et al 1995, Fernandes 1993, Freeman 1994, Kalam 1996). Nipunage and his team (1988) found 84 sacred groves in the Western Ghats protected on religious grounds, Kalam found “hundreds of Devarkadus, sacred groves” (1996:5) in the small district of Kodagu of Karnataka. There were 873 sacred groves spread over 10,865 acres in 1873 in Kodagu district according to him (1996:5). In 1984, the Meghalaya state forest department estimated that 1000 sq kilometres of forest were marked as sacred groves. Tiwari et al in 1995 recorded 79 sacred groves in Meghalaya. Of these the canopies of 56 groves were estimated and accordingly categorized by the authors as: i) undistributed, ii) dense canopy, iii) sparse canopy, and iv) open. These sporadic studies underline the importance of undertaking a systematic survey of the sacred groves in India. However, studies conducted so far indicate that sa-

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cred groves are in different stages of preservation. Tiwari et al in their study of the sacred groves in Meghalaya find that sacred groves are not only important from biodiversity conservation point of view, but they also deliver a number of ecosystem services such as conserving soil, maintaining nutrient cycling, protecting water sources and catchments areas and help maintain downstream water qualities. Sacred groves perform all the ecosystem level functions typical to a forest ecosystem and, therefore play an important role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem (1988:7). They further find most sacred groves in the state (66 out of 79) are located on the catchment areas of major rivers or rivulets. At least 58 sacred groves are located at the origin of perennial streams (1988:4). They observe that the other common sites of occurrence of sacred groves are the steep hill slopes. Being located on the critical sites which are most vulnerable to degradation, sacred forests protect land and soil erosion and help in maintaining the quality of water in the stream downhill (1998:4). They also find that the sacred groves are repository of rich biodiversity and most often represent the climax vegetation of the area. In other words, they find a positive correlation between sacred groves and preservation of environmental niche. However there are scholars like Freeman (1994) and Kalam (1998), who think that the correlation if any is incidental. They think that any positive correlation between people's cultural practices and their consequences on environment is an attempt to romanticize the cultural practices of the people. According to Freeman much of this literature supports the thesis that prior to colonialism and industrialization, India's culture was imbued with a set of beliefs and practices that naturally held human demands on the environment in check so that population and their forest environment existed in a kind of ecologically sustainable homeostasis. In particular, it is the religious values and institutions of Hinduism or its folk variants that are supposed to have somehow encoded and transmitted this ecological wisdom across the generations (cf. Freeman, 1994:6). Virtually all anthropological and historical evidences of past thirty years or so suggest such a scenario, which according to Freeman, seem rather dubious, both in its underlying assumptions and as a general thesis (cf. Freeman, 1994:7). Freeman further asserts that cultural values are being imputed to populations not on the evidence of their actually espousing and expressing those values, but on the basis of inferring that they must hold some such values and beliefs from the requirements of the analyst's own ecological model (cf. Freeman, 1994:7). Freeman's research in northern parts of Kerala confirms his views. His research shows how little there may have been historically in the Hindu culture of traditional Kerala society that man-

dated any particular restraint or harmony in relation with nature (cf. Freeman, 1994:29). He argues that if there was any pre-modern ecological balance in Kerala that was owing to resources being plentiful, population being sparse, technology was rudimentary and few incentives to resource extraction than any cultural values. Freeman believes that the above conclusion is borne out by the anthropological data he has collected from the people.

Freeman's above views raise issues of methodology and analysis. In the first place it is very important methodologically to realize that inferences are implied in the kind of questions one is asking. As far as analysis is concerned he tends to take an untenable position that cultural values are independent of indigenous knowledge. It is well established that indigenous knowledge is empirical. It is based on day to day observations, repeated experiences of the people, their trials and experiments. It is quite possible that the inferences they draw, the correlations they make among many variables are not entirely right when viewed from our present day understanding of things. But that keeps happening all the time in all societies - traditional or modern - when knowledge advances and more variable or more knowledge about the same variable comes to light.

Secondly, it is well known that a cultural practice may begin with some objective in focus which in course of time may get displaced or totally lost, and its original intent is forgotten. Besides, much of human behaviour is subconscious and symbolic in nature and as such demands careful interpretation. For example, a native speaker of a language speaks a correct sentence in his language, but he may not be able to offer sufficient explanation of the rules of his language, although each time he produces a correct sentence according to the rules of his language without being conscious about its grammatical accuracy. It is the job of the analyst to find the grammatical categories of the native language in question. Freeman could not find enough evidence in the culture of the traditional society of northern Kerala which promoted conservation. Like Freeman, Kalam in his historical study of the sacred groves in Kodagu district of Karnataka finds that the sacred groves have been spared and conserved because they were either inaccessible or because other forest patches were available for use (1996:6). Tiwari et al in case of Meghalaya find that each time a Khasi had to locate a sacred grove, he located it at a strategically critical area. They also find that owing to changes in the traditional values in Meghalaya, large scale destruction of the sacred groves is taking place (1998:9). Fernandes (1993) argues that since the tribal people had nearly total dependence on forest, they developed so-

cial and religious forest management traditions which were aimed at keeping a balance between human and environmental needs. In other words, the strategy required for their own survival was that forest resources have to be conserved. He further argues that it was possible to put into operation this strategy because the community was not individualized and was based on shared system of resources and therefore lacked the modern concept of property. The community exercised control over equitable and balanced distribution of resources. However, Fernandez is of the opinion that balanced use, conservation and control were legitimized by various myths, beliefs and practices. Forests were the abode of numerous gods, goddesses and spirits. Certain trees, plants, creepers or animals were sacred for the members of a tribe because they traced their origin to them and were forbidden to hurt or consume them. In several of his writings, quite contrary to the findings of Freeman, Gadgil (1989) finds out that there was ecological wisdom encoded in the culture of the folk people which was transmitted over generations. Roy Burman (1997) is of the opinion that besides other things the sacred grove plays an extremely important role in identity management of communities. He observed that the "the Dhangas, Kunbis and Dalits residing in the villages of Western Ghats have separate sacred groves dedicated to their respective caste/clan/lineage/family deities" (1997:15). He further writes that the sacred groves may play an important role in the maintenance of identity at regional level like in Sabrimalai. He also finds that sacred grove is the basis for the political alliance between the Bhutia-Lepcha communities. This alliance is very crucial in safeguarding their respective identities particularly in the context of large inflow of Nepalis into Sikkim. Gadgil and Vartak who undertook a study of the sacred groves in Maharashtra and Goa believe that the sacred groves have their origin in hunting and gathering stage of the society and provided a setting for the development of cult rites. They speculate that origin of sacred groves may have been to preserve a valuable or rare trees or tree-climbers, or for some secular reasons. They further point out that the deities associated with sacred groves were fierce and when aroused were apt to punish the offenders with death (1996). This fear kept the people away from these forest patches.

To sum up this brief review of the relatively well-known studies of the sacred groves indicate the following:

- i) The concept of sacred grove is widespread in India.
- ii) Sacred groves are found in various stages of preservation and degradation.

- iii) Origin of sacred groves may have been to preserve some valuable tree or tree-climber
- iv) Sacred groves are associated with deities.
- v) Sacred groves play a variety of roles in the life of local communities.

The detailed study of the sacred groves of Meghalaya indicates that:

- vi) They are important from the point of view of biodiversity.
- vii) They perform a number of ecosystem services.
- viii) Most of sacred groves are located at critical areas and hence have protected soil erosion in catchment areas of water and maintained the quality of water down the hills.

There is a clear division of opinion among concerned scholars as regards the reasons for preservation of certain forests as sacred. One group of scholars believes that there is no folk wisdom in protecting some patches of forests. If certain patches have been protected, it is on account of fear of some deity. Or such forests are inaccessible or there are other means from where the resources can be drawn or there are no incentives to cut these forests or the technology available is too primitive. The other group shows clear correlation between the idea of sacred grove and maintenance of ecological balance.

The present study in a way is concerned with both the approaches and our argument is that they are not mutually exclusive. One thought process sees forest as a source to be exploited to the best of abilities and capacities of the people. The other sees the resources to be conserved for some tangible or intangible benefits in the future. These two thoughts processes, apparently opposed to each other, are not mutually exclusive in the deep structure. However, there is continuous struggle between the two. This paper explores how culture handles the struggle between the two thought processes with reference to the Khasis of Meghalaya.

Sacred Groves in Meghalaya

It is said that in the past there used to be a sacred grove near every village in Meghalaya. They were located near the top of hills full of oak and rhododendron trees (Gurdon 1907). There were a number of restrictions in extracting timber and non-timber products from such forests. Therefore the villagers maintained two kinds of forests: sacred groves were the conserved forests

and the other forests from where the resources were extracted were the supply forests. Although today every village does not have a sacred forest the number of sacred forests in Meghalaya is significant as compared to the neighbouring and other states of India. Some of these forests (12.5% of forests studied by Tiwari et al fall in the category of undisturbed and have 100% canopy) continue to be well preserved.

The state of Meghalaya comes under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution that allows the formation of Autonomous District Councils. One of the functions of the Autonomous District Council is the management of those forests, which do not come under reserved category. The Autonomous District Council has classified forests according to ownership and rights of the people. Of these, Law Lyngdoh, Law Kyntang and Law Niam are recognized as sacred groves. The management rules of the Autonomous District Council state that no timber and forest produce shall be removed for sale, trade or business from the sacred groves other than religious purposes, for which a free permit shall be obtained from the Chief Forest Officer of the District Council. In other words such forests when registered have legal sanction too.

The Khasis, the predominant community of the state of Meghalaya, believe that sacred groves are the abode of a deity called by various names such as *Ryngkew*, *Basa* etc. *Ryngkew* is a benevolent deity. It bestows welfare to the people, their cattle and land. It keeps the evil away. Those who do not observe the traditional norms in the forests they, their relatives, their cattle their crops and community may have to face the wrath of the deity sooner or later. The Khasis also believe that if the sacred grove is not well maintained *Ryngkew/Basa* may be displeased and abandon the forest resulting in the loss of the protective cover to the communities for ever. In spite of the belief that the *Ryngkew/Basa* has extraordinary powers, many sacred groves have become extinct, some are on the way to extinction, and only a few continue to be well-preserved. It is obvious that there is an ongoing struggle between a popular belief and the consumption needs of the people.

Objective

The objective of this study is to explore the worldview of the Khasi community through the concept of the sacred grove. From a structural point of view any concept as an element of the structure does not exist in isolation, therefore there has to be some coherence among related concepts and the relations with other concepts, beliefs, values, morals, and spiritual experiences in

the social structure of a given community. The sacred grove appears to be a convenient entry point as it touches various dimensions of the community life. The forests contain so much resource vital for the existence of traditional communities, yet a certain degree of restraint has to be observed in their utilization. The perusal of such questions as to why and how the restraint has to be observed, what happens if the restraints are violated and so on, would help in understanding the Khasi society, its value and morals and its worldview. These are the realms, which are neither fully articulated nor visible. These can only be surmised through the kind of social relations people establish among themselves and the world around them and transcend the immediate to go beyond into their imagined world. The worldview may have vagueness, but it is also definitive. Though it is complex and continuously gets reflected through the actions and behaviours of the people it cannot be just a monolith lying somewhere there. It has to continuously deal with the tensions and contradictions in society. Though the people may deviate from the values of their society, the same remains a guiding principle, a yardstick to arrive at the moral judgment of their actions. If the worldview shows divergence it may be indicative of internal schism which may be owing to radical transformation of the society.

Methodology

The data for the study was collected from primary and secondary sources in 1997-98. The Khasis are one of the well studied groups of Northeast India. Most of the published books and research papers on the Khasi society were consulted. There is high degree of literacy among the Khasi in urban areas. A lot is written about them by both Khasi and non-Khasi writers in the local newspapers and other kinds of literature. Such materials too were consulted. The relevant data were also procured from the forest department. However, our primary source of data came from the interviews of the leaders of the communities. These interviews were unstructured, but were clearly focussed on the sacred groves and the Khasi society. We decided to conduct the interviews of i) religious leaders, ii) political leaders, iii) creative writers, poets and artists and iv) community leaders preferably elderly people. We also attempted to prepare a few biographical sketches of some leaders primarily to find out how they view the sacred grove. We selected three villages namely Mawphlang, Swer and Nongkrem where the sacred groves still exist. All the sacred groves in these three places fall in the category of undisturbed forests. Our impression was that the forest at Swer was better preserved than the one at Nongkrem and Mawphlang. In these villages we

conducted a household survey to prepare a socio-economic profile and to find out what is the relationship of the community with their sacred grove. Attempts were made to find out what rituals continue to be performed in these villages. We made efforts to collect incidents and stories connected with sacred groves. We tried to cross-check the stories with as many people in the villages as possible. We also collected data on the taboos associated with sacred groves.

The Khasis

The Meghalaya state, situated in Northeast India, is inhabited by three matrilineal tribes namely the Khasi, Jaintia and the Garo. The study is focussed on the sacred groves maintained by the Khasis although the Jaintias and Garos too have sacred groves. By now enough literature exists on Khasis and therefore we would not like to burden the reader with the ethnographic details about them. However, a few details about them relevant for this study may be stated here. We may intersperse the details with our own impressions about the region and the people. The first author has stayed in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, for more than a decade and has interacted with Khasis in various capacities, while the second author is a Khasi herself.

Khasi Society: Structure

Khasis, like any other tribal community, are caught up in the changing environment. Dispersed as they are in different ecological zones of Meghalaya, they show distinct cultural and linguistic differences among themselves. For the present essay, we are not taking into account the internal differences among those living in different ecological regions.

When the British entered the region, the Khasi hills were governed by 25 independent native rulers. The coming in of British administration in the region brought in significant socio-political and economic changes. It opened the way for missionary activities such as churches, schools, hospitals, etc. Large-scale conversions to Christianity also took place since then. In 1972, Meghalaya became a separate state of the Indian Republic. It is ruled, like any other state of the Indian Union, by the elected representatives. Since Meghalaya comes under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution, the state allowed autonomy in several spheres of activities. Under this provision, the Autonomous Hills District Council have been formed which have the power of administration on the specified subjects at the local level. As stated earlier forest is one of them. Khasis continue to have several traditional institutions like village council (*dorbar*), headman of the locality/village and

traditional practices. Several such traditional institutions and practices have been brought within the ambit of the Autonomous District Council giving them a formal status. However, contradictions arise between managing a modern state as per the constitution of India and as per the traditional institutions and practices.

The Khasi population in Meghalaya consists of a number of matrilineal clans (*Kur*) whose members consider themselves to have descended from a common ancestress. They make an important distinction between the members of one's own matrilineal kin (*kur*) and non-matrilineal kin (*kha*). This distinction allows them to practise exogamy. An important aspect of their society is that the youngest daughter of the family, called *khatduh*, is traditionally the custodian of the parental property. Traditionally, authority and the power were separated. The maternal uncle has the authority and his sister, the power. Now the two roles are getting concentrated in one person. At the domestic level women are powerful, but do not play any significant role in the wider social and political management such as village council (*dorbar*), district council or at the state level.

Among them, the most important functional domestic unit is called *iing* which could be defined as a stem family. Thus the members of an *iing* consist of a set of strictly matrilineal descendants who have a common right over the ancestral property and are subject to a common authority. They also practise some joint rituals. In the process of growth of the domestic unit some branch off from the *iing* except for the property holding line. The line has the right to transmit the membership to their offsprings which others cannot, as they have left the core social unit. These members are the mobile elements in the society, forced to find new opportunities for their livelihood. They are a sort of "frontier" folk in the older and innovator/entrepreneur in the emerging new situation. This explains the wide distribution of *Kur* among them.

They exclude the husbands from the wives' *iing*. The most important person in the *iing* used to be the one holding the authority (wife's brother) and the one owning the property and hence the power (the youngest daughter). The role of succession among Khasis continues to be matrilineal though many have started questioning it and have started adding fathers' names to the names of their children and would like the right to self-earned property be conceded. A man continues to be a member of the same *iing* all his life. A girl, if she is not the *khatduh*, will branch off after her marriage although she herself continues to be a member of her mother's *iing*, and the third

generation from her onwards will eventually form an independent *ling*. Progressively these days the attempts are made to form a neolocal or uxorilocal residence. But if a man marries an heiress he has to move to his wife's house. His position is very weak, particularly if there is a male member in the *iling*. Traditionally, the ties between the uncle and the nephew used to be strong. The father's position was like an additional member of the household.

The divorce rate among them is high particularly in cases where marriage is between heiress (who owns property) and the manager of her sister's state (who has authority). Each has loyalty and responsibilities to the respective stems, and therefore it is more likely that tensions between them arise.

Marriage with a non-heiress is relatively stable. A non-heiress does not inherit property from the *iling* and hence members of the household must cooperate and work hard to build up the base for a new and permanent structural unit, a stem family, which will honour the lady after her time on earth as ancestress. This common task is relatively less hampered by the structural incongruities since the woman has no property (power) and her brother/uncle has accordingly less authority over her husband's work. As a rule, what a man earns belongs to his wife's family. A man of authority is attached to his *iling* by the stronger ties of religion, social and economic (management) duties as well as sentiments in spite of his forming an independent domestic unit. Here is a serious conflict between the family of orientation and the family of procreation. Thus the stem family cycle and the branching off family cycle comprise the full domestic cycle of the Khasi society that is tied down to clan membership. This means that the two ethical spheres must coexist; one (the heiress version) organized around conservative values, maintenance of traditions and ethics; the other (the non-heiress version) around entrepreneurial challenges borne by the same structure which separates the two. In her life time the non-heiress acquires *Khatduh* like role. Along with her husband she generates property which will be inherited by her youngest daughter and after all the efforts of meeting challenges and innovation she must return to tradition to make her *iling* develop and prosper. Following the matrilineal custom, the mother occupying the position of family priestess, is entrusted with the important duties of performing family rites and ceremonies. From this comprehensive point of view the two spheres are interdependent and must coexist and enhance the integration of the community. This coexistence is threatened in the present context because the eco-

nomie dimension has become too much dominant over the other factors.

Sacred Grove: Mawphlang

The sacred forest located at Mawphlang belongs to undisturbed category according to Tiwari et al (1998) and its species richness index is to the order of 3.60 (Rao et al, 1990). It is considered to be the largest sacred forest in Meghalaya. The NEC (North Eastern Council) survey estimates that it roughly covers an area of 40 acres. From a distance the sacred grove looks luxuriant and a tight agglomerate of different varieties of greenery, although from close quarters it is not as rich. Around this sacred grove, shifting cultivation has been in practice for a very long time, making the hills and valleys look either bare or bearing very thin and young vegetation. The sacred grove stands out in comparison to the situation in neighbouring fields. Mawphlang is about 22 kilometers southwest of Shillong.

Hima¹ Mawphlang is made of 16 *shnongs* (villages), viz., *Shnong* Mawphlang, *Shnong* Mawngap, *Shnong* Kynkien and so on. These *shnongs* are further sub-divided into *Dongs* (localities). *Shnong* Mawphlang has four *Dongs*. These are Mawkohmon, Nongrum, Tongiewrien and Mission compound. Approximate population of *Shnong* Mawphlang is 1910, which is predominantly Christian. 50 percent of the population are literate. 35 persons have acquired graduate degrees in sciences or arts and 3 have acquired graduate engineering degrees. There are others who have acquired higher degrees but have moved out of *Shnong* Mawphlang.

At Mawphlang there are two co-educational high schools run by the village and assisted by the government. There is one upper primary government school and two private schools run by the *Shnong*. The Presbyterians run a multipurpose institution at *Shnong* Mawngap. There are about 20 teachers employed by these institutions who are stationed in *Hima* Mawphlang of whom 7 are in *Shnong* Mawphlang and 12 at *Shnong* Mawngap. There are 4 churches at *Shnong* Mawphlang, 3 at *Shnong* Mawngap and 2 at *Shnong* Lynkien. The oldest church is Presbyterian and is located at *Shnong* Mawphlang. It also has a health centre. Thus, it is quite an advanced village. But it also appears to be quite an ancient village. It is dotted with memorial stones and dolmens which appear to be quite old. *Hima* Mawphlang was founded by twelve clans. As the founders of the *Hima*, the founding clans have certain rights and privileges in matters of administration of the *Hima* and in observance of the rituals. The founding clans also keep a check on the people who settle in their *Hima*.

Law Kyntang (sacred grove) is located at *Shnong Mawphlang* in *Hima Mawphlang*. There are also other categories of forests in different *Shnongs* of *Hima Mawphlang*. Technically speaking, *Law Kyntang* at *Mawphlang* is looked after by the *Dorbar*² of the *Hima Mawphlang*, which in practice means that the sacred grove is the responsibility of everyone in the village. People take pride in their sacred grove. Young and old have stories to tell about it which they may have heard from their elders or may be based on their own experiences.

There have been attempts to textualize the traditions associated with the sacred grove at *Mawphlang*. H. Pde wrote a booklet about it in 1994. Pynshailang Lyngdoh composed some songs on it which were broadcasted by the All India Radio, Shillong. One of the consequences of such attempts has been to generate a standard version of the tradition. Besides its sacredness, its location and scenic beauty attract a large number of visitors on weekends and holidays. Just on the outskirts of the forest a notice has been put which reads as follows:

This is a sacred grove. It is forbidden to:

- i) *Cut trees, pluck flowers and leaves*
- ii) *Commit nuisances or illegal activities*
- iii) *Throw or break any bottle or cause any injurious waste materials*
- iv) *Enter without proper permission, specially for tourists, research personnel and outsiders.*
- v) *Have night camps and late stay (time limit 6:00 pm).*

As this is a sacred grove, any violation of above warnings and prohibitions may cause self peril.

By order: Lyngdoh of Mawphlang! Lyngdohship of Mawphlang.

The last part of the warning "self peril" is important. The argument was that since the local people are fully aware of what they can do or not do in the forest, the above notice is therefore meant for outsiders. "Self peril" indicates that there is no watch and ward in the forest but people in their own interest should know what are the taboos in the forest. Tambur Lyngdoh, who had a BA degree and who was accompanying us in one of our field trips, insisted that we meet his uncle Jerimien Lyngdoh. Jerimien was 83 years old and lived in a solitary house all by himself. For his age he appeared

alert and could easily communicate. We were told that he was one of the very old persons in the entire area who knew a lot about the sacred forest and was still very articulate. In the past he had been interviewed by people interested in the study of sacred grove. He categorically told us that *Law Kyntang* in Mawphlang had not shrunken in size. It was in the same condition as he had seen it in his childhood. He narrated the story of the origin of *Law Kyntang* at Mawphlang as follows:

Story 1

Once upon a time, *Hima* Mawphlang extended up to Ballygaon. An heiress known as *Ka Meikmah* of Ballygaon had to run away from there because people were opposed to the idea of her succeeding as the ruler. She fled from there and came to Myllem. There she married one Sohtun. But she had to flee Myllem too because the *Syiem* of Myllem felt threatened by her intelligence and popularity. He feared that he might lose his *Syiemship* to her. Her father sensed danger to her life and brought her to a village called Laitsohma, which is not far from Mawphlang. At that time there was no ruler in Mawphlang. She was asked to take charge. Wanting to know if that was her destiny, she offered prayers to god and planted two saplings.³ She thought that if it was god's wish for her to be the ruler of Mawphlang the saplings would mature into trees. The two trees were *Dieng Sming* and *Dieng Sohma*. It is believed that these two trees gave rise to *Law Kyntang*.

The story indicates the ever present structural tension between genders in Khasi society. Although *Meikmah* was very intelligent and recognized for her talents, she was not acceptable as the ruler. Ultimately she had to seek divine sanction by planting saplings. These saplings not only grew into many but became abode of the representative of the supernatural being. Jerimien said that since then people consider that patch of forest as sacred. They do not cut trees there. The people are allowed to enjoy the products of the forest such as berries, fruits, vegetables etc. but they should not pick up these things for sale or profit. Dead wood can be removed with the permission of the *Lyngdoh*.

At the centre of the grove there is a place called *Law Phiphandi*. Here the *Lyngdohs* perform rituals for the clans. These rituals are performed to invoke the *Basa*, the deity living in the forest, to look after the welfare of the clan. Near *Law Philphandi*, on either side of the clear pathway several stones have been put up. These stones were seats meant for

Lyngdohs. Sitting there they planned the entire sequence of the rituals to be performed for if the rituals were not performed correctly the deities would be displeased. According to Jerimien different rituals were performed for different purposes. If a war or epidemic had to be fought, a reddish brown male cow was sacrificed. The performer in such a case faced *Lei-Umtong*. These rituals are no more performed in this forest; they are instead performed at *Lyngdoh's* house. If a ritual for the welfare of the sacred forest is to be performed, then the performers face the sacred grove. It was approximately 54 years ago when rituals were performed inside this forest. It was done for the welfare of *Hima Mawphlang*. In the past, people performed rituals when they anticipated some kind of calamity. For example, if the neighbouring villages were threatened by a war or epidemic, people in this village arranged for a ritual to ward off misfortune visiting their villages. A *Lyngdoh* should learn the way rituals are to be performed and their sequence by observing the performance of such rituals by his predecessor. But, he is also helped by the elders to perform the rituals in the correct way. It is the duty of the *Lyngdoh* to look after the affairs of the entire *Hir'a* and perform the rituals connected with the sacred grove. On the occasion of the rituals all the *Lyngdoh* clan members participate but the *Lyngdoh* has the final word in case of difference of opinion. Jerimien said although the sacred forest at Mawphlang continues to exist, there had been attempts to destroy it.

Story 2

Once a *Lyngdoh* and his *Myntris* (officers) wanted to declare Mawphlang sacred grove as an open forest which would allow people to cut trees according to their needs. One Kun *Lyngdoh* belonging to Mawphlang heard about it. He was at that time admitted to the Civil Hospital in Shillong for some ailment. Not caring for his ailment he left the hospital and straight away went to sacred forest. There he waited for the people to come in. As they came near he shouted and said, "Whosoever will dare to strip my mother or women folk of my clan, their heads will be chopped off" (*Uno Uno u ba nud ban Lied Lyngkhuit ia ka jain kup, jain sem ka kur ka kmie jong nga un shah khrai khlieh*).

This story underlines the struggle between the traditional and modern needs. On the one hand there is the idea that forests have so much natural resources that one must have liberty to utilize for meeting day to day needs, whereas, on the other, the forest is also seen as the abode of the representa-

tive of the supernatural and therefore people must observe restraint. Since all forests are not abodes of the supernatural powers, maximum restraint is to be observed in respect of those which are declared so. If this restraint is observed the supernatural power would see to it that the needs of the people are indirectly met and their welfare protected.

In this story, in order to save the forest from being destroyed *Lyngdoh* uses the most powerful metaphor in Khasi idiom: the mother. There cannot be a greater crime than undressing one's own mother. Nobody dared to step any further and the forests were saved. According to Jerimien this episode took place in 1914. Since then there has not been any attempt to destroy the sacred forest. There were sacred groves in adjoining villages too, such as Sohiong, Lyngiong, Marbisu, Myllem etc, but all of them in course of time got disintegrated. According to Jerimien, these villages have never prospered. The people in these villages have suffered illness and epidemics. In Marbisu village, the *Lyngdoh* clan had almost become extinct on account of the curse of *Basa*. According to Jerimien *Ryngkew* or *Basa* becomes angry if sacred forest is destroyed. His place of residence becomes bare. In such a situation he can cause death to those who destroy the forest.

Story 3

Jerimien said that once when he was an acting *Lyngdoh*, he had to pray for the life of a Nepali boy. The Nepali boy unknowingly had cut some shrubs and leaves from the sacred forest to feed his cows. Thereafter the boy was struck with a peculiar disease. Jerimien prayed for the boy. He said that if one makes a sincere confession and is remorseful of one's action *Basa* forgives.

The story indicates that even outsiders are not safe from the wrath of the deity if they plunder the sacred forest. In their case the consequences are immediate, though it is possible that they may not be aware of the reasons for their trouble. However, the deity has the quality to forgive people provided forgiveness is sought. In other words, attempt is made here to enlarge the base of belief and include those who are not part of the Khasi society. The retribution may not come immediately but it follows. *Lyngdoh* said that *Basa* lived only in the sacred forest and not in other forests. The sacred forests have become sacred and special because so many rites and rituals were performed there in the past.

The present *Lyngdoh* of *Hima Mawphlang* is a Christian but he believes that *Basa* lives in *Law Kyntang*. He said that *Dorbar* normally did

not have to deal with the people who break the taboos associated with the sacred forest. The *Basa* took care of them. The *Lyngdoh* of Mawphlang and some of the members of the *Dorbar* said that Mawphlang sacred forest had not diminished in size but in fact had grown thicker. It was different from other forests because of the size and variety of trees it had. From a distance it reflects certain radiance. The local people are of the opinion that there was no danger to it. They understand the importance of the sacred forest and the role it plays in their lives. They do not dare to violate its sacredness. On being reminded that one of the residents of Mawphlang said that the idea of sacred forest was mere superstition the *Lyngdoh* replied that the person who held that view did not belong to Mawphlang and that was the reason why he had such a view. On being asked how would he explain the disappearance of the sacred forests at other places he was certain that the responsibility of maintaining the forest lay with the people of specific villages. Often in such villages more people from outside had settled and they were not exactly part of the reciprocal relations which the members of a village had. In such a situation their loyalty to the belief in the tradition of that village may be weak.

Visit to the forest

Just overlooking the sacred forest, there is a hill called after the founder of the sacred forest *Ka Meikmah*. This hill is however not a part of the sacred forest. From this hill, one gets a clear view of the sacred forest which appears oval and very dense. Just before the forest begins there is a vast and open grassy land. This is the space between the forest and the village. We were repeatedly told that this open space was always like that and it had not expanded at the cost of the forest area. This open space is used as playground as well as for holding a variety of social functions.

In the past, when people entered into the forest on ceremonial occasions, the *Lyngdoh* first offered prayers. Inside the forest we observed that it was very quiet, cold and damp. The ground was full of leaf litter, but there was a distinct path way which was not obstructed by fallen trees or bushes. Many of the trees had good girth. There was a variety of berries lying on the ground, which were neither picked up by men nor eaten by animals. There was also a variety of climbers, ferns and orchids. However, the canopy from inside did not appear to be as dense as the view from the top of the hill made us believe. We were told that there were deers and foxes but there was very little evidence of them. We did not notice even squirrels. The eastern side of

the forest had more pine and fern and gave a very clear indication of the human intervention and cattle grazing. Where in the past sacrifices were made was a six feet tall stone. There were four other similar stones which also might have been used once as places for offering sacrifices. The place appeared to be the centre of the forest. There the forest was denser. The trees were older and well covered with climbers. We were told that there were many taboos associated with the sacred forest but no one needed to supervise the forest. The presiding deity looked after the forest and punished those who were wrong doers. The sacred grove had plenty of things for people to offer. The fruits and berries could be eaten. Picnickers could pick up dead wood to light fire. However, under no circumstances are they supposed to cut a tree or carry anything from the forest for the purpose of selling. However, the people of Mawphlang do bring home some fruits and vegetables. The dead logs can be removed on the principle "*shi bah-shi sngi*" meaning one head load per person per day only. The aged trees should not be chopped down. The belief is that if a person does not adhere to these rules, he or she gets sick. The people who bring the wood from the sacred forest usually burn it outside the house because if by any chance the deity is not happy the misfortune will not visit the members of the household. They do not take the risk of bringing such wood inside the house.

People believe that *U Basa* manifests itself in two forms: a snake or a tiger-snake is signal for danger and it appears only when people have done something wrong. Such snakes are quite different from normal snakes. The tiger appears to protect people from harm. In anticipation of any danger of epidemic, the Lyngdoh may offer prayers. Although these days the *Lyngdoh* is a Christian, he observes these rituals. Now-a-days no sacrifices are made inside the forest. People say that the sacred forest at Mawphlang is 200 *Hima* (kingdoms) old. So far they think that people have followed the traditions associated with it. People relate a number of instances indicating the power of *U Basa*.

Story 4

Once a lady from Mawphlang was on her way to visit her sick brother at Lynkien a village, which is a few kilometres away from Mawphlang. As she was walking towards this village a snake appeared on her way. She was scared and called upon *U Basa* to help her. She spoke to the snake saying "if you are the *Basa* and wish to bring good news/luck please slip aside and let me proceed." The snake did not move.

She pleaded with it over and over again but the snake continued to block her way. Then it dawned upon her that the snake was a bad omen. She realized that the snake had come to tell her that her brother whom she was going to visit had done something wrong. She asked the snake to permit her to go to her brother saying that she would convince her brother who was ill to seek his forgiveness through the *Lyngdoh*. The snake moved aside and the lady hurried to her brother's house. There she asked her brother if he had desecrated the *Law Kyntang* in anyway. He admitted that he had cut down a few trees and had sold them. He then realized that he was sick on account of his action in the sacred forest. Realizing this he rushed to the *Lyngdoh* and confessed what he had done and appealed to him to seek forgiveness from *Basa*. After this incident her brother slowly recovered.

In this story the close knit character of the Khasi society is clearly indicated. It was the brother who had cut trees in the sacred forest. He was sick but he never realized his mistake. It was his sister who was reminded by the snake about the mistake committed by her brother. The actions of a person have their repercussion on the close kin. Therefore, they compel the wrong doers to realize their mistakes and seek forgiveness.

Story 5

In another case, an old lady in Mawphlang reported that when she was a young girl she had gone to the sacred grove and plucked some ferns and leaves. On reaching her house she found her one ear growing bigger and bigger and it looked like an elephant's ear. She was terrified and her parents were also puzzled. The parents asked her whether she had been to the sacred grove and whether she did any thing there. She narrated the whole incident. The parents rushed her to the *Lyngdoh's* house who prayed and asked for forgiveness on her behalf. The girl was cured.

This story indicates that any unusual physical problem with a person who violates the traditional norm is associated with the wrath of the deity of the sacred forest. The individual concerned may not see the connection, but the elders and close relatives interpret the happening in that way and try to take corrective steps which support the belief in the powers of the deity in sacred grove.

Story 6

Another story popular in the village is that once an army unit had come to Mawphlang for some training. After their training was complete they entered the sacred forest, cut some trees and loaded them in their trucks despite protests from the local people. As they were about to leave most of the army men suffered epileptic fits. Later on it was learnt that some of them had become very sick. People thought that *Basa* intervened and punished the army people for their doings in the sacred forest.

From the point of view of the villagers, the outsiders are reprimanded immediately and directly, as indicated in this story. Of course it is quite possible that they may not see the connection between their misfortune and their doing in the forest, but as far as the villagers are concerned, they see in such happenings the hand of *U Basa*.

Sacred Grove: Swer

The sacred forest at Swer though not studied by Tiwari et al (1995) certainly belongs to undisturbed category. It is denser than Mawphlang. Canopy is thick and very little sunlight penetrates. Human intervention appears to be the least there. Unlike the sacred forest at Mawphlang there is no trace of any pathway in the forest. The undergrowth is thick and heavy. Bushes and climbers block one's way everywhere. The forest has layers of leaf litter and it is spongy. There is a very high degree of humidity inside the forest. The forest is located on the slope of the hill. A number of streams flow down the hill.

Swer is about 22 kilometres South of Shillong and is connected with an all weather road. Regular buses ply on this route. The population of Swer is 878. The literacy of male and females in the village is 68.9% and 63% respectively. Majority of the people claim to belong to Khasi religion. There are a few Christian families in the village, but there is no church. Swer is a part of *Hima Sohra* which has about 100 *shnongs*. In the past, Syiemship was by inheritance but now the Syiem of *Hima Sohra* is elected by an electoral college. Each *Shnong* has a *Sirdar* called Rangbah Shnong. Swer has 4 schools out of which one is a high school. There are three clans namely Shanpru, Dohling and Nongrum, the members of which alone can perform rituals. People believe that three deities reside in Swer sacred forest namely i) *Ka Lei Bah Li Raid* (female) ii) *U Ryngkew U Lyngdoh* (male) iii) *U*

Basa (male). The members of Shanpru clan offer sacrifices for the first deity in the form of cow and she-goats. It is meant for the welfare of the people. For the second deity, the members of Dohling clan offer sacrifices of a male cow of reddish brown or black colour. For the third deity the members of Nongrum clan make the offering.

The sacred forest at Swer is located on a hill called *Lum Swer*. The entire hill is considered sacred. No rituals are performed inside the forest except on the open side of the hill. There is a spot on the top of the hill called *Lawmawbah*. This is the place where the elders involved in animal sacrifice assemble and invoke *U Ryngkew* and ask him to be present with them during the sacrifice. After which they proceed to another spot on the hill called *Maw Siangsla* where the rituals are performed and sacrifices made. Sacrifice of pigs, cows, goats and chicken are made when there is a serious problem otherwise for ordinary matters offering of eggs is considered enough. The people of Swer have very strong attachment to the deity, and they strongly feel that the deity in the forest is the main instrument for their well-being. We were informed that *Law Kyntang* is considered sacred because it is the abode of *U Ryngkew* who is like god, protector and guardian. Some of them thought that the idea of the sacred grove in Swer may have originated in wars of the olden days fought between different kingdoms. People believed that *U Ryngkew* being in the forest has protected them against enemies. Realizing this people began to protect the forest so that the benign presence of *U Ryngkew* was assured.

The location of sacred forest at Swer is such that it plays a very vital role in soil conservation and in catchment places of water which is the source for several streams. Everyone agreed that over the years the forest had grown thicker. The villagers believed that as long as the sacred forest was not destroyed *U Ryngkew* would continue to stay there and provide protection to the people. If the forest was destroyed *U Ryngkew* would leave the forest and go elsewhere, which would bring disaster to the village. The sacred forest is treated as community forest. Both literate and illiterate villagers have the same reverence for the sacred grove. They all participate in the rituals associated with it in faith and loyalty.

At Swer, people are allowed to remove the dead wood. Of course no one cuts any tree there one can as well pick up fruits, berries etc. from the trees in the sacred forest but without using tools of metal. Loud music of any kind inside the forest is not permitted. Such actions, it is believed, disturbs *U*

Ryngkew. Although there is no restriction on cattle grazing, people avoid it now due to the density of the sacred forest.

People in Swer, just like the villagers in Mawphlang, believe that seeing a tiger in the forest was a good omen, while snake indicated the reverse of it. However, if one saw a snake in the forest, one was not supposed to kill it. If one feels unsafe while going through the forest one should pray to *U Ryngkew* to protect him, who comes forth in the form of two tigers on either side of the person. These harmless tigers provide the necessary protection.

Story 7

Like in Mawphlang, people related a number of stories which indicate the influence of *U Ryngkew* in the minds of people. The Sirdar told us that a lady called *Shi Karmawlynrei* went into the forest and took away a lot of firewood from there. On reaching home she suffered terrible fits and her neck got twisted. The neighbours and family members after finding out where she had been to, came to the conclusion that *U Ryngkew* was punishing her for stealing the wood from the sacred forest. They called upon the elders of the village who prayed to *U Ryngkew* to forgive her, after which she was cured. Like in other stories, it is the relatives of the person who interpreted the sickness of the person as a result of her action in the forest. The elders of the village prayed to the deity for her to be forgiven.

Story 8

In another incident, some army personnel wanted to establish a camp near the sacred forest. The villagers disagreed with their plans. They did not pay any attention to them and went inside the sacred forest and cut some trees to make poles for their tents. By the time they could erect poles it was past mid-day. It was a hot and dry day. Suddenly the weather changed and there was a severe storm with lightning and thunder. The tent put up by the army people were blown off and carried away by the wind. The villagers came to the conclusion that it was the work of *U Ryngkew* and he gave appropriate punishment to the military personnel.

Story 9

The villagers have firm belief that as long as the sacred grove in Swer remains intact *U Ryngkew* will continue to be there and will provide protection to the people of Swer wherever they may be. In the past

when people went out to fight wars, the men of Swer always came back unharmed. People believe that it happens even now. They said that one day a lady from the village was travelling in a bus from Cherapunjee. Somewhere on the way she noticed that the bus was about to run off the road into a deep gorge. She shrieked and prayed to *U Ryngkew* Swer to protect them. The bus at once stopped at the edge of the gorge preventing a major accident.

The story very strongly suggests that the beneficence of the deity of the sacred forest is found everywhere. In the Khasi mythology the *Basa/Ryngkew* is a representative of god on earth. Their abode is forest, but it is their responsibility to oversee the creation of the god and protect those who keep right behaviour.

Origin of Sacred Forest

The people of Swer say that the sacred forest has come about because in the past there was too much disorder (*Jhrna Wait* or *Ban Kput*). Wars and killing were the order of the day. In order to search for a solution to the problem the people sought a deity who could look after them and protect them. This deity lived in the forest. Should anyone encounter danger, all they needed to do is to call upon this deity to protect and care for them (*Ko Ryngkew, to da, to ker, to ri maphi*). These deities are far more accessible than any higher gods. Thus the sacred forests have deities who accept such prayers (*kyrpad*) for protection.

Story 10

The villagers say that the way sacred forests protect the people is remarkable. During the Second World War the Japanese were attempting to bombard Meghalaya. At that time people prayed to the powerful deities who lived in *Lum Shillong* (Shillong peak) where there was a sacred forest once. The deities sent great clouds which covered the entire town. The Japanese pilots could not find their way and had to go back. Thus the entire town was saved.

Story 11

The headman gave his own personal experiences recounting how *U Ryngkew* protected him. He had gone to a place called Sohra for canvassing for a Congress party candidate. That was during 1988 elections. Some people threatened to beat him because he was supporting a Congress candidate. The headman prayed to *U Ryngkew*

saying that he was only supporting a candidate and had not harmed anybody individually and as such he begged him to protect him. The people beat him badly but he never felt any pain whatsoever. He could feel that he was being pulled and pushed but there was no feeling of pain. But for the prayers he would have been dead. The miscreants then attempted to throw him into a gorge. He felt calm and fear did not touch him. He felt great energy within himself and felt strong like a tiger. At that stage, if he had fought he would have easily given serious blows to his attackers because he felt tremendous strength building within him. After he returned to his village, he asked the members of three clans to arrange for the appropriate sacrifices to express his gratitude for the protection he received from *U Ryngkew*. If he had not done that, it could have resulted in some misfortune, not necessarily to him but his children and grandchildren.

Nongkrem

Nongkrem is a famous Khasi village about 14 kilometres southeast of Shillong. About 2 kilometres away from there is Smit which is the official seat of the *Syiem* of *Myllem*. It is there in the compound of the palace of *Syiem* that the famous Nongkrem dance takes place every year in which the rituals and dances by the young unmarried girls and boys are performed. Most of the Khasis who assemble here follow the traditional Khasi religion.

Nongkrem has a population of 2070. Majority of the people in Nongkrem are Christians. The literacy levels of male and female are approximately 51 and 50 percent respectively.

The sacred grove at Nongkrem is located on a steep hill. It is not as dense as Swer but appears to be a little denser than Mawphlang. This forest too is the source of a major river. In the grove, one can find a number of *Mawsiangs* (the place where the bones of dead are buried). Around these *Mawsiangs* one can see receptacles in which people bring food for the dead ancestors. Normally people bring such food which the dead person used to enjoy most in his/her life time. The forest has at least two major sections. One is considered to be very sacred where cutting of trees or removing dead wood or fruits is totally forbidden. The other section is where these rules are relatively relaxed. It was not easy for us to distinguish between the two sections unless told by the *Lyngdoh* who was accompanying us. He removed his shoes before he entered the more sacred part of the forest and he stood in front of one of the *Mawsiangs* for a few minutes in silence before resum-

ing the walk with us in the forest.

Inside the forest there is a cave called *Khyndai Thympee* where rituals are performed. It is believed that a tiger and a snake live in the forest. Only live fowls are offered to the deity of this forest. Killing of birds is forbidden.

Story 12

Once a person caught a fowl offered to the deity, slaughtered it and ate. He was warned, but he did not pay any attention. Later he suffered an incurable disease and ultimately died. There are several other stories known to the people which indicate the powers of *U Ryngkew*. Here, unlike in Swer, people believe that if the forest is destroyed, *U Ryngkew* goes to the field and stays there.

Phrikswel, the *Lyngdoh* of this village, is a highly respected believer of Khasi religion. He frequently writes about Khasi religion and myths. He is educated and speaks English very well. His wife is also educated. She was a Christian before her marriage but was reverted to Khasi religion.

Origin Story

According to Phrikswel, Khasis believe that the creator of the universe lives in a place called *Laiphew ar* (32) *Mawsiang Bneng*. Nobody knows where it exists, but from there the god is believed to control everything that goes on in the universe. The god created another place called *Khat-ar* (12) *Mawsiang Niamra Bneng*. He refers to *Laiphew ar* as the highest or first chamber and *Khat-ar* as a lower or second chamber. In the lower chamber many gods and goddesses live. The two chambers work together. Once the god of the first chamber asked the gods and goddesses of the second chamber to create *Ka Lisan* (earth). *Ka Lisan* was accordingly created. Then the god in the first chamber wanted that a man be sent to the earth to be the husband of the earth. The gods and goddesses at the second chamber created *U Basa* to be the husband of the earth. The gods and goddesses at the second chamber created *U Basa* to be the husband of *Ka Lisan*. Together *U Basa* and *Ka Lisan* had seven children - four daughters and three sons - first daughter-Sun, second son-Moon, third son-Thunder, fourth daughter-Wind, fifth daughter-Water, sixth son-Earthquake, and the seventh daughter-Fire. After all the children were born *U Basa* left Earth and never returned. This he did because there was no agreement that he should stay with *Ka Lisan*.

forever. The god was unhappy that *Ka Lisan* was left alone with most of the creation work remaining incomplete. As such the first chamber ordered that the second chamber should send another person to be with Earth. As such *U Ryngkew* was sent to be with *Ka Lisan* as second husband. The second chamber decided that *U Ryngkew* should stay with *Ka Lisan* for ever. *Ka Lisan* and *U Ryngkew* had two children: daughter-soil, son-stone. After giving birth to nine children and raising them, *Ka Lisan* died. *U Ryngkew* then ordered the nine children to go about in the universe and do their assigned duties. Earthquake shook the world and a big gorge was formed. After that terrible shaking, stone, soil, water and fire combined to save themselves. Water gathered there to form oceans. The Sun too went about doing its duty causing vaporization. Wind was busy forming the clouds. After the clouds it was the duty of Thunder to strike and cause rainfall. Stone and Soil were the children of *U Ryngkew*. Being the children of the same father it was their duty to support each other. After the rains came, the first granddaughter of *Ka Lisan* and the daughter of soil was grass. After grass came shrubs, trees, flowers, fruits etc.

Cremation

After the earth became alive with beautiful creations, *U Ryngkew* asked the gods and goddesses of the second chamber to come and visit the earth and see all that they had wanted to be created. The gods and goddesses of the second chamber came and were very much pleased by what they saw. In turn they called upon the god of the first chamber to see the earth. He too was happy and asked the gods and goddesses of the second chamber to let all living things exist on earth - men, birds, animals and plants. Mother Earth however objected that once man was allowed to live on earth he will destroy her clothes, will dig into her body and will dirty her. The gods and goddesses in the second chamber consulted the god in the first chamber who finally let man live on earth. However it was imperative that he was cremated when he died. That way he would not destroy the Mother Earth by digging graves etc.

Speech

In the beginning, when the world was just created, everything - animate and inanimate - had the power of speech. However, as the days passed by, all the creations especially human beings became very sinful and evil. God was angry seeing this. As such he took away the power of

speech from all things and animals except human beings. He did this so that all other creatures would not be able to help human beings. The parrot and many other birds can talk a little when taught, which indicates that in the past all birds, animals, and things could speak. After creating animals, birds, and human beings the god realized that he had to produce food on earth so that these creatures could survive. He then created 12 kinds of food and made earth responsible for their production. Lakhmi is the goddess of food. Rituals and sacrifices have to be offered to her once in 12 years.

Rice

The uncle of Lakhmi brought a seed to offer her. That seed was rice. She was asked by her uncle to plant that seed. He told her that from that one seed many more would be produced and that would be the food which will nourish and sustain him. From that one seed many more varieties emerged and the same was the case with humans. From original seven people thousands of races and communities have developed in the world.

Ritual and sacrifice

In the early days of creation, man was very close to god he was able to meet and talk to him face to face. However with the growth of evil and sinfulness this privilege was taken away. Man could reach god only through rituals and sacrifices.

Disease, suffering and cure

In the beginning, there was only good on the earth. God appointed spirits to look after the hills, mountains, rivers and valleys. After man became evil god sent diseases and sufferings. Man pleaded with the god to spare him. The god, however, told him that with the disease and sufferings he had also provided on earth herbs, leaves and medicinal plants which will help him in curing his diseases.

Sacred Grove

Man realized that his direct links with the god had been severed. He could now only turn to spirits on earth for help. Man began respecting these spirits and praying to them. He offered sacrifices to these spirits and asked them to live in certain forests which have been made special and sacred through rituals and sacrifices. The spirits then became the protector of man and they looked after his well-being and the well-being of all. This is how the concept of *Law Kyntang* (sacred grove) emerged. In these groves people

are not allowed to misbehave. They are permitted to enjoy the fruits and other edibles from the groves. They may also collect firewood. All these are meant for their consumption and not for sale.

Creation of human kind

Man was created after all animals and plants were created. After *Ka Lisan* (Mother Earth) died, her youngest daughter *Mei Ramew* (soil) became the heiress to earth. She looked after all animals and birds (*Ki Laiphew*). However, on the surface of the soil, only birds and animals existed. The beauty of all that was created was of no value because there were no human beings. One day *U Ryngkew* asked *Khadar Mawsiang Bneng* (gods and goddesses of the second chamber) to send living beings on earth to make creation perfect. They in turn asked *Laiphew ar Mawsiang Bneng* (god of the first chamber) to advise. On his orders the gods and goddesses came to earth to inspect the situation and they decided to create human beings in the image of the most beautiful goddess of *Khadar Mawsiang Bneng*. This creation was called *Thakuri*. It was a statue. The goddess then asked *Biskorom* to make *Thakuri* real. *Biskorom* asked the goddess to put the statue on fire so that the skin would be smooth. It was the duty of the god of the first chamber to give life to the statue. Then the *Khadar Mawsiang Bneng* asked *Laiphew ar Mawsiang Bneng* to give life to the statue. The god did so by putting a few dew drops on it. Then only the statue became soft and blood circulation started. The god used a fan to make breeze near the statue which gave breath to the statue. The statue then opened her eyes and started to talk. The god then told her not to worry as all of her needs would be taken care of. The statue was created in heaven and was ready to be sent to the earth. However, *Ki Kunek Ki Kugen* (gurus of the God) had instructed *Ka Leisynshar* (goddess of ruling) to see that all her creations go to earth in pairs. The gurus said that if *Thakuri* was sent to earth alone, she would be very lonely. As such god created the man. The man and woman were shy of each other. Thus to get rid of shyness from them, the god and goddesses took blood from the man and put it into the woman. The woman had thus had more blood than the man. The gods then took the bones of the woman and put them into the man. That is why the bones of man are harder. After this exchange of blood and bones, the man and woman were blessed by god, and they began to multiply and bear children. They multiplied into *Hynniewtrep* (16 families in heaven). The god sent a servant by the name of *U Lakriah* to protect them. Then *Laiphew ar Mawsiang Bneng* ordered that these 16

families should go down to the earth. That was when men and women began to live on earth. These 16 families used to go up and down between earth and heaven through a golden bridge. One day the bridge broke and seven families remained on earth, nine in heaven. These 7 families are the ancestors of the people on earth today. The gods also decided to make all kinds of men and women, tall like mountains, short like plains etc. It was also decided that human beings would have the authority and power over other creations, animals and birds, mountains, hills, rivers and oceans.

Evil

After creation of all beings and things, it so happened once that the sun and the moon disappeared and the earth was plunged into darkness. This happened because the man had become evil. A cock was sent by the goddess to the house of the sun to apologize on behalf of the man. The sun did forgive man. From then onwards, with the first crowing of the cock, the earth would still be dark. The second crowing brings a little light and with the third crowing the sun appears on the horizon.

Devil

However at that time there were two devils at the feet of the sun. Both of these devils were males. Their names were *Raibi* and *Parbi*. These two devils came on to the earth and man began to have problems and suffering. The cock went to the goddess and asked her why this was happening even after she had visited sun and done all the things that were commanded by sun; and things had become normal. The goddess said that the devils were sent because man had forgotten how to worship and respect their creators. The gods and goddess even had warned that they would send even more devils so that the people will understand the importance of knowing their creators. The gods and goddesses however said that along with these devils they will also send medicines in the form of herbs to help man to fight these devils. However, using these herbs without remembering and acknowledging the creator will be of no use and the medicines will not work. Thus, while using these medicines, a person is supposed to pray to god then only herbs will be effective. This way the god manifests himself in the form of plants and herbs and provides relief to man.

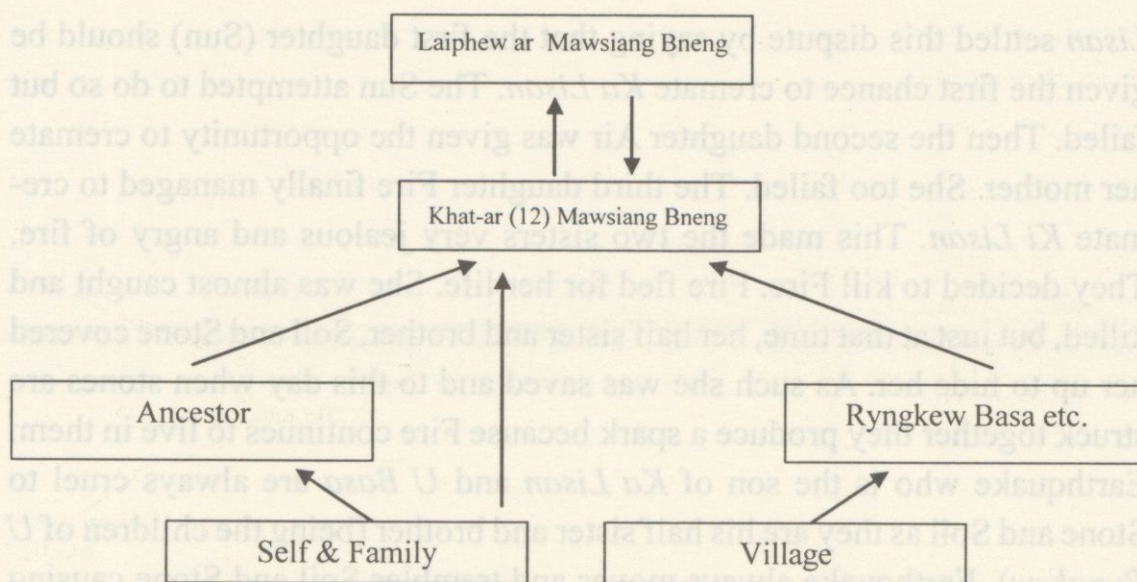
Siblings

After *Ka Lisan* (mother earth) died, all the daughters wanted to have the right to cremate her. This led to a quarrel among them. The uncle of *Ka*

Lisan settled this dispute by saying that the first daughter (Sun) should be given the first chance to cremate *Ka Lisan*. The Sun attempted to do so but failed. Then the second daughter Air was given the opportunity to cremate her mother. She too failed. The third daughter Fire finally managed to cremate *Ki Lisan*. This made the two sisters very jealous and angry of fire. They decided to kill Fire. Fire fled for her life. She was almost caught and killed, but just at that time, her half sister and brother, Soil and Stone covered her up to hide her. As such she was saved and to this day when stones are struck together they produce a spark because Fire continues to live in them. Earthquake who is the son of *Ka Lisan* and *U Basa* are always cruel to Stone and Soil as they are his half sister and brother (being the children of *U Ryngkew*). Earthquake always moves and trembles Soil and Stone causing them to rise and fall. Thunder who is the brother of Earthquake was disappointed by the attitude of his brother and became very angry. In order to curb his brother's excesses he struck off his right arm and this weakened him. As a result of which today when an earthquake takes place there is a no major rise or fall of Soil or Stone.

Hierarchy of Gods

The *Laiphew ar Mawsiang Bneng* is the highest chamber of authority, where there is only one supreme god who creates many gods and places them at *Khatar Mawsiang Bneng* which is the second chamber and gives them various commands to be carried out. At *Khatar Mawsiang Bneng* there exist many gods and goddesses usually those who look after the affairs of the earth, seasons etc. a Khasi cannot approach the supreme god directly when he, his family or his people are in trouble. The god has created two mediators who form the link between god and man. They are: i) *Ka iawbei*: the ancestral mother of the clan. She is also called the goddess of the home. ii) *U Ryngkew*—divine soul. These two mediators usually communicate man's needs and prayers to the gods and goddess of second chamber who in turn approaches the god in first chamber. *Ka iawbei* (ancestral mother) is recalled when a Khasi experiences personal loss, hardship, or when some members of a family are sick or in distress. She in turn approaches the gods and goddesses at *Khatar Mawsiang Bneng* to pardon the concerned person and all becomes well again. The following diagram shows this hierarchy:



The prayers are offered to *U Ryngkew* and he is remembered whenever a village faces some serious problem such as wars, epidemics, famines, etc. *U Ryngkew* then approaches god and goddesses at Khat-ar Mawsiang Bneng who further communicates with the god at *Laiphew ar Mawsiang Bneng*. If a Khasi or his family is in trouble he may directly pray to the gods and goddesses at *Khatar Mawsiang Bneng*. Usually this kind of appeal is made when one is dealing with buying, selling, trade and commerce (*lei iew, lei hat*). The appeal to *Khatar Mawsiang Bneng* is carried out through performance of rituals (see the diagram above). Appearances of various symbols in the rituals (meaning of which could be deciphered only by the practising *Lyngdoh*) indicate whether the gods have or have not granted pardon and therefore rituals will have to be performed again. *Ryngkew/Basa* as a protector assumes different names in different places but the functions are the same.

Gilbert Shullai, a poet and Khasi thinker is of the opinion that if one wants to understand the significance of the sacred groves, one must study the Khasi people, their way of life, their mythology and their history. He uses the following legend to explain this point.

Story 13

The Khasis believe that they are descendents of seven families. The legend has it that originally there were 16 families and they lived in heaven. There was a large tree called *Dieng iei* that connected heaven and earth. These families regularly visited earth using this tree as a

sort of bridge. They often complained that the tree obstructed much of the light and sunshine. As such they decided to cut down the tree. Since the tree was very large, they could not fell it at one go. As such after working on the tree for the whole day they returned to heaven in the evening. Next day, when they descended they found that all the cuts they had made on the tree had disappeared. This happened over and over until one day they learnt that a tiger licked the cuts they made on the tree which healed them and tree would become the same overnight. In order to get rid of the tiger, the people placed their gadgets and saws on the gashes in such a way that the cutting edges were facing outwards. The tiger unknowingly licked these tools and in the process was wounded due to which it died. The next day the people found the tiger dead and the tree had all the gashes. Eventually the people were able to fell the tree. Then they realized that they were not in a position to go back to the heaven. Thus, the seven families who had descended and participated in cutting the tree remained on the earth and the present day Khasis are their descendant.

Like some other Khasi stories, this story too depicts an extreme tragedy and self mortification. Despite repeated attempts by the tiger to stop cutting the tree, the humankind not only killed the tiger, but also eliminated the only medium between the earth and the heaven by cutting the tree.

Discussion

The World Commission on Forest and Sustainable Development [WCFSD] reports that "forests have virtually disappeared in 25 countries, 18 have lost more than 95 percent and another 11 have lost almost 90 percent. In the last two decades of the 20th century, the world has been losing 10-15 million hectares of forest annually to permanent deforestation. Nearly 800 plant species in the US may become extinct by the turn of this century and between 20 and 25 per cent of all species on earth may disappear within the next 30 to 40 years, with 85 percent of the organisms being unknown to science". (*The Hindu*, September, 1998). In such a dismal scenario, the picture presented by the sacred forests at Mawphlang, Swer and Nongkrem, described in this paper bring some hope. But this hope can be momentary for the concept of sacred grove is fading away everywhere as also in Meghalaya. It will be too facile to link the decline in sacred forest to the weakening of the belief in the supernatural and the dissemination of scientific knowledge. For if it were true then the study conducted by WCFSD should have shown

different results. Instead the study shows that in the last two decades of 20th century the permanent deforestation has been alarming. This is the period when the science has not only become more popular but has touched new heights. In other words the rationality of the scientific paradigm and its ecological concerns have not been able to save the forests of the world. On the other hand, the “irrational” beliefs and customs have been able to save at least some patches of forests.

Today in Meghalaya, the elite, the leaders of the community and some educated young people seem to have engaged themselves in the exercise of finding rational objectives in age-old customs of the people. Their enthusiasm to find environmental concerns in their customs can be appreciated but they do not take us very far in the face of tragic reality which is emerging in Meghalaya and in whole of Northeast India. The same people who save some patches as sacred forest practise shifting cultivation, and indulge in legal and illegal timber harvesting. As a result of this ruthless devastation the hills have become bald and nothing can grow on them as there is hardly any soil cover left. It has been predicted by some experts that certain parts of Northeast India are going to be the wettest desert of the world. A common Khasi sees the devastation around but does not invoke his tradition to halt the process. Instead he moves out to another patch. The alternative for his subsistence has not clearly emerged and in the meanwhile so many other factors have intervened as a result of which continuous erosion of green cover continues.

Holistic view

Like any other community, the indigenous knowledge of the Khasis is partly based on their observations and experiences, and partly on what they understand out of it. Accordingly they construct their view of the world including nature and organize their lives which we call culture. The disparate observation and experiences of the world around them are knitted together in a holistic framework called worldview. It is through this worldview they judge what is right or wrong, good or bad, fulfilling or unsatisfactory and so on.

In the Khasi society, as in many other societies, there are many points of friction between different sets of relations such as between youngest and older sisters, between a man and his wife's maternal uncle or brother, between wife and husband, and between men and women. The Khasi society resolves or contains these frictions on the principle of *delayed indirect reci-*

procity. If a dispute persists the case can be referred to the council of the elders in the family, clan, village or at the regional level. The delayed indirect reciprocity demands restraint; that is postponement of immediate gratification of felt needs. Also there should be confidence that other actors in the system would play their respective roles. For example, the elder sisters must get out of the *iing* to which they are born, struggle in their own lifetime and carve out a niche for themselves with the hope that their youngest daughters would nurture the *iing* they are founding. Thus their sacrifices are rewarded in securing a descent group for the coming generation. Similarly a man is supposed to look after his sister's children while his own are to be looked after by his wife's maternal uncle. The delayed indirect reciprocity is a binding force among the people who share the same world view. It integrates the community and ensures its continuity, self regulation and sustainability. The concept of restraint and postponement of the gratification of the immediate needs are built into it. But the mechanism built on these concepts can work when there is homogeneity and no serious schism in the society. Minor deviances here and there are taken care of by the moral code and the institutions built into the society. There are a number of stories and myths to indicate supernatural sanction against non-observance of the principles of the society.

However, the Khasi society has enlarged and there is considerable mobility of the people in and out, both for internal structural reasons inherent in the society and also for external reasons. Like any other society it has been exposed to various forces of modernization of which enlargement of consumer needs and their immediate gratification are important. The confidence that other actors would play their traditional role has also been eroded to a great extent. In other words, a number of chinks have appeared in their social system as well as in their worldview which directly hits the principle of delayed indirect reciprocity. The consequences of that are beginning to emerge among them. Let us explore how all this fits into the concept of sacred grove.

The sacred groves are located in critical areas, which clearly suggests that the Khasis made a correlation between the environmental importance of these areas and the need to conserve them. The instrument they used for the conservation was the sanction of the supernatural power based on the principle of delayed indirect reciprocity. The sacred forest is the abode of deity who has been sent there by the gods and goddesses of the second chamber on the order of the supreme god. The abode of the deity is not to be

disturbed and from time to time appropriate rituals and offering have to be made. In turn the deity will provide a protective cover to the people, their cattle, their crops and so on. Beneficence of the deity will continue to flow. But if the abode is disturbed the retribution may not be immediate and directly on the persons responsible for it but on their family, relatives, village and so on. Therefore it becomes the responsibility of all to see that sacred groves are not disturbed. People have to observe self-restraint and postpone gratification of the present needs. There are no guards at sacred forest. No Lyngdoh initiates any proceedings against the persons who indulge in excesses in the sacred forest. A Khasi is supposed to be aware of "self peril". One may then argue as to why then so many sacred forests have disappeared in Meghalaya. The people themselves explain that too many people who do not belong to the inner circle of the group have moved in. They in no way are part of the principle of indirect reciprocity. Dkhar lists three factors for the destruction of the sacred forest: i) The Khasis who were afraid to cut the trees in the sacred forest employed people from the plains to do the job, ii) the unscrupulous leaders of some villages sold the trees from such forests to the traders, and iii) the Christian churches who ridiculed the belief in the sacred forest as mere superstition (Dkhar 1998).

Once the chain of indirect reciprocity breaks, it is very difficult to make the wheels of the system move again. Moreover, the ideology that the gratification has to be now and here has become dominant both as a result of economic modernization and new religious ideology. The idea of conservation simply does not fit into the present scheme of things. Conservation demands creation of ethical worldview in which gratification of the present needs have to be postponed for the good of people in general. That the world of Khasis is collapsing and the modern world has not created any worldview which favours conservation, self-restraint and postponement of the gratification of the immediate needs. It has of course created a legal frame, but a legal frame without a moral code is not sustainable.

Notes

We sincerely thank Prof. R.S. Tripathi, Dr. B.K. Tiwari, and Dr. S.K. Barik of the Regional Centre, National Afforestation and Eco-Development Board, Shillong for their help and encouragement. We are also indebted to numerous Khasi friends for their help and encouragement.

1. *Hima* refers to old chieftainship which is as follows: i) 17 under Syiemships, ii) 3 under Lyngdohships, iii) 4 under Sirdarship, and iv) 1 under

Wahadarship (cf. Simon, 1991:4).

2. *Dorbar* is a council. At village level it means a council of all the adults of the village led by a headman to act according to local custom. The election of the headman is ordinarily confirmed by the *dorbar* of the concerned *Hima*. Similarly at higher levels there are *Dorbars* presided over by *Syiem Raid*, *Lyngdoh Raid* or *Basan Raid*. A significant point about the Khasi administration is that the headman, *Syiem* or *Lyngdoh* does not have the power to decide on his own. The issue has to be discussed at the relevant *Dorbar* and a consensus should be reached (Simon, 1991: 220). Thus the traditional Khasi political system is considered to be highly democratic and broad-based, which is a very important point in understanding the phenomenon of the sacred grove in Khasi area.

3. In another version of the story collected from the same village she was supposed to have planted three saplings. She waited for three years. These saplings did flourish. She took this as divine sanction to rule Mawphlang and she did rule Mawphlang. These saplings multiplied and grew into a forest. From the beginning this forest was considered sacred. Sacrifices and rituals have been performed since then. There are stones in the forest on which sacrifices were made. Around these stones, there are 12 other stones which represent the 12 children of *Ka Meikmah*, who were the founders of 12 clans.

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Book Reviews

Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy(eds), *Decentring Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2006.

The British Empire administratively withdrew from Southasia in 1947 and that marked the beginning of shrinking of the colonial rule from all over the world. The empire left a lot of its old baggage behind in its former colonies, invariably in ways of services, institutions, and associations, which continue to be relevant to the ex-colonies like India. With a view to dissecting and uncovering the mute dimensions of the empire, a conference was held in April, 2003 at the University of California, Berkeley in honour of Thomas Metcalf, a historian of the British Empire and South Asia. The above anthology of over a dozen presentations made in the conference informs the readers on the current debates among the historians of the empire. First of all, the book under review demonstrates that there were abiding connections between the histories of the empire such as the British and the process of globalization in the 18th century. Secondly, modernity and its various dimensions were equally attractive to the colonizers and the colonized. Thirdly, the volume demonstrates that “the British Empire as a superstructure was sustained and contested by the cultures of the empire”. Finally, the presentations in the collection argue that the forces and practices unleashed by the colonial rule were never entirely in the control of the colonial authorities. It goes without saying that the British rule was an important factor in generating forces of modernity, which have also used the colonized subjects in their favour.

No doubt, India looms large in the volume, but the presentations in the volume demonstrate how uneven were its effects and how the Empire was plagued by inefficiency, confusion, contradiction and challenges. It was noted that the Suez trauma in 1956 marked the effective end of Britain as a super power. From these emerged in Britain a historiography of empire, shaped by mixed feelings of loss, nostalgia and regret verging on anger at its displacement by the United States of America. John Richards demonstrates how colonial rules were bent upon creating a usable revenue surplus each year with a view to investment and paying dividend to the Company’s shareholders. In the process, there was a negligible revenue left for education, health,

David R. Syiemlieh, Anuradha Dutta and Srinath Baruah (eds), *Challenges of Development in North-East India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2006, xii + 508, Rs. 1150 (US\$75)

Challenges of Development in North-East India is the updated version of 23 well-researched papers by eminent writers. The origin of the papers goes back to a seminar organized by the Indian Council of Social Science Research – North-East Regional Centre (ICSSR-NERC) in October 2003. The new publication contains precious material on a wide range of subjects connected with development in North-East India. The papers are grouped under Polity (2 papers), Society (4), Economy (9), Tourism (3), Education (3) and Health (2 papers).

The inaugural address by the then Governor of Meghalaya, His Excellency Dr. M.M. Jacob provides an excellent overview of the challenges of development in the Northeast. Being in the periphery of India, observes Jacob, the development too is peripheral. He proposes practical solutions for the region's greater progress, and suggests better trade relations with countries that surround the region.

In the section on polity, Udayon Misra arguing forcefully for the economic development of the region, highlights the decades-long indifference of the Centre to the region's economic potential which resulted in a vicious circle of insurgency and underdevelopment. Added to this is also insufficient devolution of power. The "economics of 'colonial' exploitation" and the politics of alienation made the vicious circle still more vicious. By and large this was the situation till 1976. A change in the Centre's policy is noticed after this year. More devolution of power to the Northeastern states started from 1970s due to greater awareness of the fact that the challenges to development in the Northeast are inseparably linked to issues related to ethnicity, autonomy and territoriality. True development calls for the abandonment of "exclusionist stances" and acceptance of mutual interdependence and cooperation among the states. This will ensure speedy development.

"Government, Local Self-Government and the Role of the Civil Society" is the paper by Anuradha Dutta. In this well informed write-up the author by means of a long "introduction" (18 pages) explains the different aspects and workings of a democratic set-up. "Democracy and good governance are loyal allies", affirms Dutta. But good governance, warns the author, would depend on both formal and informal participation by people at the grassroots level, and effective roles by NGOs. Thinking globally and acting

locally would be effective only when good thinking takes place at the local level, and both men and women are given equal opportunities.

Under the section 'Society' dedicated mostly to "migrants and migration," Samir Kumar analyses the concept of "rights," and affirms that development cannot any longer be viewed independently of the question of rights. Runumi D. Baruah in his turn does a detailed study of migration patterns in Assam and offers a practical conclusion. "...Rural development," he writes, "coupled with measures to promote the growth of small and intermediate urban centres should be the core of any well meaning policy aimed at population distribution." A.C. Sinha in his "Marwari Collaborators and Nepali Subalterns: Two integrative social forces in North-East India" analyses the integrative elements in the Marwari and Nepali communities of the region. Sajal Nag considers the phenomenon of "migrants" an enduring, live issue of the region, and a major source of tension in all Northeastern states. The paper offers a detailed study of it especially from the aspects of displacement, right to land, influx of Muslim population, political power and anti-national feelings and accompanying spurt of violence. The paper is more a statement of facts than a strategy proposal.

The section under economy has the maximum number of papers. A.K. Agarwal focusses on the flow of Central funds to the Northeast. In spite of the availability of huge sums from the Centre for the region's development, the Northeastern states still remain underdeveloped. The reasons are many. The paper factually and competently x-rays the situation, and affirms that, "the time has come to evaluate the lapses and to look at the remedial measures for best use of Central funds" in the region. The future could be bright, if the region opens up for trade with neighbouring countries.

Ranjan Singh's paper highlighting the problems and prospects of Manipur suggests measures for a sustainable development programme for that state. B.G. Verghese in a minutely and competently documented account, shows the immense water and bio-diversity resources of the Northeast, and writes, "the potential is huge, utilization small!" He shows how Bhutan doubled its per capita income in a few years and reached the top of the SAARC league! The author concludes his convincing analysis of hydro power and bio-resources available in the Northeast by saying, "An exciting opportunity beckons!"

The other papers in this section are by Prasenjit Biswas on development as complementarity. Kalyan Das writes on issues about livelihood. In

particular he addresses the problems of poverty and unemployment. He looks into the existing resource base and livelihood opportunities in Northeast India. Employment generation possibilities to reduce poverty in the context of globalization "onslaught" too are discussed. The paper, "Levels of Human Poverty across Districts and Population Groups in Assam," moves away from the traditional concept of economic poverty in terms of calories. The authors understand human poverty as a three-fold "deprivation." They are first, the deprivation of the choice of leading a long and healthy life; second, lack of facilities to acquire knowledge; and third, the absence of a decent standard of living. Policy implications for the removal of poverty are also dealt with in the paper.

Susmita Das and Sutapa Sengupta in their paper assess the level of "basic amenities" in the state of Meghalaya. Basic amenities include food, water, clothing, proper sanitation, and medical care at low cost. To speak of amenities such as presence of educational institutions, means of transport and communication and banking would call for a still "higher" level of living. And availability of television, car, telephone, etc. is beyond the reach of the great majority of people in the region. The present situation is such that only the more affluent sections of society can afford to have something more than the very basic amenities of life. The ever widening disparity will only hamper the development process. A way out of this impasse is urgently needed. The last two papers in the section are on border trade. Gurudas Das writes on the theory and practice of border trade, whereas K.C. Kabra and R.K.P.G. Singha reflect on border trade and its future prospects with reference to Mizoram.

The three papers under tourism contain M.P. Bezbaruah's paper on "Sustainable Tourism and Economic Development of the North-East". The paper is a detailed study of the theme. "Tourism in Assam: Need for a Paradigm Shift" is the title of Abu Nazar Saied Ahmed's paper. The possibilities are so many, that only a political will can transform tourism in Assam into a major developmental agency in the state. This calls for a paradigm shift in tourism governance. Amitava Mitra's paper "A Sustainable Environment-Friendly Approach to Tourism Development in Arunachal Pradesh" shows the vast tourism potential of Arunachal's forest resources and biodiversity. The author also spells out policies and action plans for ensuring sustainable tourism in the state.

Moving on to the section on education the book presents three papers: N.B. Biswas' "Development of School Education among the Tribes of North-East India: A

Complementary Approach"; Anjan Saikia and K.C. Kapoor's "Wastage in Elementary Education: A Comparative Study of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh"; and Meghali Baruah's "Challenges of Higher Education in the North-East."

N.B. Biswas, citing from the report of "The Friends of Tribal Society" that had appeared in *The Asian Age* (June, 1997), writes that tribes in India are still in the periphery of progress, and that "Eighty four per cent of the male and ninety five per cent of the female tribal are illiterate. Ninety five per cent of the tribal population has no access to medical facilities, and ninety per cent have never known what electric light is ..." (p. 443). The paper, therefore, offers very practical suggestions by way of concluding remarks to improve the educational lot of tribal population in Northeast India. It emphasizes in particular the importance of knowing one's cultural richness, since "cultural variables affect education, teaching, learning and the growth and development of all learners" (p. 455).

Angan Saikia and K.C. Kapoor, in their paper, present a comparative study of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh from the point of view of "wastage" by which they mean school drop-outs. Meghali Baruah's paper on the "Challenges of Higher Education in the North-East" presents an overview of the situation in the country.

Finally, the section on health offers two papers: Substance Abuse and HIV / AIDS in North-East India by Hallelohim Ghonglah and "Women's Vulnerability to HIV / AIDS in Manipur by Jubita Hajarimayum. The former presents an overview of the problem in Northeast India and suggests possible ways to overcome it. The problem is not only a medical one, but also a social and a spiritual one. The paper on "Women's Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in Manipur" is a study carried out among the Meithei women in the reproductive age group of 14-45 years in the Imphal West district of Manipur. Gender inequality, lack of autonomy, absence of decision-making power, and ignorance about health and their own rights make women more vulnerable to infection.

The references at the end of every paper and cross references provided in the index further make *Challenges of Development in North-East India* a very valuable and handy companion for everyone interested in the development of North-East India.

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Rafiq Dossani and Henry S. Rowen, *Prospects for Peace in South Asia*, Orient Longman Private Ltd., Hyderabad, 2006, 424p, Spl. Indian price Rs.500/- (org. US \$24.95).

The idea of peace in the context of Southasia assumes a complex political, military and economic make-up. Especially the increase in nuclearization of military arsenals as a competitive assertion of strategic superiority between India and Pakistan compounded with internal instability of fragile political systems produce a grave threat to security. The metaphor 'South Asia on a short fuse' still remains the central conceptual problematique amidst the angst of being 'vulnerable' to a possible arms race that extends to what the US under George Bush called the 'axis of evil'. The book seemingly highlights a US-centric perspective to glean through the political processes like Islamization and the rise of Hindu Right in Pakistan and India respectively to scour through the strategic doctrine of 'status quo' in Southasia that promotes the economic interests of the US in the best possible way. Such a gnarly reading of Southasia hardly gets at the many-layered cultural and historical convergences between articulations of national interests that often overlap by signaling possibilities of engagement across the daggers drawn. In portraying 'Kashmir' as a flashpoint of nuclear warfare sustained by equally militant regimes of religious right in both India and Pakistan, the book grossly undermines the possibilities of minimized conflicts that merely require a stable political will and not stability *per se*. The way the book defines the US interest in Southasian region (Introduction, p.16 and Chs.10 &13) gives it the place of cynosure for both India and Pakistan seeking strategic partnership with the US, who can tilt the balance of power to any of the side. The US, on its own terms, sees both India and Pakistan as allies for very different purposes, the former as a permanent ally in its geo-political games and the latter as a counterweight to China. If all these fragments of strategic alliances come with an inherently weak and shortsighted plan of peace and stability, it serves the US interest of arm twisting in the region by way of consolidating economic and security gains derived from the dependence of Southasian nations on the US. The dependence is deep throated, starting from purchase of military hardware down to analysis of strategic relations. It is the US that predicts the ebbs and flows of the tides in the Indian Ocean both literally and metaphorically. The book only understates the rising dependence on the US for the whole of the Southeast Asia and downplays the role of non-aligned diplomacy in the context of increasing weaponization. In a strong sense, much of the voluminous spaces within the book are devoted to descriptive

truisms of US foreign policy that got its ideological and operational support from an entirely negative characterization of regime types in India and Pakistan. The book also prescribes a robust economic determinism for Southasia as a *fait accompli* as it is for any contemporary neoliberal state system in assessing the problems and prospects of its foreign, military and economic policies. The weight of a perceived world order dominated by the US caters to the idiom of Morgenthau's realism that reduces the structures of rivalry to an already intervened and mediated entity by a hegemon or by a super-power, a syndrome that very recently also wears the hat of 'strategic analysis' in the canons of international relations. The book stands out for its thrust on hegemonic stability without any possibility of transition that turns out to be a symptomatic description of Pakistan's anarchic role in sharp contrast to India's neoliberal shift towards multi-partner strategic relations in Southasia.

The first four essays in the section entitled "Pakistan: Politics and Kashmir are: "Islamic Extremism and Regional Conflict in South Asia" by Vali Nasr, "Constitutional and Political Change in Pakistan: The Military-Governance Paradigm" by Charles H. Kennedy, "The Practice of Islam in Pakistan and the Influence of Islam in Pakistani Politics" by C. Christine Fair and Karthik Vaidyanathan, and "Pakistan's Relations with Azad Kashmir and the Impact on Indo-Pakistani Relations" by Rifaat Hussain. All the four essays portray Pakistan as a case of 'failed democracy' that always balanced its internal instabilities with war games at the frontier and by reconstructing its relationships with the US and the West. To be specific, Vali Nasr's analysis of Pakistan's military regime harps on a socially constructed Islamist politics that falls in line with the neoliberal doctrine of economic dependence on international institutions without much ado about Islamism. Nasr significantly highlights the role of Mutahhidah Majlis Amal (MMA) in creating an environment of peace in Indo-Pak relationship and consequently, argued that the MMA acted as a countervailing force to greater Islamist parties within Pakistan's domestic politics. This limited understanding of the internal political contest between a conglomerate MMA and larger parties like Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML) during the regime of Army unwittingly endorses the role of MMA in sustaining the Army rule of General Musharraf. The next essay by Charles H. Kennedy reads repetitive of issues pertaining to Islamism, looked albeit through a different point of view, like the evolving patterns of political legitimacy at the provincial level and constitutional stalemates. But the essay goes strong on chronicling the political mess in Pakistan without clearly figuring out which of the forces played roles upholding the sanctity of a constitutional state. In

fact the singular importance of a Constitutional State is not properly emphasized by Kennedy in his narration of political exigencies. Next essay by Christine Fair and Karthik Vaidyanathan makes an attempt to understand the state-society relationship from the perspective of examining the roots of Islamic practices in Pakistan's politics. Instead of developing a normative model of analysis, the central part of this essay adopts a perceived Islamist response to the West and apparently gets it supplemented from the responses to the questionnaire that dishes out statements such as West "care about poorer nations", "fair stance on Palestine situation" etc. (p.87) that obviously make the respondents express negative responses to the West at the practical, psychological and emotional levels. This is an attempted projection of Islamist reaction to the West, which is later supplanted by respondent's support towards banning the secessionist and sectarian political outfits, apparently a secular-rational response to Islamism. Further, the Pakistani response towards the US as portrayed show poorly the moral indictment that Pakistani opinion makers have towards US stance. The authors finally accept the invalidity of their method, data and analysis, when they pass the buck of failure to the respondents for giving what they call 'contradictory': "Pakistani respondents claim that they would like to see a decreased involvement of religious parties within politics, while still upholding that Pakistani law should be based upon Q'uran and Sunnah" (p.108). What the authors suppress is their pre-mediated style of eliciting responses that do not cohere in a neat framework of what they call 'policy community'. Post 9/11, Pakistani response to the presence of Taliban in Pakistan vis-à-vis American 'war on terror' forms the context of this essay that try to present Pakistani opinion as 'contradictory' from the vantage of US policy framework.

Rifaat Hussain cultivates an internalist realism of sort in suggesting ways and means of giving Azad Kashmir a due place within Indo-Pak relations. His narrative reconstruction of events that led to internecine border conflicts between India and Pakistan along with the US interest of keeping Pakistan to its side in its sojourn to Afghanistan often displaces Azad Kashmir in the meta-narrative of nuclear rivalry. This merely portrays the incompleteness of any Pakistani initiative to politically handle the Kashmir issue, as the state of Pakistan is yet to discover the stable basis of bringing peace and development to Azad Kashmir. The author leaves out the implications of Pakistan's weak-willed response to the problems of Azad Kashmir, which in itself constitutes a major drawback for Pakistan's domestic policy.

This entire section assumes a few things, notably the rise of an uncontested Islamism and its concomitant support to terrorist radicals that supplement Indo-Pak arms race in building up nuclear arsenals. This is a rather

straightjacket realism that merely supports a US-centric strategic perspective on the region.

The four essays in the next section entitled "India: Politics and Kashmir" are: "Who Speaks for India? The Role of Civil Society in Defining Indian Nationalism" by Ainslie T. Embrie, "Hindu Nationalism and the BJP: Transforming Religion and Politics in India" by Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., "Hindu Fundamentalism, Muslim Jihad and Secularism: Muslims in the Political Life of the Republic of India" by Barbara D. Metcalf and "Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian Union: Politics of Autonomy" by Chandrashekhar Dasgupta. These essays overcome the limited view of strained Indo-Pak relations by analyzing the socially constituted structures of State that enter into conflicting national interests. Embrie's essay revisits some of the well-established arguments about Hindutva-led hawkish positions against Pakistan with a smattering of discussions on an 'aggressive civil society' of contemporary times as well as centrist responses to secessionism in Kashmir and Nagaland. The essay is long on centrist perception of the health of Indian polity during the decade of seventies, while it is short on how Indian society practises politics of recognition. In his grand notion of civil society, Embrie minces words in thinking of a consensual politics, while he misrecognizes many facets of 'unity in diversity' that binds India to a state of chaos and difference without breaking its fragile sovereign existence. Hargrave's essay blows up the possibility of a permanent transformation of Indian State and society in the hands of Hindu chauvinists and its various outfits that presents a superficial account of how these forces attempt to drive India to a place of communal hatred and sacrilege, while the essay does not address the interstitial emergence of different forms of power-relations in the sphere of political economy. The punchline of the essay, "It may be a 'grave miscalculation' to suggest that Hindu extremism does not have international ramifications" (p.238) sounds extremely telescopic as the connection between India's foreign policy and activities of Hindu group abroad is tenuous except the fact that Hindutva leaders, during the time of being in the government never missed a chance to visit VHP headquarters abroad. Barbara Metcalf's essay on Hindu Ethnonationalism is an original work of analysis that does not reproduce the polarities of conflict. It rather emphasizes on the ideological orientation of RSS-VHP-BJP on the one hand and Jammāt on the other. She succeeds in showing that Islam as a religion does not influence the fundamentalist forces. She clarifies that the rise of fundamentalist Islamist forces stem from sources very different from doctrines embedded in faith. They arise from an ideological othering of the Muslims or the Hindus, which is a kind of 'psycho-drama' (p.231). Dasgupta's essay on

'Politics of Autonomy' is probably the best essay in reviewing historical and political developments in Jammu and Kashmir. The essay stays as close as possible to developments in the field, while it concludes splendidly by stating, "A measure of vagueness about the final outcome is probably an essential element of a constructive approach to resolve differences between Indian and Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir." (p.258)

The third section entitled "India's and Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrines and US Concerns" brings out the real concerns of the volume, namely the US concern about balance of power in South Asia as part of its long-standing strategic necessity of keeping China at large. The anti-Communist cold war slant of US foreign policy gets its backroom support from the kind of arms race that India and Pakistan indulge in. The US interest lies in having the last word in case there is a flashpoint between the two. Diplomatically speaking, both India and Pakistan attempt to win over the US support to pursue their own agenda by avoiding any confrontation with US interests. This gives the US the enviable position of a superpower that decides and dictates terms and deliberates about the internal and external compulsions of its subordinate allies in Southasia. The whole volume is geared to contribute to this US standpoint. The very first essay by Michael Krepon on the theme of de-escalation presents the Indian and Pakistani calculations of military strategy during ten month long mobilization in 2002 as a paradoxical measure of stability-instability, a mutually assured game of destruction. The point is to understand how such war-games of escalation/de-escalation strengthen the US presence in the Southasian geopolitics. What Krepon ventures in his elaborate discussion on strategies of deterrence are largely borrowed from cold war continental ballistic missiles competition and the imagery of star wars, which he applies in the context of Indian subcontinent. This takes into account the crucial input of mutually damaging strategies that the other side can adopt such as 'economic strangling'. By turning a fig that is yet to come in the subcontinent, the analysis presents the US (read NATO) line of strategic thinking in a manner manifest before it really comes. The lever for his analysis springs from the vulnerability of both India and Pakistan from each other having similar striking capability. Ironically it is this vulnerability of parties engaged in arms race that does the groundwork for a pro-US stance in foreign policies of both India and Pakistan. Krepon's analysis builds up this possibility of 'third party' intervention in the relations between India and Pakistan. Although Krepon suggested substantive political engagement between India and Pakistan centring the Kashmir issue, he seems to predict the possibility of third party intervention in any guise (p.280). Peter Levoy's essay on "Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrine" mostly authenticated the popularly held fears about irresponsible uses of nuclear weapons that are articulated

by Pakistan's civilian and military officials. Thereby, the essay completely ignores Pakistani concerns about de-nuclearization and its attendant demystification of India's evil intentions. The essay goes to the extent of airing an unsubstantiated fear of western powers about the possibility of transfer of nuclear technologies from Pakistani sources to some 'terrorist' groups, which is a re-affirmation of USA's CTBT stance. The essay is superbly written in a backroom boys' 'democratic war game' style that exports nuclear war as the *summum bonnum* of nation-building politics by various actors. While doing so, the essay selectively privileges some of these actors of the domestic scene to determine the course of Indo-Pak relations. Rajesh Basrur's essay on 'coercive diplomacy' practised by both Pakistan and India strikes a significantly different chord in the whole volume. For the first time, when the reader is tired of grasping the monotonic war game tome, Basrur talks of a situation of compellence between India, Pakistan and the US, all engaged in a mutual game of containment. But Basrur brings out the salience of each of the sides very accurately. For India, the US, with its presence in Afghanistan, is a softer target of compellence. Given the disadvantage of Pakistan in terms of strategic strength, the US appears to its radar only as an interceder. These two different assignments of the same referee (the US) confined in the hotspot of Indo-Pak theatre, for Basrur, also gives it the advantage of refusing to the referee the Indo-Pak conflict (p.315). Probably, this superpower option of the United States also acts as a deterrent for both India and Pakistan not to strike first and begin the fare. Basrur characterizes such deterrence as 'non-traditional' with a 'hair-trigger status'. He substantiates his argument by citing the very real warning from the US about detection of release of energy equivalent to Hiroshima bomb in the outer space by an asteroid at the same time when India and Pakistan were nearing the brink in 2002. The warning made everybody aware of the cosmic event so that no one mistakes it to be nuclear detonations. What he projects in the essay is about the lessons learnt by both the Indian and Pakistani states soon after December 13 attack on Indian parliament that set in motion a chain reaction of military strategies and weighing of each other's nuclear options by both the parties. But he hypostatizes the situation when he says, "Compellence through a third party is inherently problematic because the interests of the third party tend to be its own, and these may be a drag on the compelling power. Concessions extracted from the target state are reversible, and the investment in ejecting a coercive threat can be brought to nought whenever the state chooses." (p.324) This weakens Basrur's progressive analysis of the trilateral compellence. That compellence and deterrence are parts of the strategy of overcoming a security threat and a diplomatic difficulty gets blurred in this turning of 'factors' into 'actors'. One

instance of such a transformation is available in Indian media's construction of 9/11 kind of attack on December 13 by some terrorists from across the border. Basrur's nuanced analysis could have derived strengths from the inherent social formations and mobilizations that shape the opinions in India and Pakistan's post-colonial societies, which cannot be entirely subjected to 'deterrence' and 'compellence' kind of orientation. As he pontificates both India and Pakistan's search for strategic spaces, the internal divergences and heteronomies of both the societies present a different picture of shared historical memory and identity. Especially how India, being a democratic state, frames a few individuals for the episode of parliament attack. Similar things are also available with Pakistan, where the judiciary is often penalized for being against the national interest. The last essay of the volume expresses the overarching thematic of the volume in its title, "U.S. Interests in South Asia". The author of this essay Howars B. Schaffer takes a regressive view of India's foreign policy by blaming it as anti-American, when he seems to suggest that New Delhi should not have antagonized America. He goes on to say, "For many Americans, India seemed to make a practice of biting the hand that might have fed it." (p.329) Such a statement reminds one of PL-480 aid and very recently, the impassioned defense of Indo-US nuclear deal that subjects India long term defense and multilateral subordination through legal measures such as Hyde Act and Patent regimes. That India had bitten such an American clasp is inadvertently admitted and so the desire to make India see itself as an indebted and grateful nation that should pay heed to America's embrace as a 'quasi-ally' against Chinese Communism is so blatantly proposed. Apart from such hard-nosed power interests of America, the essay euphemizes the US interest in India's growing economy. In all, the essay fails to understand India's track record of an independent foreign and economic policy that seems to dominate India's national interest. Although India has given in to some extent to US military kowtowing, it still refuses to agree to a permanent stature of a sub-ordinate ally who must remain faithful to US skullduggery in policy matters. The essay lacks a balanced understanding of perspectival and positional differences between the US and India and it fails to properly explore unimpeachable grounds of mutual cooperation, if there exists any, that would benefit both the sides. The US-centric slant in India's foreign policy operates only at a discursive level to make the nation-state of India realize its own strength that never allows it to abandon the singularity and tenacity of national interest.

The tenor of most of the essays see the US as the most sought after ally for both India and Pakistan on which both the Southasian states evince close competition. This renders the US simultaneously present and absent in

Indo-Pak affairs. This also makes the US vulnerable to quandaries of bilateral relations, of which the US apparently has only a disciplining interest. The volume re-iterates US interest in most of its essays, while a few essays written by Southasian scholars present an objective and authentic analysis of the role of US. One can clearly read two distinct approaches in this volume: One, a US-centric transvaluation of domestic politics in India and Pakistan without assessing the possible ways of redemption and another, the overwhelming diktats of the US foreign policies to tailor independent policies of India and Pakistan so that their relations are sufficiently mediated by the US. Both these approaches lack the support and substance that are otherwise so amply available in analyses of internal politics of the respective states. Rather the volume reproduces a part of the available material for no new inferences in most of its pages. Descriptive truisms that follow from chronicling of events without anchorage to the domain of everyday politics dominate the tenor of holding onto a constituency for Uncle Sam. Hence the volume fails to inspire any hope in sustained peace in Southasia. Most of its essays are second rate observations on swings in foreign policy circles that can hardly describe the increasingly complex and subtle ways in which India and Pakistan work in the domain of international politics. Essays that add to new knowledge are in a sense by the 'native informants' who would otherwise represent their countries in any intellectual exercise. The editorial discretions too are in-expansive as they hardly fulfill the role of being the links in the fragmented and ruptured narratives of US led peace and stability in the region. This is the Orwellian predicament of Southasia.

Reviewed by

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Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (revised edition), Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2006 (1995), pp.ix+108, price Rs.130/-

The book under review is one of the founding texts of understanding the emerging contours of Dalit identity and ideology. The book that originally had seen the light of the day in 1995 is now republished. The text has not changed much, only the context has become more embedded and rooted.

The author revised her book of late, possibly with a reaffirmation of her faith in the relevance of Dalit struggles that demanded a greater clarity. Omvedt presents the Dalit emergence with a remarkable political and cultural correctness of a critique of Hindu ideological superiority. The book in its ten chapters presents the case of Dalit emergence in the form of counter-hegemonic struggles, while it underscores the process of Dalit identity formation as a constitutive element of democracy and modernity.

The first chapter entitled, "Introduction" discusses the social base of Dalit movement that combines the ex-untouchables with non-Brahmin castes. Dalit identity and Dalit consciousness take the form of a discursive resistance to reformist Hinduism by moving a step beyond. This step beyond is conceptualized by Omvedt in the following terms,

In contemporary times they (Dalits) draw on such leaders as Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar; they appeal to heroes of revolt such as Birsa Munda and Veer Narayan Singh; they claim the traditions of Buddha and Carvak, Mahavir, Kabir and Guru Nanak and Basavappa; they claim heroes like Shivaji but contests the Hinduist interpretation of him; they claim the glories of Mohenjo-daro and the heritage of pre-state tribals as opposed to that of plundering Aryan tribes. In contrast to the secularist opposition to Hindutva they proclaim a politics of identity, an in contrast to reformist Hindu identities *they define 'Hinduism' itself as an oppressive class/caste/patriarchal force.* (p.5)

One can note here several references to a historical past of location and cultural distinctness that are 'claimed' by the Dalits. Such claims are also based on a politics of difference that relativizes the validity of such claims. The crucial question is, *does the politics of Dalit identity need an articulation of specific claims in positioning the identity of the Dalits over and against a Hindu mainstream?* Omvedt can be said to have veered between a pull toward redistribution and recognition and a push toward an articulated authenticity. She presented her dilemma in terms of caste-class dichotomy, when she says, referring to Phule's notion of 'ideology', "This one did not recognize community/caste as a node of exploitation ... *The formation of a class ideology of this type created a caste ideology of a specific type in reaction*, one which set up caste in opposition to class as a cultural/social factor, a non-economic factor." (p.41) Indeed Omvedt attempts to see 'caste' as a category that arises out of a process of social, economic and cultural exclusion, so much so that social movements by untouchables

and lower castes were looked down upon and even delegitimized by the nationalists and Marxists. Omvedt portrays the common ideological grounds of nationalist-Leftist-Marxist-Gandhian strands of social and political movements having an antagonism toward any movement that voiced caste oppression as an issue and all of them shared an ideological subscription to mainstream Hindu nationalism. But this kind of a hegemonic construction of Hinduism and an idea of centralized India creates many folds of historical and political exclusion. At one level, it paved the way of partition as a measure to avoid giving too many concessions to Muslims and also stave off the possibility of making India into a decentralized and federal province. All these were done just in order to have a 'centralized state structure' (p.64) that reproduced Manchester under state ownership. At another level, the ideological hegemony of Hindu political and cultural formations resulted into an 'anti-caste' movement that had an anti-northern and anti-brahmin identification. Such movements had a regional framework and it grew to an 'emotive slogan' against Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan. Positively speaking, anti-caste movements took a reflexive anti-Aryan, non-Hindi and anti-'brahman-baniya' turn, which she described thus: "Anti-Hinduism was taking on a rather complex, anti-northern, anti-centralist character." (p.54) Periyar inspired "self-respect" movement of 1930s and Ambedkar's attempts at liberating untouchables throughout 1920 to 1940 and beyond come into focus in the book at lengths. Notable punchlines include Ambedkar's pronouncement that he was "born a hindu but would not die a Hindu". A song published in Ambedkar's weekly *Janata* is cited by Omvedt that establishes a Shudra-proletariat equation (p.45) in the political outfit called Independent Labour Party (ILP) floated by Ambedkar that became the largest opposition in Bombay Legislative Council in 1936 elections. Such fireworks by social movements of the lower castes substantially exposed the upper caste-bourgeois orientation of emerging post-colonial polity in 1930s.

Omvedt followed an argumentative strategy of exposing the caste-class alliance in the domain of political economy to the extent that it constitutes an ideological hegemony. As opposed to this, she highlights the role played by alliances of lower castes and various movements that aimed at redeeming the oppressed castes from the subjection by dominant Hindu political elites. This strategy of unfolding the emergence of lower-caste struggles against Hindu dominance produces a convergence in terms of Dalit-bahujan and other movements from the margins of mainstream Hindu nation-space. Omvedt's emphasis on regional identities such as Dravidian movement,

Kashmiriyat and tribo-national movements of Northeast India mobilizes ideas of de-brahminization, de-saffronization and de-territorialization of anti-caste formations in its multitude. All these put together constitute, for Omvedt, a single moment of 'visions' that de-institute the Brahminical forms of power from the domain of law, public discourse and resistance. Omvedt characterized this moment by citing veteran Marxist leader A.K. Roy's pamphlet called, "The New Dalit Revolution" (p.79). Omvedt is in full agreement with Roy, when Roy wrote,

The culture of the people, struggle of the oppressed like that of Birsa Munda of Chotanagpur and Veer Narayan Singh of Chattisgarh would be highlighted which is now obscured and would be restored to its rightful place above the wars and conspiracies of feudal kings and colonial rulers which now crowd the pages of history. From Buddha to Lenin it would be a unique journey, a new search for a spirit of emancipating millions, a new religion not only a new party, out to make a new history for mankind without exploitation, subjugation and with justice. (p.80)

This position taken by Omvedt through the politically correct synthesis between Marxism and Dalit ideology as proposed by A.K. Roy is a radical deconstruction of Hegelian residue of a critique of an emancipatory project that synthesizes the agency of emancipation into an abstract universalizable identity. So also Omvedt's position undercuts Kantian notion of civic-liberal individualism that merely reconstructs the domain of politics from what is 'sensible' and 'meaningful' by taking them as things-in-themselves. Beyond political and social theory, Omvedt also characterizes the unspeakable Dalit experience in terms of its creative rendering of self-consciousness, when she affirms in relation to Sita, the banished heroine of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, "In a folk poem of Uttar Pradesh for instance, Sita refuses to go back even when Laxman has been sent to bring her, and instead raises her sons on her own and gives them her father's name, in a half-way return to matriliney".(p.99) This portrayal of Sita as the mother who refuses to follow the norms of patriarchal-brahminical society also becomes a figure of emancipation in a counter depiction to *Ramayana*. This is also a Dalit enterprise of self-definition that renders brahminical claims to history as repressive. Omvedt elaborates this creative discourse of liberation in following words,

(...) *Ramayana*: not as a story of Rama's triumph and the ideal family. But a story of his conquest over Dravidian and tribal native inhabitants, of the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy, of the suppression of women

connected with the establishment of a stable agricultural society. (Sita is after all *bhumikanya*, she was found below a furrow.) It is ultimately a story that has many renditions in a long era of class/caste/gender struggle, of a conquest over long time span, but also of the resistance and uniting of the conquered, a reversal, a forecasting of the liberation of peasants, dalits, women and tribals. (p.100)

At the same time she cautions against 'desperate beatings of an imagined upper-caste past' (p.101) in order to give her analysis an Ambedkarian 'moral import'. Just as historicity of liberation struggles is neither a mere remembrance nor forgetting of the past, Omvedt's Ambedkarian strategy of speaking against 'caste' as the "monster that would always cross their path" (p.52) form an essential condition for forging Dalit identity, while it discounts the idea of a unified national identity. Omvedt does not merely give an agent-centred moral argument, she expands the space of morality from protean notion of identity and alterity to a space beyond the existing social hierarchy. In her reading of Dalit Panthers (chap.9), she categorically states, "If the proletarianism of dalit identity was a new universalism, a new claim to being a kind of vanguard it was also an effort to define the entire Indian revolution in terms of the upsurge of the low castes ..." (p.78). This is a reconstruction of moral spaces lost within caste system by way of responding to emergent forms of class hierarchies that situate moral agency not merely on a Dalit-centric discourse, but in a new discourse of justice and liberty. Omvedt produces a knowledge of the 'sensible' by mediating between the polarities of Dalit struggle: Brahminism and Dalitisation. She goes along with the strategy of posing the latter against the former as advocated in Dalit movements, but departs from this usual strategy by suggesting the possibility of a creative synthesis between proletarian class identity and concrete forms of oppression.

Re-publication of this founding text of understanding Dalit movement re-configures significant questions of our time, such as, affirmative action, protective discrimination and questions of representation. Without falling into some of Omvedt's anthropological search for authenticity, these questions can be addressed more rigorously by taking into account situations and events. The recent claims of inclusion of the Dalits by replacing the ascriptional paradigm of evaluation of merit in the national context and the claim of Adivasis of Assam to be recognized as 'scheduled tribe' finds its right echoes in the inner recesses of Dalit consciousness that is depicted in the book. That the question of recognition is not merely a question of recognition of an

identity and their empowerment is brought out in the pages of the book by a *re-iteration of justice and its denial*. The book immensely succeeds in raising our sensibility against any distortion in the lived experience of un-emancipated Dalits. It is, therefore, a radical affirmation of a vision that goes beyond the apparent.

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