Land, People and Politics

Contest over Tribal Land in Northeast India

Editors

Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora

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Tribal Land Alienation in the Northeast: An Introduction

Walter Fernandes
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Land is the centre of most conflicts in Northeast India because of its importance in the life of the people of the region, particularly its tribal communities. It is also the resource most under attack, in the tribal areas in particular. This book is an attempt to understand the processes that result in tribal land alienation and the consequent conflicts in the region.

In the opening chapter A. K. Nongkynrih gives a bird's eye view of the tribal areas of the Northeast and of the processes of privatisation that also result in land alienation. The relatively high status of tribal women depends on the community property resources (CPRs). So, Patricia Mukhim discusses the impact of privatisation and land alienation on Khasi women. Balsa Sangma gives a brief outline of the process among the Garo of Meghalaya. Legal ambiguity is basic to many conflicts around land not only between individuals but also between states. Dolly Kikon studies the Nagaland-Assam border conflict which symbolises the ambiguity as well as the imposition of a modern system on the tradition without any effort to integrate the two.

Such legal ambiguity is visible also in Manipur. U. A. Shimray studies the effort of the state to change the land laws in order to make alienation of tribal land to non-tribals possible. The law has already been

changed in Tripura in order to facilitate the alienation of tribal land to resettle the immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan and the present day Bangladesh. Basic to the legal changes is individual ownership which alone is recognised by the colonial land laws that continue to be in force in post-colonial India. These laws facilitate encroachment of the tribal CPRs by the immigrants, make its alienation to non-tribalals possible and also make it easy for the state to tranfer the CPRs for development projects. Manju Menon illustrates this contradiction by looking at the proposed mega-dams in Arunachal Yradesh. Finally, Uttam Bathari looks at the processes of alienation in general and in particular of monopolisation by the tribal elite among the Karbi of Assam.

The Process of Privatisation

In the very first paper Nonkynrih looks at the processes that result in all four types of tribal land alienation viz. transfer to non-tribals, encroachment by the immigrants, acquisition for development projects without recognising community rights, and monopolisation by the tribal elite. The legal changes that began in the colonial age that do not recognise the difference between the tribal tradition and the formal law are basic to all forms of alienation.

The tribal communities differ in their ethnic origin, culture, languages and customs. That diversity is reflected also in their customary laws and land management systems. Some traditions like those of the Angami of Nagaland (D'Souza 2001: 41-43) and the Dimasa of Assam (Bordoloi 1986) combined individual with community ownership while others like the Aka of Arunachal Pradesh lacked the very concept of individual ownership (Ferbabdes abd Pereira 2005: 19). Amid this diversity, common to all the tribes is the centrality of the community on which was based the customary laws that governed even individual ownership. Its owner could transfer the land only to specific persons determined by this law. A system based on a written document and a land classification that is different from theirs was imposed on their tradition based on the word of mouth and recognition by the community. No effort was made to integrate these two systems.

The contradiction that the imposition of the individual-based land laws causes is basic to land alienation. Privatisation is its first result. From it follows land alienation both to outsiders and within the commu-

nity. Most authors discuss the central role of privatisation in the process of alienation. Deb Barma shows how the Tripura Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act 1960 (TLR&LR) recognised only individually owned registered land. Most tribal land being community owned could not be registered. Those few who owned individual land were illiterate and did not register it. Only a small tribal elite got its benefits and the rest lost out. As a result, by the late 1960s more than 60 percent of tribal land was alienated to the immigrants and their communities were impoverished (Bhaumik 2003: 84).

Non-recognition of community land is another mode of alienating tribal land. It facilitates encroachment of their land by the immigrants and allows the state to use their land for development projects without compensation or rehabilitation. Nongkynrih refers to its impact in Assam. Deb Barma shows how because of the recognition of individual ownership only 2,341 tribal and Dalit families were recognised as displaced by the Dumbur dam in Tripura in the 1970s and the remaining 6,000 to 7,000 families were ignored. Menon studies the impact of this system on the families to be displaced by the proposed hydro-electrical projects (HEP) in Arunachal Pradesh. The project underestimated the number of the families to be displaced. When they are counted among the displaced, the CPRs even of these families are ignored for compensation and rehabilitation. For example, the Lower Subansiri dam counts only 38 families from two villages and ignores 12 other villages that will be submerged by it. These two villages will lose more than 900 hectares of land but the state does not recognise their jhum (shifting) cultivation land. So the "land for land" rehabilitation scheme involves giving only one hectare of land to each displaced family.

Land Alienation and Conflicts

The failure to integrate these two systems leaves much ambiguity behind. That often results in conflicts. Kikon studies one such instance in the form of the Nagaland-Assam border conflict that has not been solved 45 years after Nagaland was formed. The borders have either not been marked properly or the landmarks have disappeared. The people inhabiting these areas have interacted with each other for over a century and know what belongs to whom. But their traditional knowledge is not recognised and the formal alternative is not available. The conflict has

therefore been allowed to linger for nearly five decades.

Conflicts arise also from the effort to change the law in order to facilitate tribal land alienation. Within this perspective Shimray looks at the reasons behind the proposal to extend the Manipur Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act 1960 (MLR&LR) to the hill areas of the state. The desirability of a single law is given as the official reason. In reality the changes are meant to facilitate transfer of (tribal) land in the hill areas to the (predominantly non-tribal) inhabitants of the Imphal Valley. Land was an important issue in the Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s (Haokip 2008) and a contributing factor in the Meitei-Naga conflict of 2001 (Maring 2008). As Deb Barma states, the desirability of a direct link between the cultivator and the state was the official explanation for the TLR&LR. In practice it was used to transfer tribal land to the immigrants.

Other conflicts result from land alienation. For example, in Tripura alienation of tribal land against their will to the Dumbur dam after loss of more than 60 percent of their land to the immigrants was the last straw. The conflict began in Tripura in the 1970s immediately after the dam submerged their land and is continuing till today (Bhaumik 2003: 85). The 2003 Karbi-Kuki conflict in Karbi Anglong for an autonomous regional council was around the tribal identity linked to land and territory (Damzen 2008: 58-60). Also the conflicts in the Boro area of Assam in the 1990s were around a territory and an effort to create a majority in villages where the tribe was in a minority (Bhaumik 2005a: 150-155). As Kikon says, the disputed area on the Assam-Nagaland border is mineral and oil rich land. Its economic value seems to perpetuate the border conflict.

Class and Gender Implications

Land alienation also has class and gender implications. Studies show that the community ethos both in the ownership of the CPRs and the legitimacy provided by the community to individual owners was the foundation of their equitable tribal societies. They did have a hierarchy with the chief being supreme and the members of the village council being the decision-makers in all their affairs. Amid this hierarchy their political bodies such as the village council also ensured that the resources were distributed equitably according to the need of every family and not

controlled by individual greed. For example, in most jhum cultivation societies, the village council made up of men alone decided which area would be cultivated in a given year and the day before which cultivation would not begin. The village council also decided the extent of land that each family would get according to the number of mouths to feed and which family with excess labour would assist which family with a shortage of adult workers. After it, the man of the house chose the plot that his family would cultivate that year and performed the religious rites marking the beginning of cultivation. At that stage the woman of the house took charge of production and divided work between men and women. As a result, the division of labour was more equitable than in caste societies (Fernandes 1994: 136-137).

That did not make women equal to men. All their societies, including the matrilineal ones, were patriarchal but they kept a clear division between the family and social spheres. The woman was in charge of the family and the man looked after the social sphere. That conferred on women a higher social status than non-tribal societies did, without making them equal to men. That status depended on the CPRs. Men were in charge of the resource but women looked after production and the family economy. Thus as long as the CPRs were their sustenance division of labour was more gender-friendly than in settled agriculture and women had some decision-making power in resource management though ownership remained with men (Menon 1995: 100-101).

Both equity and the relatively high status suffer with privatisation i.e. with the changeover from community to individual ownership. Nongkynrih and Bathari deal with the equity issue and Mukhim discusses the gender implications of privatisation. As all of them state, land alienation is not merely to outsiders but also within the community. Among the Dimasa of Assam, for example, men from the elite are demanding individual pattas and are transferring community land in their own name (Barbora 2002). As Bathari shows, the process of privatisation begins with state bodies like the Coffee and Tea Board offering loans and subsidies to individuals alone. Such individual patta holders are invariably men whom the state bodies and financial institutions treat as heads of families even in matrilineal societies like the Garo. Men from the tribal elite make use of these inputs to monopolise community land by depriving other members of the tribe of their sustenance. For example in West

Garo Hills where much land was privatised in the 1980s for rubber plantation, more than 30 percent of the respondents were landless two decades later (Fernandes and Bharali 2002: 20-22).

Traditional tribal systems are modified or misused for this purpose. As Nongkynrih and Mukhim show, many members of the village durbar (council) make use of their position to transfer community land to their own name. That weakens equity and the further erodes the little power that women had in their societies. Today such monopolisation within the tribe seems to have become a bigger threat to equity and women's status than alienation to outsiders. The contradiction that the imposition of a dominant formal system on their tradition creates supports the elite that want to monopolise the resources. The state too supports this process. For example, as Deb Barma shows, the TLR&LR in Tripura has impoverished the tribal masses but their elite have got its benefits.

Facts, fictions and the foundation of land-use systems in Northeast India

An oft-repeated theme in the story of land alienation of the indigenous people of Northeast India is that of the point of contact with alien systems. Any narrative on belonging usually begins with a reference to the moment of colonial contact (Guha 1977: 34-37). In Northeast India, colonial contact invariably dovetails with the establishment of the plantation complex. Despite obvious problems of extrapolating from an event that initially was limited to the eastern side of the Brahmaputra valley, this point-of-contact has affected historiography of a much wider region that is referred to as Northeast India today. Hence, the land laws in princely protectorates like Tripura would differ from those that were applied in areas where tea plantations and other extractive industries were being explored. However, with the consolidation of republican law in India, widely dissimilar laws were incorporated into a repertoire of techniques of governance. As a result, there has been a tendency to treat quantifiable land measuring tools and transactions as the standard on which issues related to land are to be studied. There is an implicit trust of the verifiability of transactions around land that refer back to revenue systems managed and controlled by the state. Transactions that are communitarian and uncodified, one the other hand, are seen as suspect by both social scientists and researchers. Yet, it is the idea of codification

of community land and the notion of communitarian ownership that forms the first order of contradiction in the foundation of different land use systems in the region.

The point of contact therefore serves to delineate two strands of ideas along which cultural and economic histories are written in the Northeast. These ideas can roughly be traced along the lines of a 'people whose tradition is oral' and those whose history is written. The first set of ideas is important in reiterating a myth that certain people (who do not have written chronicles) are not fettered by the mundane transactions of more stratified societies. The second set of ideas have been instrumental in creating a widely recognised body of historical work that are critical of the impact of colonialism to social and political structures of settled communities in the region. In the interplay of these sets of ideas, is an interesting notion of what constitutes the politics of identity in contemporary times. Researchers are divided about what this means, especially in terms of securing communitarian rights over land and resources. Tribal land use is often reduced to shifting cultivation in such scholarship and the resulting narrative is one based on linear trajectories of progress. Claims of historical injustice by indigenous people are thereby negated as over-stated and ill served by empirical categories in social science.

"Frontiers, Landscapes and Peoples": Frameworks of Colonial Ethnography

It is almost the norm to begin a historical study of any of the tribal/ indigenous communities of the region with a roll call of secondary sources that purport to be the "myth of origin" of the particular community in question. In Assam, for example, usually it is some reference to nineteenth and twentieth century reconstruction of the chronicles of the Ahom period in eastern Assam. In the modern reconstruction, the chronicles (bu'ranji) appear as the substitute for the truth, as though the historian by some twist in time is transported back to the day and age of the Ahom kings. Somehow, the tribes appear as extras in a grand production with the usual odd characters that shine briefly before disappearing again. Another way to begin would start with the physiognomy of the people in question, which are then added to a liberal dose of possibilities from reconstructed Vedic texts. What is common to all of them is this (almost)

naïve belief in secondary sources and their urge to rush headlong into finding a location and anthropological type for the subjects in question. Granted, that the lack of written sources play a huge in role in the manner in which they are defined. For scholars, this always remains a barrier in constructing a history of a people. The reference to Grierson (1909), a functionary of the colonial government and the director of the Linguistic Survey of India in the late nineteenth century, are quite significant. In a sense, it is difficult to circumvent colonial ethnography while working on any of the indigenous groups in Northeast India. However, the question bears repeating: just how useful are these sources in understanding the dynamics of the tribal question? Are they, in any way, so irrefutable that they must be reproduced in every subsequent text on any tribe/ indigenous population in the region? Obviously, colonial documents are good place to start for anyone who wants to construct a historiography of the Tiwa, Karbi or any of the other major/ minor indigenous groups in Northeast India. They tell a part of the story that can be used to build any historical edifice. In that case, what are the presuppositions and contingencies upon which the colonial ethnographic project came to be constructed? Some of the answers are captured in Pemberton's report to government in 1835:

"...(In the following report on) the eastern frontier of the British territories, it is proposed: ...In the first place to give a general description of the great chain of mountains...Secondly, to describe the nature and passes and countries by which the great mountain chain has been penetrated..."(Pemberton 2005:1)

The reference to frontier is quite obvious in this historical context. The nineteenth century was in fact the era of expansion of capital to hitherto untrammelled landscapes such as Northeast India. This "discovery" precipitated a move towards a fundamentally different type of economy, where the movement of populations became a condition for growth and colonisation. The process of creating "frontiers" became a condition peculiar to the type of economy introduced. Pemberton was not directing his report to a prospective "pleasure traveller", but to policy makers keen on knowing the landscape they were entering. More importantly, these were policy makers who saw the region as political frontier on the geographical northeast of their territories. This geographical location, would not only place the region in a hierarchical relationship

with the metropolitan centres, but also remain rooted as a frontier, in the nationalist challenges that came later. The politics of a descriptive generalisation of the political geography had one inherent problem. It was hardly the "uninhabited wasteland" that the descriptions made them out be. The presence of groups of people, locked in a political and economic relationship with one another, was underplayed in the initial colonial reports of the period. Hence, a complicated process of mapping the region within notions of centre-periphery was being undertaken. With it, there was visible move towards what Rumley and Minghi call the "consideration of border landscapes as a set of cultural, economic and political interactions and processes occurring in space" (Rumley and Minghi, 1991). Those inhabiting regions that were not immediately earmarked for expansion of capital and colonial administration were clearly subjected to a position of marginality precisely because they constituted a new periphery. It was only with the need to engage with policy making that Pemberton's exotic landscape became "populated" with people.

Not many years after Pemberton's geographical descriptions, the economy of the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley underwent changes where the colonial administration began an elaborate process of categorising the different regions, the people who lived there and their social and economic relations. In his still popular "report", Moffatt-Mills began the intellectually challenging work of mapping the region, along with its people. His work can be seen as the natural corollary to what Pemberton had done a decade or two earlier. Moffatt-Mills had the challenging task of rationalising the complex relations between the hills and plains, forest-dwellers, traders, agriculturists and others, and securing this knowledge to governance and administration. It was imperative, for example, to have an adequate knowledge of the complex relations surrounding the haats (local marts) for the purpose of taxation and at times for retribution. The punitive expeditions against the Bhutiyas, Khasis and Nagas were all related to the need to secure land, by force as well as by law. This project is a fascinating dossier of manipulation of territory and people that is centrally linked to administering a frontier. Politics of the times dictated not only the fixing of people to territory, but also to "reopening" roads and trade routes (Moffatt-Mills, 1984). In doing so, a particular intellectual space was created. A certain form of reading the histories of the indigenous peoples came to be accepted as the norm. The form and content of

this reading followed a strict regimentation where the historical and anthropological location of the subject was made conditional to the linear passage of time and social formation. Hence, Gait's subsequent rendition of the history of Assam, now accepted as the standard text for history students, mixed an eclectic selection of Persian and Ahom texts and presented to the readers a view of history that was reassuring (Gait 1967). This reassurance, however, should be read as a product of its time. The weight of textual representations and archaeology meant that only selected formations appeared as actors in the ensemble of historiography. Thus, kings, texts and conquests formed the basis of recognition for the indigenous people. It is not surprising that Gait's book, in its published (and prescribed) form, appears with an introduction that first refers back to an older, idealistic notion of ethnography, wildly plotting the possible places of origin of the different peoples of the region. Having done that, the 'Introduction' meanders into a realm of myth and memory- the latter presented in medieval Persian texts. Hills and plains become mere textual markers and their inhabitants, the subjects of different disciplines. Those who were part of a semi-feudal state formation, with kings/ chiefs, and a cosmology that allowed social hierarchy, such as the Koch, Dimasa and Ahom are accorded a 'history', an identity that freezes them in time and politics.

Identity, Politics and Economic Transformations: Case for a Tribal Mode of Production?

It is in this intellectual moment that the tribal populations appear, without kings, texts and state-formations, for historians to speculate on what they might be doing in the new economy. Incidentally, this is also the moment when a nationalist critique of colonial hegemony is launched in the sub-continent. While the struggles of peasants and workers, the problems of caste and race occupy a central position in the polemics, the tribal question remains a concern for the frontier. In their designated frontier, the indigenous tribes seem out of sorts with the new economic and political milieu. They continue to raid, loot and demand reparations from the new order. For some, they become the classical noble savages while for others they become irritants to stability, law and order. A common thread in these arguments for and against the indigenous peoples was their supposed isolation and barbarity. Both views emanated from a

romantic notion of what the "isolated" peoples were supposed to represent- i.e. either wronged/ misunderstood subjects, or recalcitrant people not quite used to the ways of the modern world. According to Dirks, this process symbolises the colonial state engaging in "...policing and proselytising...justified by the identification of barbarity and normalised by the professionalisation of anthropology" (Dirks 2001: 21). What it also does is to divest any notion of agency from the subject, in this case the indigenous tribal. This condition is recounted in almost all subsequent attempts at unravelling a 'history' of any given tribe in Northeast India.

There is no doubt that pre-colonial modes of production were altered. The prime example in this context was the establishment of the plantation complex. Having said that, even the most detailed study of the effects of the plantation complex on the political economy of the region failed to locate the linkages between terrain, deprivation and identity formation. The obvious concerns of this particular reading of colonial history are that of documenting the reaction of subjects to the changes brought about in the economy. Yet, subjects appear as peasants and workers, categories that are well founded within the discourse but lacking the language to incorporate other forms of mobilisation. The economic transformations did have a profound impact on the way society viewed neighbours. Added to this, were new regulations that marked the landscape, creating barriers and impediments in the uninterrupted contiguity between hills and valleys. In these interruptions, the disruption of contiguities (between hills and valleys) also created a body of literature on the isolation of the hills and relative prosperity in the valley. Kar explains this predilection in colonial (and subsequently nationalist challenges to) historiography in the desire to place the region, especially the valleys and their diverse populations, within the colony, not as if it were "a latecomer to, but one of the earliest members of the Indian nation" (Kar 2004).

A significant section of the history of modern Northeast India is devoted to the study of this phenomenon. Historians have adequately addressed the formation of new classes and the dismantling of the pre-colonial structures in Assam. The peasant rebellions are documented in great detail, as are the activities of an emerging national bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie. On the surface, it would seem that this historiography

adequately addresses issues of economic and cultural hegemony of the colonial state, as well as the means adopted by those who resist. Even so, there is little that explains the impact of these changes in the consolidation of a people, especially the tribes. While Guha recounts the impact of inner-line regulations on the agricultural practices of frontier tribes (Guha 1991), as Roy recalls the impact of the bureaucratisation of forests in the North Bank of the Brahmaputra (Roy 1995: 20-34), there is very little sense that one gets of shared/ contested histories of the contests over resources. Some nagging questions remain unanswered. How did the redrawing of boundaries and the incorporation into a new economy affect the tribes of region? Were they to share the same fate as the dispossessed indentured workers from the central hills of the Indian sub-continent? Were they going to be placed in an increasingly hierarchical relationship with those who controlled the economy? Indeed, it would seem almost axiomatic within this scheme to see the "end" of traditional systems and the "emergence" of new classes within the colonial mode of production. Saikia claims, "...Within the lifetime of a single generation, old ruling classes, including vassal chiefs of Beltola, Rani, Dimoria, Gobha etc. ceased to exist...(their world) vanished without a trace" (Saikia 2000:40).

The Truth (Still) Lies Out There!

Perhaps much of what has been expressed in the preceding section is true. There can be little doubt that with changes in the mode of production, social and economic relations were altered. Identities, perhaps, became inscribed in stone for colonial administrators. Just as the Assamese was categorised as "indolent" and "lazy", the tribes were categorised as "wild" and "savage". There is a remarkable sense of achievement in such categorisation- a sense that things are in place and policies will move along. In this moment of achievement, the history of indigenous tribes of the region celebrated more than just the triumph of reason. It also accepted colonial ethnography, thereby ignoring the finer modes of looking at the past. While colonial anthropology and history, displayed a remarkable symbiosis, so too did the alternative discourses. The historiography of subaltern resistance and class formation in the region still has not answered why impoverishment has not created lines of vertical solidarity among classes and ethnic groups. If anything, the tribal question in seems to be demanding another chance. It is true that in the space of a generation, traditional institutions and structures disappeared. Worlds

ceased to exist. Yet, they are continuously being re-created. If the vassals of Gobha went quietly into the night in the nineteenth century, they reappear with great pomp and vigour in the personage of the Tiwa kings in the present day. To such assertions of agency, history has either tepid objections, or uncritical acceptance. There is the tendency to either disown such displays of identity by vociferously citing the lack of historical evidence to such claims, or to play into the game by "discovering" kings and "texts-that-are-irretrievable."

The nation (and society) that emerges out of the colonial process, whether that of the coloniser or the colonised, is no simplistic central totality. The process of cultural exchange are too varied and hybrid to allow for any simple dualities such as the ones that characterise the paucity of anthropological and historical treatment of the tribal question. Yet it is also true that the assertion of identity and selfhood, one of the most important aspects to postcoloniality, has often been framed within the ideology and activity of the nation. When dealing with the assertion of tribal identity, one gets the distinct feeling that the post-colonial nation failed to include the feelings of grievance of those in its cultural, economic and geographical margins. Balibar proclaims "...every 'people', which is a product of a national process of ethnicisation, is forced today to find its own means of going beyond exclusivism and identitarian ideology in the world of trans-national communications and global relations of force" (Balibar 1991:105). History has simplified the nationalisation process in Northeast India. While it does sound a trifle unkind and sociologically reckless, there is a polemical point to be made. The tribal question has rather been the anti-thesis of a nation. It is coded and categorised as a "real" anthropological entity, based nevertheless on myths and markets. The truth remains that the tribal question finds only a marginal space in the project of nationalising knowledge. It disallows, even discourages the processes of "going beyond" exclusivism by its silence. The transformation of the region into a colonial "frontier" remains the key to understanding communities that conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a super terrestrial order of power and yet, differed from the (innovative) imagined national communities (Anderson 1991).

It is obvious that the transformation of the region into a frontier meant several things for its denizens. In the paragraphs above, one has

tried to tell part of the story- a chronological account of sorts- to create the context within which much of the historiography of the indigenous peoples of the region seems trapped in. It would seem like the progression from "descriptions" of the landscape, to the "discovery" of people and finally to the "theorising" of their linguistic and historical "roots", follow a seamless progression. However, what is missing from this account is another view of frontiers. Frontiers, as processes, have four crucial dimensions. First, they are instruments of state policy, where governments seek to protect interests, ideas and wealth for a particular purpose. Second, the policies and practices of governments are constrained by the degree of de facto control, which they have over the state frontier. Third, frontiers are markers of identity, in the twentieth century usually national identity, although political identities may be larger or smaller than the nation state. They (frontiers) are in this sense part of political beliefs and myths of the unity of people and sometimes about the 'natural' unity of a territory. Fourth, frontier is also a term of discourse as one has tried to show earlier. In scholarly exegeses, it has different meanings depending on the approaches adopted. Against such a backdrop, as serious a question as that confronted by the indigenous tribes is reflected only as a sterile product of the unhappy association between history and a particular mode of anthropology. The need to get beyond the debilitating dichotomies of myth versus history, oral versus written, is most urgent in this case.

The conventional criteria of historical writing- sequence and causality- are elements of an interpretation of the past, which also embraces various forms of memory. One also wishes to add that in doing so, one has to also include a radical critique of the denial of difference to the history of tribal peoples in Northeast India. Thus far, anthropologists of different persuasions seem keen only to discover history, which end up constructing a partial history of peoples and of the relationship between history and anthropology. Likewise, historians appropriate particular versions of cultural anthropology that often ignores a much longer tradition and argument that often remain subterranean. One has to reach beyond such descriptions, to analyse other means of recording and remembering history. Specifically, this would include a reconceptualisation of anthropological knowledge and historiography of the "tribal question", to include the importance of performed and material culture. The former

would include the parades, rituals, festivals and socio-political events that have been instrumental in re-creating iconic constructions among the tribal/ indigenous people of the region today. Why, for example, does Me-dam-me-phi suddenly reappear as the marker of Ahom identity in eastern Assam today? Or, for that matter, why is there a renewed interest in reclaiming a Tiwa sense of identity in the annual parade in Morigaon district? In terms of material culture, there is the need to ascertain the centrality of monuments, objects, photographs and such-like, in the reassertion of tribal identity. For instance, why do the ruins of Maibong and Dimapur, infuse a sense of pride and identity to the Dimasa people of Assam? Explaining the persistent demands for creating sculptures and busts of icons among the Dimasa and Karbi, Singha, states that "... (Our) haste to ally with Indian history has meant that we (still) seek to reflect our society in terms that are palatable to them (Indians). The demands (of the tribal people) remind us of our commitment to recognise our "other", more Southeast Asian kinship".[1]

The polemics discussed above are not to take away anything from the great advances in the historical sciences in the region. Nor is there any intention of trivialising the methods of social anthropology or history. Yet, when faced with the frustrating silence on the tribal question in Northeast India, one has to constantly reiterate to historiographers that writing history has never been a neutral activity. So far, the "tribal question", seems to have been caricaturised into a dossier of "myths of origin". This is quite out of sorts with the rising chorus of peoples claiming "nationhood", "autonomy" and even "secession". The re-emergence of new kinds of colonial relationships in the unequal distribution of (global) wealth and the operations of capital, and the dispersal through migration and relocation has also added to the chorus. The re-conceptualisation of history (and folklore, anthropology, sociology etc.) in the region needs to be a genuine intellectual breakthrough, in order to reveal what "quiet history" does not say. That is: the "tribal question" in Northeast India is urging us to come up with a more precise vocabulary to tell the story of peoples without written chronicles that date back to antiquity. It is through a complex retelling of the story, as seen in the diverging contributions to this book, that one may be able to look for solutions to the persistence of conflicts that arise out of the issue of resources and identity in Northeast India.

[1] *Biren Singha, interview with Sanjay Barbora on December 12, 2004 (Diphu).*