

Transformational Process in Northeast India:

The XIV Verrier Elwin Endowment Lectures

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Tape and Transcription by Ms. Charisma K. Lepcha

Lecture I: March 5, 2008

Thank you Professor Tandon, Vice-Chancellor of the university, who has been kind to preside over the first lecture, the members of Late Elwin family, distinguished faculty of the university, my colleagues in the Department of Anthropology, students of the university, ladies and gentlemen.

At the very first instance, I would like to join the Vice-Chancellor and Dr. Khongsdier, Head of Anthropology Department, in paying my tribute to Dr. Verrier Elwin who was literally responsible for bringing me into the fold of Anthropology. I never met Dr. Elwin but I spoke at length on him when the centenary celebrations were organized by the Department of Anthropology in Shillong in 2004. I saw, I read and then I joined his league in which I am continuing till this day. He has been an inspiration in the past and he still keeps inspiring. His voluminous writings in anthropology inspire even the students of the day. So, this is indeed a great honour and privilege for me that the university authorities in their wisdom bestowed on me this honour in view of the kind of people who have spoken on previous occasions starting with Kapila Vatsayan and ending with so many others who I know have made their mark in the field of anthropology. Nevertheless, the honour has come since Professor Subba and his colleagues always feel that it is good to resurrect somebody who is trying to get into slumber every now and then. So, their effort has finally brought me here to a place with which I am associated since the inception of the combined Department of Anthropology and Sociology. NEHU has never really left me alone and that is why I am here. I am indeed very thankful to the organizers of this programme.

The series of three lectures were decided in consultation with Professor

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Subba and the general theme of the lectures is “Transformational Process in Northeast India”. Today’s lecture is an overview of the theme. Tomorrow I shall present the case of Arunachal Pradesh which I know a little better than many others and I will end the series with a lecture on hills and plains relations particularly in the context of Assam.

Today’s lecture is by and large, if I may use a simile, like old wine in a new bottle - the new bottle being the Science Seminar Hall of NEHU but what new ideas could I throw up again? At the very beginning I would crave your indulgence as I am going to be a little anecdotal. Professor Triloki Nath Pandey of the University of California, Santa Barbara, who was a visiting faculty in the Department of Anthropology, NEHU for a couple of times, once told me this incident. In a subway in New York, an Indian approached him and asked in chaste Bhojpuri about the direction to a particular place. After he was given the right direction by Professor Pandey he wondered how that man knew he was also a Bhojpuri. He asked that person, who replied “What other language do I know? For the last ten years I have lived in New York I have spoken only in Bhojpuri!” My condition is something like that of the Bhojpuri person who knew no other language.

Though I began my research in the Pacific I eventually shifted to Northeast India. So by and large I would like to share my thoughts on the aspects of social transformation in emerging societies in parts of the Northeastern region and their ethno-cultural connotations for us today. In order to understand the nature and processes of social transformation in Northeast India it is necessary and helpful to take three definable periods which I have tried to develop as pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial.

The Pre-Colonial Period

The hills and plains of the region had been occupied by different streams of Mongoloid people who came from north-eastern direction at different periods well before the onset of colonial rule. It is generally agreed that the Mongoloids, mentioned as the Kiratas in ancient Sanskrit literature, once occupied practically the whole of the Northeastern region of India. It has for instance been surmised that long ago one section of the Indo-Mongoloids, namely the Bodo speakers, spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley, North Bengal as well as East Bengal which is today’s Bangladesh, giving rise to various groups whom we today know as Bodo, Kachari, Garo, Hajong, Tripuri and so on. The diverse Mongoloid groups which eventually settled down in distinct habitats and ecological settings of the Northeastern hills

subsequently crystallized into distinct tribal societies.

Even in the Assam plains, the early rulers were Indo-Mongoloids of various dynasties spanning a time period from fifth to mid-eleventh century. The situation changed in the early 12th century when the invasion of Assam took place by the non-Mongoloid king of Bengal. But these migrations were between 5th and 12th centuries. The history of Assam plains, i.e., the Brahmaputra Valley in particular shows that by 12th century local kings of Mongoloid origin became Hindu while the Mongoloids coming from the north and the east contributed to the emergence of tribal social formation in the region. The influence from the west of this region contributed to the formation of Hindu social order in Assam and in Northeast India. For instance those who established a kingdom in the lower Assam region by the 16th century made a significant contribution to the formation of the Assamese Hindu society.

The Ahom period is also of considerable significance to anthropologists. This is really when Assam history began. Their rulers for the first time established a well integrated administrative system in Assam and they also patronized Hindu religious institutions. An aristocratic class emerged centering around state powers and religious institutions. In the pre-Ahom period, the social formations of Assam were predominantly tribal in nature despite the simmerings of Hinduization in the plains region. But the development of centralized power and state religion during that period united the different ethnic groups. The Assamese assumed a wider social formation during the Ahom period. The new religious movement under the leadership of Sankardev in the 16th century also played a significant role. The Ahom period was characterized by percolation of Brahmennical religion and Shakti cult among the masses. A society largely of tribal background but with strong Hindu ethos emerged clearly in the Assam plains.

The important point to note at this stage is that in the long centuries before the advent of British rule in the region there was a high degree of fluidity in the social and cultural arena so that intermingling of various streams of people including biological admixture produced diverse social alignments and group identities. The boundaries of the groups were never very rigid. It was this flexibility characteristic of frontier people experiencing considerable population movement from different directions that provided hope for shifting alliances and identities, which no longer take place today. Pre-colonial social settings in Northeast India were more fluid and flexible than in the subsequent

colonial and post-colonial periods. Thus various tribal inhabitants of the hills got integrated and were often brought into the fold of Hindu peasantry, consequent upon their migration from the hills to the plains. The process of social transformation continued even in the colonial period leading Edward Gait, the noted historian and Census Commissioner to comment on it extensively in the Census of 1891. A perfect example is the Koch caste, which has been remarkably open in Assam. Caste is almost everywhere a closed group but in Assam it is open. In the plains of Assam, tribal groups like Bodo Kachari, Hajong, Karbi and Deuri have provided the main source of Hindu population through a process of conversion and subsequent Sanskritization. The continuum from the basically Mongoloid tribal stream to a Hindu caste could be seen in many cases. There are many and varied instances of social transformation among the tribals of Assam and Northeast India as a whole. Social formations along tribal or Hindu lines, as miniscule autonomous polities or a part of complex caste structures are evident. Migration, strategies of adaptation and negotiating the space between differing groups are the three very important processes through which this transformation took place. Contrary to popular notions, the numerous culturally and politically discrete communities of later times lived in a situation of contact and communication with the respective neighbouring populations. Now this no longer takes place. Mixed regions of various communities replete with evidences of inter-community contacts and inter-cultural give and take are no longer found. The Bodo, Mizo and Kuki constellations in the region were great migrants in the pre-colonial times, which account for their scattered distribution all over the hills of Northeast India and also the neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. Other groups also moved from the hills to the plains. This mobility of the Mongoloid tribesmen of the hills was no doubt inspired by fight for living space. But movements and subsequent adaptation to new homelands often with changed names and identities were possible only because the social settings of the areas into which they moved were essentially flexible and fluid to incorporate the new migrants.

Let us now briefly examine the British colonial policies adopted during the rather brief period of 121 years. The then East India Company entered Assam by involving themselves in the Ahom-Burmese conflict, eventually fighting a war with the Burmese and driving them out of Assam with the help of Khasi and Jaintia warriors. They took charge of lower Assam by 1828 and extended their regime to upper Assam in 1838. The annexation of Assam by the British brought the people of this region to a greater and deeper contact

with socio-political current then prevailing in the rest of the country. The contexts were further accentuated in the early part of 20th century. The British set in motion a series of steps in order to establish a degree of political and administrative dominance over the plains as well as the hill people. They introduced certain socio-economic and administrative measures towards these ends. In the plains region, they undertook cadastral mapping of the land and established a system of revenue collection while in the hills, a system of house tax collection was introduced, more as a means to establish their dominance and control of the hill areas than as a means of earning sizable revenue. Slavery was abolished in 1905 and this legislation weakened the medieval aristocracy in the Assam plains. Introduction of modern education through schools and a few colleges opened up the way for social mobility.

The differences between the largely Hindu and Hinduized plains peasantry and the small scale preliterate politically autonomous communities of the hills appeared too great to be ignored in their respective spheres of influence and activity. The nature and extent of problems of administration and proselytization are found to be different in the two segments of the Northeastern people - the tribal and the plains peasantry. The tribes were perceived as static in character in a wider network of relations and articulations with other similar formations and with non-tribals. This sort of perception and consequent policy orientations of the agents of Western civilization contributed significantly to having the freeze effect on a fluid situation. Such an approach also contributed significantly to defining the character and tenure of identity movements among the tribals and non-tribals in the region in the post-independence period. While the plains of Assam practically fell into British lap as a result of the Yandaboo treaty in 1826 establishing control over the sparsely populated vast and difficult hilly terrains was not an easy proposition. Most of the hill tribesmen living in an atmosphere of an age-old autonomy refused to be easily subjugated. The British avoided direct administrative control in the frontier areas and sent punitive expeditions only when it was necessary. By the latter half of the 19th century, the British accepted the Ahom tradition of making peace with the turbulent and hostile tribes through the payment of *posa*, which is fixed tribute in agricultural products raised mainly from the non-tribal peasants living close to the hills. The British also encouraged active Christian proselytization among the hill tribals right from the very beginning of their rule and that created divergent orientations among the hills and the plains people. The hill tribes were thought to be marked by a certain simplicity of manners and devoid of the prejudices

common among the plains people. They realised that what could not be achieved by military expedition could be achieved through the powers of the gospel. Thus began the so-called mission of civilization to humanize the wild tribes of the northeastern frontier region with full government support. The phenomenal success of Christianity of various denominations in the hill areas was largely due to the modern western education. Spiritual gains apart, the success of conversion should also be seen in terms of the technology the missionaries brought for the material well-being of the people like the printing press. The colonial administration and missionaries prepared a ground for socio-political and ideological transformation of the tribal inhabitants in the hill areas where they gained their foothold. The new faith acted as a sort of brake on the age-old tribal religion.

In addition the role of British colonial administration in altering earlier social patterns became manifest through other measures adopted by the new rulers. One of these was the introduction in 1873 of the Inner Line, which virtually cut off the prospect of increased contact between the hill tribals and the largely non-tribal plainsmen. The Inner Line exists to this day in many of the states of the region. The tribal - non-tribal difference gained further rigidity in the region from the Government of India Act of 1935 which conferred upon most of the hill areas of the region the status of "Excluded Area" whereby the elected provincial legislatures ceased to have effective jurisdiction over the tribal-inhabited tracts. Consequently the hill areas remained under direct administration of the provincial governor. Until 1947, most tribal communities in the region remained cut off from the social and political development taking place elsewhere in the country.

Mention must also be made here of the impressive population movements into the region during the British period unleashed by the imperatives of colonial administration and economy. Groups of people having distinct languages, cultures and ethnic characteristics and hitherto unknown in the region came in the wake of colonial rule, almost since the beginning of the nineteenth century. For example as early as 1831, the Government of Bengal, under whose jurisdiction Assam was, made Bengali the court language of Assam and this led to the rapid induction of large number of Bengalis in petty administration and as teachers in Anglo-vernacular and vernacular schools. The immigrants were mostly Bengali Hindus from the neighbouring province of Bengal. With all this began the social tension between the Bengalis and the Assamese. The coming of the railways in Assam in 1881 also added to the flow of such migrants, according to Myron Weiner who has written

extensively on the issue of migration in Assam. Thus, by the beginning of the 20th century doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, clerks, railway and post office staff as well as officers in the provincial government were Bengali Hindu migrants. Further, in the first decade of the 20th century, according to the noted historian Amalendu Guha, immigrant land hungry peasants from East Bengal of whom an estimated 85 percent were Muslims started settling down in thousands on the uninhabited riverine tracts of the Brahmaputra valley to account for nearly 300,000 persons by 1921 census. The number increased to over half a million by 1931 and according to Mohamed Taher, a well-known geographer of Assam, this number could be anything up to 4 million today out of a population of 26.5 million for Assam. It is just an estimate of the total population of descendants of immigrant Muslims from the then Bangladesh. If you add the recent migrants the figures could be more than 4 million. From the riverine base, these land-hungry people further pushed themselves forward towards all directions in search of more living space in areas held by the autochthones. Mention must be made in passing that the Hindu Bengali migrants came to Assam plains in early part of the British rule and the later peasant migrants were largely Muslims from East Bengal. These two groups of migrants remained two discrete formations, episodic coalition and ethnic block formation out of political expediency notwithstanding. Another major induction of outsiders was triggered by the British tea plantation interests during the third decade of the 19th century. The number of tea gardens rose to as many as 764 by the turn of the 19th century. Under a system of contract labour the British planters recruited indigenous tribesmen from different states of present-day Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The non-indigenous plantation labour force along with locally born descendents of the original migrants touched a million mark by 1931. It was a multilingual, heterogeneous population under the rigid, oppressive and regimented conditions of work in the tea plantations. There was a sort of social and economic steam rolling of internal lines of differences and uniqueness of each group and they came to be referred to as “coolies”. The tea gardens and their labourers today constitute an important social stratum and they are referred to as *sa monuwa* or tea people.

In outlining population movement into Assam largely as a consequence of the colonial rule mention must also be made of the Nepalis and subsequently of the Marwaris who are small in number but in the context of the regional society and economy of Assam they were important forces.

In 1947, the entire hill region of Northeast India remained in Assam

except for NEFA which is now Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura. It is in this setting that the post-colonial social transformation in the region has to be examined. Following independence, the governmental approach to tribals was radically altered. The old policy of maintaining status quo and isolation was replaced by a policy of development and integration. The post-independence period has been one of exhilarating pace of social change and modernization of various tribal groups in the region and their effective induction within the framework of the nation state. However, it is also during the last six decades since independence that the freeze effect on the social formation became more vivid, functional and effective in turning tribes, castes, communities and language groups into ethnic blocks. Many groups have also shown varying degrees of strains in accepting and adjusting to the demands of integration. Thus while the pre-colonial setting was fluid and flexible the colonial and post-independence setting has been less so and societal boundaries have become more rigid, adding to the process of distinct cultural orientation the phenomenon we call ethnicity today. Societies became ethno-political blocs. In addition, the post-colonial period is also characterized by revivalism, which anthropologists have noted in so many areas among so many peoples. The Chutias, for example, or the Morans and several other groups who had once merged into the identity of Hindu and Assamese now want to revert to their tribal roots. Ethnic self-consciousness, consolidation and assertion along the lines of tribe, community or language group have become increasingly manifest in the recent years in the region as a whole. The cumulative effect of immigration beginning in the British period and gathering momentum in the post-independence period has been the growth of communal language and separatist politics. The phenomenon of immigration in the colonial and post-colonial periods, which led to the hardening of the boundaries of social formation of Assam into the sons of the soil [*tholuwa*] and outsider or foreigner [*bohiragat aru bideshi*]. These are dominant issues not merely in Assam today but in other states of Northeast India as well. In every state, there is an emic perception of who constitutes the insiders and who are the outsiders vying for the limited jobs, assets and resources in their respective territories. The sons of the soil generally wish to keep the outsiders away from territorial resources and destinies. Violence and riots involving the locals and outsiders have been common enough occurrences in most parts of the region over the years further augmenting the consolidation of various societal boundaries. The integrationist framework of the nation-state has never really worked in the region. It does not actually seem to have worked anywhere in contemporary India. Regionalism along social and ethnic

lines has been a dominant development in the years since independence. In Assam and for that matter in the whole region tribal groups have been trying to come to grips with the problem of defining and externalizing their relationships and establishing new linkages with other neighbouring groups, the regional society, the nation-state and ultimately the outside world.

I have always regarded that ethnicity is not a negative development; it is a kind of interest articulation. It is one of the means through which these groups are really trying to become modern and fit into the new scheme of things. Ethnic cultural identity has been the most important resource for these societies for mobilizing the people in the socio-political spheres. It is in a way trying to cut down the load of historical forces. They are trying to sort of bridge the gap which history did not provide them and pave the way for a new kind of articulation. Ethnicity could be formulated in the region in territorial terms though tribes do not constitute compact territorial units in the Assam plains. Classic example is how the Sixth Schedule was changed in order to create the Bodoland Territorial Council. The Sixth Schedule was meant for the hills but now it is operated in the plains also through a change in the Sixth Schedule provisions. And the Government of Assam thought that by creating the Bodoland Territorial Council they solved the problem, as it provided a territorial framework for Bodo-Kachari identity. But, as we anthropologists know, by resolving one problem they have created twenty others. Assam is now ripe with every community demanding territorial autonomy.

In the post-colonial Northeast India, we can identify five different parameters of identity consolidation. They, to my mind, are tribe, caste, language, territory and to an extent religion. These often work in combination with one another. That is how the various states have come into existence.

The final point that I would like to make is about integration of tribals and non-tribals of various language groups. We are sitting literally on the simmering volcano of demands and issues. The consolidation of various social formations and ethnic upsurges may be viewed as strategies of adaptation of the tribesmen and other indigenous inhabitants of the region in the modern context. There is a positive side to these movements despite the killings and conflicts. The emotions that go into demand-making politics, even with a secessionist outlook, have created uncertainty. But if we take a long range view of history, we see that social unrest with mass bearing have never been permanent attributes of human societies. These are like turning points in the life of a society which is passing from one kind of articulation to another and there I think is a real hope.

Lecture II: March 6, 2008 (Forenoon)

In this lecture I shall trace the social transformation process in the context of Arunachal Pradesh.

Incidentally, my perception of Arunachal Pradesh is now four decades plus old. May 1967 was when I first, as a student of anthropology, had my encounter with Arunachal Pradesh. It was in the company of a very great anthropologist, whom I recognize as my *guru*, who might not have taught you but whose name might be familiar to some of you, Nirmal Kumar Bose. He was invited by the then Governor of Assam, Vishnu Sahay, to make a tour of Arunachal Pradesh and look into the issues of education and the consequence of social changes coming through the introduction of formal education. He was to tour through all the nine districts of Arunachal Pradesh, starting with Bomdilla in the west and ending up with Kira in the Northeast of this State. Thus, he was to traverse the entire province of the frontier agency. Nirmal Bose, in his wisdom, chose me as his company for this tour. I was then a young lecturer of anthropology at Gauhati University, just come back from my sojourn of the Maoris of Northern New Zealand for my PhD. So, probably he wanted someone with a comparative perspective to look into the issue of Arunachal Pradesh. There was one other person, an ecologist from the Anthropological Survey of India, accompanying Bose.

The main worry of the Governor was the impact of modern education on the traditional society of Arunachal Pradesh. Forty years ago, there was just one college – Pasighat College - and three schools. He was worried because the college education was somehow not related to the needs and aspirations of the then emerging society. In 1980s I became one of the administrators of higher education in the state. So I could really see the manner in which the education system changed in the state.

When people refer to Arunachal Pradesh they say that it is a State with 25 major tribes. That is not really the count, as the count would be between 18 and 100 different linguistic, cultural, and social formations some of which are actually constellations of tribes rather than single tribes. In 2001 the total population of Arunachal was 1.098 million out of which only about 64 percent were recognized as indigenous people. Most of the indigenous groups incidentally came from somewhere else, usually from northern direction. Some such groups have been coming and settling in the state until the last century. So literally for thousands of years, people have been coming and occupying certain tracts of the land that now belongs to

Arunachal Pradesh. People themselves have long history of travelling within the hills and also coming down south to the Assam plains. Though the British left them alone, it did not imply that the people lived only in the hills. Actually they were very great travellers. Basically in search of living space, trade and other necessities, they travelled at great speed.

Between 1947 and 1954, a new policy was developed under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership. Dr. Verrier Elwin was invited by Nehru to advise the then governor of Assam on tribal affairs. Elwin was also expected to advise on how to develop this area without tampering with people's traditional institutions, custom and practices. With this end in view Elwin joined his post on 31st December 1954. He came to Shillong because this was the administrative headquarters and between 1954 and 1957 he wrote a book, which is now almost a classic for anthropologists but that was his first real piece of applied anthropological research. *A Philosophy for NEFA*, which he published in 1957, is still what we read. My own copy has been tattered now but I keep it because it is the first edition priced Rs. 6/- only. I read and reread it whenever there is need and I find there are many little gems of ideas there.

In 1965, a troupe from Arunachal Pradesh was taken to New Delhi for the 26th January Republic Day celebration. After the celebration, however, the President bypassed the group. Bokan Atey, a Galo interpreter and a member of the team, took exception to being ignored by the President. He stopped the President and said, '*Roko* or "stop". You ignored us mainly because we speak only in Hindi as the second language. And you ignored us because we don't know English. So, I take an oath here and now in Delhi that tomorrow when I go back to Along [that was his home base] I will start an English medium education and I will see that our students receive education through English medium.' He went back and started an English medium school in 1965 and named it Along Jawaharlal Nehru English Medium School. He hired a Mizo headmaster and started the school in competition with the Along Secondary School run by the government.

One reason why the social transformation process in Arunachal Pradesh was smooth was mainly because of the policy of Verrier Elwin. In the last 60 years, the way the society has transformed is simply astounding. Acculturation has been the most dominant pattern of cultural change in many indigenous communities around the world. But in Arunachal Pradesh social change cannot be explained by the theory of acculturation alone. It may perhaps be better

explained by what Keatington has called "imagined development." When certain things of the old style of life are retained by people by their own choice and something new is adopted and incorporated thereby creating something which is neither the old nor the new this is what I call the "third order reality". This is exactly what has happened in Arunachal Pradesh. I will give you a few examples.

Among the Apatanis the old and the new are combined to create the third order reality. When we went there in 1967, Nirmal Bose, Arabinda Bose and I used to meet mainly the students, youths, school teachers and so on. One evening we had this encounter at Zero Higher Secondary School with the students, mainly boys of different tribes but mainly Apatanis and a few Nishis. The secondary school boys gave us a very interesting story which is there in Furer-Haimendorf's second book, *From Cattle to Cash*. Among the Apatanis, they have this custom that if a person feels he is slighted by someone he does not go and give him a kick. Instead he will take one of his own *mithuns* and slaughter it in front of him. If the other fellow remains quiet he has been slighted back. But he will instead slaughter two of his own *mithuns* to slight back the person who slighted him. So, the contest goes on. If somebody's own supply of *mithuns* is exhausted their kinsmen appear with their own respective *mithuns* and offer them to their contending relatives. In this way, on one particular occasion, 80 *mithuns* got killed. Today, a prime *mithun* would cost anything up to 80,000 to one lakh rupees. So, imagine the loss of wealth. Of course the meat would not go waste. It would be smoked and kept but the relatives would be nearly exhausted of their stock. In this particular case, the administration in Zero tried to intervene but the contest could not be stopped. Then the relatives from both sides joined to stop this mad race, which is locally called *lisudu*, between the two contenders but they failed. Finally they went to the secondary school and told the boys to do something. And it was the Apatani Secondary School boys who brought the contending parties to an understanding. Thus where the administration and relatives failed, the schoolboys succeeded.

Now this is where I say lies a situation of imagined development where the new education empowered the youths who are respected by the elders as well. This is an example of how the old and the new meet and create a third order reality. There is umpteenth number of examples of this kind. They are all the time playing such role or have played such role in their respective traditional milieus. Another example I will give is from the Moklung community. This is also a story from the secondary school but this happened

in 1981. I had taken a group of students from Dibrugarh University where I was teaching and was more or less continuing the same kind of dialogue with the youths to Changlang district of the State for their fieldwork training. And it was remarkable to find how intervention of school students could literally stop one practice and very substantially stop one more. One was a very unhappy traditional belief among them that twins were a bad omen. Thus, when a woman gave birth to twins the woman had to leave the village. The other practice which the youths thought was not good was addiction to opium, although a cultivator rarely left the house without a pinch of opium. The students of the secondary school in Changlang organized a systematic move against both these practices and while they had complete success in respect of the former they achieved some success with respect to the latter as well.

Everywhere, there have been catastrophes called degeneration or detribalization or derogation of the traditional base of tribal societies. People have literally risen from the ashes, such as the Maoris among whom I did my fieldwork. There was a very dark phase from 1860s for about a hundred years, and eventually the Maoris literally rose from the ashes and tried to rebuild their culture. The same thing happened with the American Indians all over. But such a thing never happened in Arunachal Pradesh.

To cite one more example, the chief of the Wanchos had so many obligations to the community which could not be fulfilled. As a hereditary chief, he had obligations to the community and to his many wives. Polygyny was quite common among certain classes of people in Arunachal Pradesh. But now things have changed and monogamy has become the norm. Again, the changes have not come because of administration or development. The entire credit goes to the people, mainly the educated youths and their own perception of how the society should be shaped. It is something which has grown from within. It is organic that is why it could take roots.

Lecture III: March 6, 2008 (Afternoon)

This lecture is on the relationship between the hills and the plains with particular reference to Assam. By plains I mean the Assam plains, the 63,000 sq. kilometres of the Brahmaputra and Barak river plains. I would like to mainly focus upon one very interesting area of hills-plains relationship which has a very interesting historical background namely the ceremonial trade and commercial transactions that took place between the plains people and the hill people who lived in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and so

forth. The hill areas had interesting relationship with the people in the adjoining plains mainly through trade, barter and various other ceremonial exchanges. This is one particular area of inquiry which I have been working on and off since 1970s starting first with my interest in the Sherdukpens of Arunachal Pradesh who live in three main villages of Rupa, Jigaon and Shergaon besides many other satellite settlements in present day West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh and also their northern neighbours, the Monpas. The Monpas and Sherdukpens had their ceremonial exchange or trade relationship with people in the plains called Koch or Kachari. This relationship has somehow diminished today but it was extremely vibrant once.

The Sherdukpens used to practise a type transhumance, i.e., in the winter months they used to migrate to the foothills of Duimara, near Goalpara. They used to migrate for three months when all the people of these three main villages and their satellite villages came down to the plains and lived along the river banks and practically recreated the entire map of their hill habitat.

While staying there for three months, they made very interesting and expansive forays into their neighbouring plains districts of Darang, which is now partly Sonitpur and partly Mongoldoi districts of Assam. These people came down with their herds of cattle, goats and horses and went to the adjacent villages, sometimes several miles away, for a very unique kind of exchange. Nobody stayed back in the village those days. They went to particular families with whom they had ceremonial kinship relationship. The people in the plains called them "Bhutia-Raja" and they called their respective families with whom they had traditional ties "Bohotia", more or less meaning subject people.

I will start with the exact manner in which the transactions took place. By evening a Sherdukpen would have reached the house of a particular family with whom his father had also interacted. He would be received with great ceremonial fervour saying "Rajagira Hilina" meaning "O you kings have come!" And they quickly requested them to stay for the night. In next to no time, food would be provided, fire would be lit, and they would take the food. During the night, he brought out from his own package little packets of articles like spice, dried radish, chillies, iron harps, circular tripods and a few other items. These would be given to his host as gifts. In the night they also discussed how the harvest was and so forth. The next morning the most amazing thing happened. The visiting Sherdukpen knew where the granary

would be. He would fill his sacks each of which actually contained about 15 kg of paddy without asking the family member. He took the amount of paddy depending on his information that he collected the evening before. Normally he would collect two or three *maunds* (1 *maund* = 37.5 kgs), bid ceremonial goodbye and leave.

The next morning the Sherdukpen is out again to visit another house and in this way for three months, the men are travelling to homes ceremoniously exchanging articles that are otherwise valueless. Practically nothing, if you come to think of an article like a dry radish, which is cut into small pieces and dried. But if you ask a Koch or Kachari person, he will say, 'My god, we wait for a whole year for these little gift packets because they are absolutely splendid.' The whole exchange had a lot of ceremony about it. Halfway through the transaction and before the commencement of the migration to the plains the Koch and the Kachari people sacrificed a goat in a particular place.

In a way, this was part of the *posa* system which the Ahoms had developed for the hill people who used to raid the plains and foothill dwellers. Subsequently it became a ceremonial exchange and through that so much of plains culture went to the hills. In a Sherdukpen house, the amount of brass and metal wares one sees is so amazing that it is almost like a museum collector's dream to visit them. The huge vessels were hardly used by Sherdukpens. They would occasionally display them but by and large they would hide them in caves to avoid being taken by enemy groups. Similarly *endy*, which is a variety of Assam silk, has more value among the Sherdukpens, Monpas and Nishis of Arunachal Pradesh than in Assam itself. Dr. Joram Begi, the present Director of Higher Education, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, who was my Registrar in the University of Arunachal Pradesh, would feel practically undressed if he did not wrap an *endy chadar* or endy shawl over his body in the Nyokong festival or any ceremonial occasion. No Nishi girl would in any ceremonial occasion be dressed in any cloth other than *endy*.

Similarly, throughout the plains and right up to the Naga hills border, transactions between foothill dwellers and the hill people used to take place. And this was formalized by the Ahom king long ago to avoid the depredation of the hill people into the plains. For example, in the foothills of Wancho and Konyak areas Ahom kings had certain tracts of land called Naga *Khat*. [*Khat* in Assamese means farm or cultivable tract.] These were assigned to

the Nagas who cultivated betel leaves and areca nuts which would not grow in certain altitudes. So these areas were given in order to contain and also allow them access to the plains for ceremonial trade in places like Sonali and Jorhat markets. Most of the clothes and implements the Wanchos wore earlier were made in the plains of Assam.

In the central Assam region, one finds the same kind of thing in Darang *mela* between Bhotias and the plains people. In Dimaru area of Kamrup district a very interesting practice existed since 15th century. Annually, in the post harvest season, Jaintias, Khasis, Hill Karbis, and Hill Tiwas descended to pre-decided spots in Morigaon for ceremonial exchange and barter. And this is a practice that has been in existence since centuries.

Legend has it that four brothers, whose names are partly Khasi, show how the hill and plains people are inseparable. The four brothers were on their sojourn to the plains. They were sleeping in a forest and each one of them went for toilet in the morning and they lost contact with each other. As a result the four brothers went to four different directions. One of them eventually had to satisfy his hunger by eating the fig fruit, which in Assamese is called Dimaru and the place was apparently named Dimoria. The other brother went to an adjacent place called Khinsang, which is near Neli and established another kingdom there, which became the Gobha kingdom. The third and fourth brothers also established small kingdoms in the plains. Eventually, the Ahoms in the 16th century integrated them and they became small vessel kingdoms within the Ahom principality and they were called *puwali raja*. [*Puwali* in Assamese means small.] It is during this period that the *melas* called Parhali mela and Junbil mela attracted men, women and children - Khasis from the Bhoi area, Jaintias and Karbis from the interior hills and Tiwas - descend to these places. They come the day before the *mela* which is the Assamese Bhogali Bihu day, which normally takes place on the fourteenth day of January every year. Earlier these hill people were allowed a certain area of land to establish camp, which was a kind of hut made out of thatch or straw from the field and the next day there would be the transaction. That is no longer done in Dimoria. Instead smaller groups of Bhois come by trucks, three-wheelers and other kinds of vehicles, camp somewhere and go to certain assigned houses with whom they have ceremonial kinship relationship. The terms of address here are interestingly *mama-mammy* or mother's brother and mother's brother's wife, which clearly indicates the influence of the matrilineal Khasis on the plains of Assam.