Man and Society

A Journal of North-East Studies

VOLUME XXI ❖ SUMMER 2023

Indian Council of Social Science Research
North Eastern Regional Centre

Shillong, Meghalaya

Man and Society
A Journal of North-East Studies

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Subscription: Rs.300

Manuscript, editorial, correspondence and books for review should be sent to the Editor, ***Man and Society***, ICSSR-NERC, NEHU Campus, Shillong-793022, Meghalaya.

For information concerning the preparation of paper, see Style Sheet at www.icssrnerc.org

ICSSR-NERC acknowledges financial support from ICSSR, New Delhi.

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Editorial

It is indeed a pleasure to bring out the twenty first volume of 'Man and Society: A Journal of North-East Studies'. Theories and Practices in social science grow through 'contestation'. Contestation happens through development of critical thinking. Much of the critical thinking gets shaped through quality research and its dissemination. ICSSR-NERC, Shillong for almost half a century, has been in the forefront of promoting quality research in social sciences and humanities in the North Eastern Region. It has also been disseminating relevant critical thinking and policy suggestions by publishing selected articles in its Journal. In continuation of this tradition and in response to the imperative of bringing research closer to development policy, this volume includes six articles contributed by active researchers from the region.

Arambam Noni Meetei's article attempts to understand how the over simplification of politics in colonial frontiers led to problems in postcolonial times as the frontiers seem to have caught in a complex web of geography and demography. Binayak Dutta in his paper argues that partition narratives and experiences are critical to understand the historical experiences of the community in contemporary times in the Khasi-Jaintia lands of Meghalaya. Nabaprasad Nath and Papori Dewri in their article make an attempt to find out the similarities between the home economy of the Tiwa Tribes and the Gandhian philosophy of self-sufficiency and put its contextual relevance with the Atmanirbhar Abhiyan advocated by Prime Minister Modi. Batskhem Myrboh's article makes a critical analysis of the role of Meghalaya State Information Commission (MSIC) in effective implementation of RTI Act 2005. Neena Kishor in her paper explains the trauma of the Naga people and their land, as a social phenomenon, by examining the trauma of the turbulent past caused by the military reign and the current Naga armed movement. Finally, Bhattacharjee, Das Gupta and Debbarma in their article make an interesting examination of the 'festival tourism' in Meghalaya from the angle of sustainability.

I am sure all these six articles make stimulating reading and are of use to development practitioners. I also take this opportunity to thank our Delhi office for their financial support in bringing out this volume. My appreciation goes to our copy editor Ms. K.I. Lyngdoh and the office staff Mr. Romauldo M. Pasi and Mr. Temberly R. Kharbani for meticulously examining and processing of these articles at different stages. I also express my appreciation to 'Eastern Panorama Offset' for undertaking the printing job of this Issue at a short notice.

22nd September 2024. Bhagirathi Panda

The Making of a Borderland: Rethinking Politics and Society in India's Northeastern Region

Arambam Noni Meetei*

Abstract

The concept of borderland, in most instances, is constituted externally. Although, all borders, do not necessarily transpire into difficult frontier(s). Physical location in a distinct geographical space ought not to be a precondition to becoming an objectified spatial region. Borderlands have a tendency of becoming politically susceptible sites; of select administrative designs and policies. The paper seeks to revisit how the colonially construed borderlands continue to unfold in complex forms in postcolonial identity politics. The paper attempts to understand how the oversimplification of politics in colonial frontiers led to problems in postcolonial times as the frontiers seem to have been caught in a complex web of geography and demography. The contemporary politics in India's Northeast borderlands exemplify such a difficult terrain of politics. The colonial administration in India's Northeast region was reminiscent of such a framework. Physical location in a distinct geographical space ought not to be a precondition to becoming an objectified spatial region. Borders are often altered into politically susceptible sites – of select administrative designs and policies. From a definitional perspective, a border denotes a physical identity of a geography, while borderlands are constituted as an objectified site where the possibility of select bio-political deliberation is either high or enacted upon.

Keywords: Colonialism, Borderlands, Administration, Geopolitics, Frontiers

Introduction

The identity of borderlands is complex largely for the reason that it is constituted externally. All borders as frontiers in political perception is a source of policy perception and administration thereby resulting in the

* The author is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, D.M. University, Manipur.

production of distinct govern mentality. The colonial administration in India's Northeast region was reminiscent of such a framework. Physical location in a distinct geographical space ought not to be a precondition to becoming an objectified spatial region. Borders are often altered into politically susceptible sites – of select administrative designs and policies. From a definitional perspective, a border denotes a physical identity of a geography. Borderlands are constituted as an objectified site where the possibility of select *bio-political* deliberations is either high or actually gets enacted upon. The deliberations often came as a resultant cohort of the British colonialism and its dominant mentality. Therefore, the colonial state making process in South Asia undermined the national consciousness as it harped on a state–nation sequencing as its programmes generally induced conditions of subjectivity. Moreover, when the postcolonial nationalizing identities and edifices are built upon the remnants of the colonial state apparatuses which was originally devoid of belongingness ran antithetical to conditions of primordial and modern national identity formation.

Given the complex unfolding of national identity in the post-colonial worlds, the paper attempts to understand how there exists a generalist undermining of several political aspirations located in specified geographies. The denial leads to the production of ghettoization of epistemes and politics. A re–narration of the dominant state–nation making programmes in select geographical spaces which are habitually termed as *borderlands* in the parlance of colonial cartography and retention of the same in the post–colonial national renderings show how diametrically contesting historical and political churnings play its detrimental part in shaping up the troubled borderlands in the contemporary times.

Regionality and the making of Borderlands

The offensive of ambitious 'nation–state' making programmes give way to new regionalities. Assertive 'proto-national' geo-bodies incessantly come into conflict with the idioms and ambitions of the post–colonial nationalising states. The history of borderlands was not only physically distant to mainstream nationalism, but also the terms of engagement were predominantly undemocratic. Benedict Anderson's proposition of modern

print capital induced *imagined community* finds its distractors in hitherto amnesic autonomous territorially specified political spaces. Official nationalism, which was built upon the remnants of colonial census, maps, and museums, began to provide the grammar of (dominant) nationalism. The imaginations of the dominion were to be actualised through quantifications and demarcation of political spaces. According to Anderson, nation's borders are seen as 'definite and limited,' (Anderson 2016, 101), while Nozick argues that such processes of 'acquisition and transfer,' (Nozick 1974, 151-152) of the political in an unsolicited manner were to prove unjust implicating long-term distress in the enforced discourses of any definiteness.

Georgio Agamben has argued that such discourses and functional aspects of ideologies tend to be premised on a generalization of an exception (Agamben 2005, 2) while leaving ample scope for its borders to be finite yet simultaneously making it elastic and permeable at the same time. Agamben's main concern is to explain how (judicial) order is suspended on the pretext of an existing threat, which Carl Schmitt calls a monopoly to decide the usage of exception on the pretext of an existential threat to a (nation) state's integrity (Schmitt 2005, 2). The probability of integrationist state systems involving a strategic and aggressive ghettoization of regionalities is high. Regionalising cartography and ethnicity was evidential not only in the colonial engagement of borderlands but also thereafter as seen in the wake of geopolitical scrambles in borderlands. Often, legal apparatuses are found oscillating between the ordinary and exception as the entry and exit into the borderlands have been structured only to suit the monopolistic ambitions of the paramount. It is accompanied by the hegemonic structures that produce a situation of Foucauldian 'biopolitical significance' of regionalities.

History of Colonial Cartography and the making of Frontiers

The term Northeast India was originally coined by the British colonial cartographers in an apparent identity of a directional usage. The term was introduced in the 1830s when Pemberton Boilieu, a British surveyor, used the term 'East' for directional purposes to refer to the present Northeastern region (NER) of India. The term was subsequently employed in the writings of Alexander Mackenzie. The construction of NER as an objectified periphery

in colonial administration and continued nationalists' dispensations re–affirm the site of a preoccupied and prejudiced regionalization. The ramification of a continued extraneous imposition is the frontierization of people and territories. Another aspect of the ramification is the internalization of a solidarity due to the prolonged experience of a similar subjectivity–a sense of regionalised *geo-body*. Internally circulated sense of regional solidarity provides a sense of broad community while it also continuously struggles to reconcile with specified sensibilities within – of being an ethnicity, tribe, kingdom, *etc*. Dissecting the notion of *geo-body,* Thongchai Winichakul argues that the (national) identities are discursively constituted as a *geo–body* while elevating itself into a collective polity based on its experiential territoriality. According to Thongchai, the conception of geographies through modern mapping produced political imaginations, territorialities, and a sense of *geo-body*. His work comes as a response to Anderson's conception of the nation as an *Imagined Community* by emphasising how maps provide a scientific temperament to national articulation and its authoritative growth.

Thongchai further argues how the indigenous Thai conception of the *national* was redefined and diminished by modern (colonial) cartography. Thongchai further contends that nation as a *geo-body* is discursively constituted because an idea of 'we-self' (of Thainess) emerged in response to the European colonization and the possible onslaught of hostile neighbouring powers. Thongchai argues that 'the creation of otherness, the enemy in particular, is necessary to justify the existing political and social against rivals from without as well as from within' (Winichakul 1994, 167). A fundamental emphasis is given to the discursive nature of national construction, which is permeable. The emergence of modern Thailand, signified by a specified sense of territory, constituted a Thai *geo-body*. The Thai geo-body of a nation is credited to have been shaped by modern day cartography. Pre-nineteenth century *Siam* was territorially fluid in the absence of a stringent delineation of boundaries. Winichakul views that the advent of Europeans brought in new tools and techniques of mapping, thereby producing frequent contestations between the traditional concept of boundaries and *de facto* maneuvering of the colonial power.

Surveys, mappings, censuses, and demarcations were a site of enormous tussles between the traditional idea of territoriality and the modern process of affirming fixing territoriality. For instance, unwavering mediation between the traditional Siamese authority and modern European cartographic intervention played a major role in the emergence of *Siamese* geo–body. The subsequent rise of a *geo-body* through new mapping technologies started to segment the overlapping spaces of the governed and 'ungoverned.' Such a process of mapping and codification of the overlapping traditional space (s) gradually provided the sources and material requisites of a nation – a *geo-body* of modern Thai state. In other words, the history of modern cartography of Thai nationhood exemplified how historically overlapping spaces and territorialities were integrated and aligned through a new (modern) process of mapping. For Winichakul, advancement in cartography proved to be an efficient process in resolving the permeability of a nation's fluid borderlands. Giving another interpretation of spatially and politically secluded spaces, James Scott postulates the concept of *Zomia* as a frontier cultural community that historically exhibited tendencies to escape the onslaught of modern state making processes. Scott's postulation of *Zomia* helps in understanding the nature of non-surplus societies that did not require a state and its complex relationship with the relatively better off self-sustained surplus having societies. The surplus societies, largely in low lying fertile agrarian societies, were more into the process of state formation.

Another site of political evolution that Scott's postulation misses out on is that the 'kingdoms' and 'village republics' were apparently aspiring to transform themselves to become a modern state(s) not exclusively on the edifices of colonial cartography but based on their cultural and political experiences. Though the colonial cartographers found the then existing territorialities vacillating, there were precedents of covenants on boundary protection, such as the Moirang Treaty and Sanjenthong Treaty. On the fluctuating nature of territoriality, according to colonial cartographers like Captain R.B. Pemberton (Report), 1835,

> the territories (of Manipur) have fluctuated at various times with the fortunes of their princes, frequently extending for three or four-days' journey east beyond the Ningthee or Khyendwen river, and west to the plains of Chachar (Pemberton 1834, 20).

Though the outreach of ancient kingdoms were dependent on the *fortunes* of the kings, the idea of a shared sedentary political life (Sattin 2022, 3) was constantly evolving due to the daily administrative interfaces, tributary taxations, and military exchanges. The societies with established primordial loyalties and shared cultural sensibilities tend to reclaim these sources to consolidate its nation – state making process to conflate with that of the modern states. The majority of the present–day nationality and identity movements (including those in the uplands) are directed towards having a state of its own. The contemporary aspirations and post-colonial democratic processes in the form of state formation, as witnessed in the Asiatic uplands, reflect such a story of state–making, not state escaping as propagated by James Scott. The continued preservation of age–old rituals, oral and folk cultures, and linguistic and racial lineages, even between highlanders and low landers, often provides ground for alliances. Prior to the arrival of modern colonial cartography, settled agrarian economy, mundane economic interactions and consolidation of clans or *tribes* paved the way to a sense of kinship or village *republics*, and proto state(s).

Shifting ethnicities and Negotiations

As an offshoot of the process, state formation in the lowland valleys with established agrarian life was in an advanced stage. Not exactly in the way of Scott's *Zomia* – the state escaping people – the upland *Zomias* also began to espouse consciousness of their own political space, which later became the ground for the rise of a new political desire to amalgamate the hitherto warring (wandering) tribes which Anthony Sattin calls *Nomads*. As the uplanders and lowlanders were exposed to new apparatuses of modern colonial administration and cartography, newer sense of subjectivities emerged. As far as the lowlanders are concerned, state formation in low lying areas were rather archaic due to its interaction with the outside world and dynamic integration of clans, races, cultures, and ethnicities. Borderlands,

for its historical seclusion and distinctiveness, have a tendency of experiencing geography and demography in a most bizarre spectacle which is aptly termed by Ian Morris 'geography as destiny' while Auguste Comte prefers to term 'demography is destiny'. While ethnicities were in delicate negotiations with the emerging states formation till the middle of twentieth century, state formation in the present India's Northeast borderlands state was emergent much before the onset of colonialism.

The history of ethnoses and principalities re-aligning with each other is rather old and pre-colonial. The integration of the Moirang principality with the present Manipur state occurred during the reign of King Ningthoukhomba. In the following years, King Kiyamba further expanded the territorial outreach of Manipur by defeating the King of Khampat of Kabaw Valley (now in Myanmar) with assistance from one of his allies King Khekhomba. There was an incessant growth in the power of Manipur Kingdom as King Mungyamba crossed over the Ningthi River and conquered the Kingdom of Pong. King Khagemba, son of King Mungyamba, further consolidated the territoriality of Manipur by defeating the Kingdom of Khagi – which is presumably considered to be somewhere around the present Yunnan region of South China (Kabui 2014, 14 – 17). The antiquity of interaction and the struggle for territorial sustenance of Kingdoms produced a distinct process in the annals of consolidating Kingdoms states through the tributary system and conquest of new peoples and territories. Before the reign of Maharaja Gambhir Singh (1823-1834), the political and territoriality of Manipur was continuously evolving. During his reign, the northern boundary of Manipur was extended up to Thibomei (present Kohima), subduing several Angami villages.

Towards the middle of the Eighteenth Century, Manipur had witnessed an extended territorial control up to the Brahmaputra Valley, subsequently extending its complete control over South Cachar, Kabaw Valley and Chittagong Hill Tracts (Arrowsmith 1832). The Treaty of 1834, which involved the British Empire, also known as the Kabaw valley Convention, mandated that non–payment of compensation would lead to reverting Kabaw valley to Manipur. With the increased involvement of European mercantile

powers in the affairs of highland kingdoms, the colonial government began to devise modern mapping to secure its control. The colonial administrative practices in the regional politics of the South/East Asian borderlands reflected such a trajectory. The attempt to align the boundaries in colonial South/East Asia was evident when the British imperial cartographers attempted to demarcate the boundaries. The mapping of the southern frontiers of Manipur was more pressing for the Empire as it viewed traditional administrative boundaries as insufficiently demarcated. Captain Pemberton Report of 1835 intervened with such a perspective when he reportedly argued that,

> the confluence of the Chikoo with the Barak is a point politically important as it marks the union of boundary of no less than three states, those of Manipur, Cachar, and Tripura. From this point, the southern boundary of the Manipur territory is very irregular and ill-defined; unconquered tribes, of whose existence we have but recently acquainted (Pemberton 1834, 20-21).

The colonial cartographic struggle continued. The Colonel McCulloch Report of 1859 also attempted to settle the southern boundaries of Manipur. On the issues pertaining to the southern borders of Manipur, the Report of 1859 stated,

> East and South, the boundary is not well defined, and would much depend upon the extent to which the Manipur government might spread its influence amongst the hill tribes in those directions, and in the south by one drawn west from the source of Numasailung river, the fixed South East boundary, till its junction with the Tooyai river (McCulloch Report (Reprint) 1980, 1).

With the emergent need for cartographic representation of territorialities, the British India Government set up a boundary commission in 1881 under the aegis of Sir James Johnstone, the then political Agent of Manipur, mainly to demarcate the boundaries between Manipur and Kabaw Valley. Another boundary commission was set up in 1894 to define the boundaries of the southern borderlands, including the Chin Hills of Burma. The cartographic Commissions did not, however, entirely resolve the questions relating to

boundaries. Standardization of traditional boundaries through modern colonial cartography was easier said than done. Colonial cartography was gradually mediated through new treaties and covenants. With the improvisation of anti-colonial narration and appropriation of modern democratic institutions, a sense of new national consciousness evolved out of the colonial condition. The new consciousness appeared both as an act of critique and appropriation. The discernment of the hitherto politically and culturally autonomous precincts into securitized space was to enhance the mercantilist cartography, which in turn made the borderlands perennially precarious. The colonial and post – colonial essentialization of borders as *buffers* produced prejudicial regimentation of frontiers. The story of crafting a 'sub-continental' South Asian identity indicates an imbrication of such a rationale of majoritarian politics.

In other words, dominant nationalist maneuverings in the borderlands hitherto unknown as *buffer* produced ideologically conflicting sites. The state making programmes in the South Asian subcontinent were intolerant of the Left (sic. communist) leaning political formations. The presence of non–liberal political formations in the Southeast Asiatic borderlands of what one calls today Northeast India was viewed as politically fragile, 'non-dependable' (Noni 2018, 111) and ideologically perilous. The dominant nationalists' disbelief created an urgency to make unilateral claims over the politics and identities which had been nascently made to become frontiers. The Southeast and South Asian borderlands were witnessed to the different ideological currents; of geo-political tilts, unsettling Sino-Indian scramble and the 'Great Game East'. The tumultuous phase of transition from colonial to post-colonial and continued geopolitical cleft in the region can be explicated as a remnant of the inherent problems in the regionalised identity called Northeast India's borderlands. The lingering conflicts over the McMohan Line that were aimed at demarcating the boundaries between British – controlled territories on the British Indian side and Chinese controlled regions in the eastern Himalayan region continue to shape the region's political equations. Historically speaking, the Chinese were reportedly not prepared to accept the proposal of the British. The Chinese delegation reportedly argued,

> our country is at present in an enfeebled condition; our external relations are involved and difficult and our finances embarrassed. Nevertheless, Tibet is of paramount importance to both (Szechuan and Yunnan) and we must exert ourselves to the utmost during this conference (the Shimla Conference, 1913)' (Maxwell 1971, 47-48).

After a longer period of struggle to understand what constituted the actual NER, in the façade of a frontier, the concept acquired its post–colonial official acknowledgement in 1951 when the colonial Balipara Frontier Tract, Tirap Frontier, the Abor Hills district, the Mishmi Hills district and the Naga tribal areas were collectively renamed as Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). It was reconstituted under the NEFA (Administration) Regulation, 1954. Much later, the idea of North-East was again officially put into usage when the Parliament of India promulgated the North-East Council Act and the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organization) Act, 1971. The duel of locational determinism and resultant coercive pursuit of state creates geo-political compartments that resemble what Georgio Agamben calls 'camps' (Agamben 1998, 120). The relational dynamics between erstwhile princely Kingdom states and Excluded Areas, on the one hand, and the British India provinces, on the other hand, testifies the embedded political complexities and colonially imposed binaries.

As the integrationist regimentation assumed power, peripheries as securitized *buffers* began to be reduced to a condition of a 'bare life' – *zoes* – where *bios* (ibid) where the chances of compromising democratic standards are higher. In the words of Sanjib Baruah, there is little scope in the security discourse that the frames of India's policies towards Northeast for debating whether the routine use and display of military might be consistent with the ethos of a liberal democracy, or should it be the best way to pursue nation-building in a cultural borderland (Baruah 2007) called the Northeast India. Once colonially perceived to be peripheral, it continues to be treated as a fragile borderland in the post-colonial parlances. The story of such borderlands that seemingly had become *buffers* between dominant geo – political currents show a site of a difficult interface between

the superimposing state–nation making in sub-continental South-Asia and its consequent objectification of frontiers in the Western South-East Asian region.

The roots of identarian conflicts and geopolitical complexities in the contemporary Indo-Myanmar region can be, thus, traced back to its turbulent past. The unnerving political optics in the region has implicated normalization of extra–ordinary laws and surreal ethnocentric squabbling. One of the possible ways to decode the problems in the region might come from unmasking the fixation and construction as it can induce exceptionalities in 'a particular region, and not in the entire country,' which in the long run gets normalised due to the prerogatives driving by contestations. The Section 4 of the Armed Forces (Special Power) Act, (AFSPA) 1958 is a case in point. It reads, search and arrest without a warrant in case where the security forces believed that a person has or may be about to commit an offence or the destruction of homes and any other structure or dwelling if security forces are of the opinion that an attack has been made or may be made or that a structure may be used as a hideout; and the use of force, including killings, if the security forces are of the opinion that such force is necessary, including if persons are carrying items, such as farm tools, that are capable of being used as weapons.

Section 6 further empowers that no 'prosecution, suit or other legal proceedings' may be brought except with permission of the Central Government in relation to any act done under the authority of AFSPA. A colonial 'ordinance' of 1942 later rechristened as a proper law in the postcolonial era indicates to the troubled politics in India's Northeast borderlands. The regionalised borderlands are habitually converted into a site of non-reciprocal political relations which is marked by defiance to predispositions of state and identities. Nationalising narration of postcolonial states persuade select and regular interruption and negotiation of constitutionally guaranteed rights. The mandates of Article 34 of the Indian Constitution appear to have become operational only in the regions where the provisions of AFSPA have been imposed. Non – revocation of AFSPA and decades-old unresolved armed insurgency in NER reverberates

the predicaments of borderlands. According to Max Weber, 'legitimate use of physical force' is a condition that the non-feudal states did not have. There is a boisterous relationship between the mainland and the frontier is found in India's ethnically troubled Northeast borderlands where political economy is not only destabilizing but also remains largely illusive.

Imperiled Borderlands

The Northeast Region is reportedly home to more than 30 unlawful armed organisation with (sub) national worldviews. India's Northeast has been turbulent with insurrectionary politics and fragile geopolitical equations. The trans-national ethnic solidarities in the borderlands has proven to both a boon and bane. Usage of the concept of an aspiring western south Asian solidarity in the parlance of several movements from the Northeast India comes as an attempt to self-exteriorise from the sub–continental South Asian identity. The idea of western southeast Asia with a popular acronym called WESEA that has appeared in the cultural narrative narratives imply an existing reality of a distinctive geographical and cultural locational predilection. The Manipur–Anglo Treaty of 1762, the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826, the Pemberton line of 1834 and the Manipur State Constitution Act of 1947 were some significant moments that reasons the Weseatic tilt.

Explaining the concept of geo-body Thongchai argues that the notion of (national) identity, which is discursively constituted in the long run, elevates itself to a sense of collectivised body polity – with a sense of territoriality and practices. The history of military contestations and colonial cartography continuously produced firmer ideas of territoriality and nationality in the Asiatic intersection of South-East and South-Asian borderlands. The imperial British 'use this small country (sic. Manipur) occupied by a martial race as a pawn in the Asian chessboard of the British imperialism' (S.K. Sharma and Usha Sharma 2006, 116). In corollary, the integrationist approach to geographically secluded NER unfolds one of the most objectified narrations of an ideologically driven state-nation making in India. A relook into an otherwise unaccounted agenda in the mainstream academia exposes how the liberal state that was looking for a post-British nation in India was wary of a possible expansion of communist political

yearning in the borderland areas of India-Burma region. The Indian National Congress's integrationist nationalism further frontierised NER as it had a preoccupied fear of communist incursions from Burma. A report issued by the then Congress official hinted at such fear as it read,

> the South Eastern Asia will be for some years to become a hot-bed of turmoil and communist risings. The Communist Party of Burma and that of India may well like to establish a link through Manipur. These circumstances necessitated a strong Government in Manipur direct under the Centre (K. Singh, 1949).

Nationalising politics, therefore, produces securitizing perspectives on borderlands. While integrating the borderlands, several garrisons were deployed to watch over bio-territorially sensitive spaces as a pre–emptive mechanism. Aptly in the Haripura session of 1938, the Indian National Congress resolved to create a new Burma Congress Committee. The main purpose of the Committee was not only to extend solidarity to the Burmese struggle for independence but to initiate steps towards a greater India. In a nationalist inexplicable turn, Subhash Chandra Bose, in his presidential speech claimed that 'the Congress had always recognised Burma as a part of India, and the same policy would be continued' (Bradley 1949). The Congress was evidently becoming aggressive while it was equally becoming intolerant to federal power sharing in India. As a part of the proceedings of the 51st session of the Indian National Congress, Subhash Chandra Bose declared 'my term of office as the Congress President will be devoted to resist the unwanted federal scheme (ibid).

The method of nationalising State in India which Perry Anderson called the 'Indian Ideology' was limited to territorial possession of borderlands as it neither paid any heed to simultaneous political churnings that re-surfaced on the verge of colonial departure nor to actual federal constitutional commitment. The assertion of erstwhile Princely Kingdoms and formerly tribal conglomerates as modern states with the establishment of responsible constitutional government, which Eric Hobsbawm terms as 'proto-national' (J. Hobsbawm 1997, 46), aggravated the nationalist aspirations

in India resulting in the production of an apprehension against the liberal constitutional response to the scope of federal arrangement in India. The idea of cooperative federalism, instead of competitive federalism, in India is a glare example of how the center-state relations was imagined in postcolonial India. The founding fathers of the constitution wanted the spirit of federalism but in praxis they were reluctant and apprehensive to effectuate the same. The ambiguity between integrationist politics and reclaiming autonomous polities became a site of battle between overarching claims and counter claims.

Conclusion

The biography of a geo–politically ghettoed borderlands is marked by extraordinary circumstances, methods of governance, legislations and political machinations in its neighbourhoods. The instability in Myanmar and its ramifications on ethnic equations in India's Northeast is evidently seen in the conflicts in the region. Newer concepts of territoriality, administration, security, and economic designs largely revolve around managing regionalities and solidarities. As argued above, nationalising paradigms had routine reliance on preemptive methods of regimenting borderlands. For the reasons known, the extraneously imposed directional ghetto comes with a price – the rise of a resisting solidarity of regionalities. Continued transborder population movements, trading off ethnic aspirations from neighbourhoods, dubious economic practices, and the creeping in of insidious global capitalism make the borderlands even more friable and bare.

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Endnotes:

[1]The Treaty of Yandaboo, 24 February 1826, enthroned Maharaja as an internationally recognised Maharaja and resulted in the transfer of Kabow Valley to Burma. The Treaty of Yandaboo was a tripartite agreement involving the British, Burma, and Assam with an implied payment of Rupees 6000 per year to Manipur as compensation.

[2]According to Article 34 of the Indian Constitution, 'notwithstanding anything in the foregoing provision of this Part (sic. Part III of the Indian Constitution), Parliament may by law indemnify any person in the service of the Union or a State or any other person in respect of any act done by him in connection with the maintenance or restoration of order in any area within the territory of India where martial law was in force or validate any sentence passed, punishment inflicted, forfeiture, ordered or other act done under martial law in such area.' Also see, D.D. Basu, *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, LexisNexis, 22nd Edition, 2015.

Predicament of a Partitioned Homeland: Historicizing the long history of boundary demarcations of the Khasi and Jaintia

Binayak Dutta*

Abstract

One of the major events in the history of India which continue to excite popular imagination and academic curiosity is the partition of India which was neither a simple cartographic realignment over territories nor an uncritical redistribution of political power and authority over demarcated territorial units. Cartographic realignment over Khasi-Jaintia lands is one such area where partition narratives and experiences are critical to understand the historical experiences of the community in contemporary times. The main thrust of the paper is to examine the process and politics of boundary and border making in Khasi and Jaintia lives, their negotiations with an almost unexplored prehistory and an oppressive present beset with border fencing, migration of people and community relations.

Keywords: Khasi, Jaintia, Borders, Partition and Fencing.

Introduction: Some Preliminary Concerns

When Urvashi Butalia pointed out that, "I began to realize that partition was not, even in my family, a closed chapter of history,"[1] she probably did not imagine that this statement could be proverbial not only to capture her situation or her but also for many other residents living in many other partitioned lands of North-East India. Partition in this frontier region of the Indian state is not just history but a live story where and the resistance of communities against border demarcations and barbed wire fences across international borders and recurrent debates on migration keep the partition story alive till today. Here partition was not a simple realignment of cartographic contours but an intensely personal and political event that metamorphosed the life of the people who fell on the 'wrong' side of the borders as location

* The author is Assistant Professor, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

determined quality of life, socializations and articulations of culture and politics. The Khasi and Jaintia people who found themselves severed from their homes, hearth, kinsmen and their cultivable lands since the partition of India and the creation of East Pakistan (subsequently Bangladesh post 1971) were two such communities who found themselves as transnational since 1947. Though historians from and on this region have only recently entered this campaign to counter statist historical project on independence and partitions, the Khasi and Jaintia stories have not entered much into the mainstream discourse. While engaging with both these dimensions, this paper would attempt to locate post partition politics and mobilization in this region under study by negotiating the labyrinth of multi-vocal narratives of the story of partition in North East India highlighting the dichotomy between the state and community narratives in the geography under study. Though this paper seeks to study the long history of Khasi and Jaintia narratives of partition experiences over a space that they have traditionally shared from the pre-colonial into the contemporary times, which today stand partitioned between India and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan).

Colonial cartography and the first partition of the Khasi-Jaintia

Before the colonial disruption the Khasi, Jaintia and the plains people of Sylhet cohabited a contiguous geography. If the Jaintias"cohabited with Cachar on the west and the province of Sylhet on the North",[2] the Khasis, or *Cassiahs* inhabited the tract "of mountainous country extending from Laour, the northwest extremity of Sylhet, to the Eastern boundaries of Cutchar- The mountains according to Rennel's calculations are 1200 yards high, so perpendicular as to be inaccessible to a foreign enemy…"[3] But what stood out as the common grounds for both the Jaintia and the Khasi were territories referred to as Cachar and Sylhet which were shared spaces for home. Therefore when Sylhet was carved out as a separate district of Bengal post 1765, the Khasi and Jaintia foothills which was a fluid geo-space as a natural extension of Bengal through the district of Sylhet, landed in a flux. Historians and researchers alike have often traced the beginning of colonial interest on these spaces to a period after the receipt of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765 but some colonial official transactions could also be used

to indicate that colonial interest on the Khasi and Jaintia territories lay even in the first decade of colonial rule over Bengal between 1757 and 1767. The colonial administrators were extremely anxious about the political turmoil in this region caused by the continuous warfare between the Khasi chiefs and the incursions of the Jaintia Raja on the Khasi territories that bordered Sylhet. As early as 1763, a year before the battle of Bauxar, the Governor of the English East India Company at Fort William, Harry Verelst informed the Company Board of Directors,

> … that the Raja of Jyntea a country that joins Cachar on the west and the province of Sylhet on the North has on pretence of an old debt, formed a design against the province and that he further suspects his intentions to be with a view of distressing his party and cutting off their provisions...[4]

By 1765, the English East India Company had secured for itself the Diwani of Bengal, a transformative moment that altered irreversibly the way the Company began to perceive the land, people, resource, economic transactions and territorialization and assertion of power and authority over areas that was under its control. Therefore, to carry out a smooth transaction of taxation and defining of company lands soon after securing the diwani of Bengal, the English East India Company servants began to advocate the drawing of determined borders and boundaries of administrative control. Company administrators, as D.R. Syiemlieh pointed out,

> … immediately applied a boundary, a hill-plain divide where previously there was none. Problems then very naturally arose over the control of the foothills. The Company believed their right extended to the foothills and the Sylhet plains which was a natural extension of the Bengal plains. New revenue and administrative arrangements for Bengal quickly affected the Jaintia Rajah's position."[5]

But this situation was not just limited to the Jaintias and the English East India Company got into a protracted conflict with the Khasi chiefs as well. The repeated 'raids' of the Khasi chiefs into territories south of their chiefdoms into Sylhet along with inter-chiefdom fights between the Khasi chiefs

caused much anxiety among the colonial administrators as well. While the Europeans who were Company officers were naturalized into their belief of territorial states, post West Phalia, 1648, (which introduced the concept of nation states into Europe) they found the idea of formally undefined ethnic spaces antagonistic to the ideas of civilization and judicious administration. It was of little surprise that European scholars such as Bradley-Birt believed that Sylhet was almost an entirely unexplored and practically unexplored area peopled by wild tribes and with 'its further boundaries ill-defined and its limits stretching away to impenetrable jungles.[6] The Khasi chiefs were unfortunately presented as one such 'wild tribe' that repeatedly penetrated the company territory, of which, post 1765, Sylhet was a part of the English East India Company's Dacca Division. The company officers were not oblivious about the economic significance of Sylhet as "the district was an important one for the purpose of trade. Its vast forests produced some of the finest timber in Bengal while the rivers that intersected them furnished means of transport…"[7] John Sumner, a colonial officer at Sylhet, who was to become the collector of Sylhet after William Thackeray informed Thomas Kelsall, Chief and Supervisor of Dacca in 1771 that,

> "It may be proper to inform you that the Rajahs who possess the hills bordering this province are at present in hostility with each other. Within a very short distance from the town of Pondawa (Panduah), where the trade of our merchants and theirs is carried on, there have been two battles between two contending rajahs, and within a days journey of Sylhet almost between it and Pondawa, another Rajah has lately commenced hostilities against the Rajah of the country about Pondawa" [8]

But the hostilities persisted well into the 1770s and in 1774, Richard Barwell, a subordinate colonial officer not only complained to William Thackeray, the first Collector of Sylhet about Khasi incursions into Sylhet and the depredations on Company resources also requested for troops led by Ensign Leake to "oppose the incursions of Cossahs." [9]The Zamindar of Panduah had already become a tributary of the Company and the repeated

incursions of the Khasi chiefs and Jaintia Rajahs against the zamindar was viewed as an attack on the company which Company officers felt, "merited chastisement and entire reduction of his country."[10] By 1774, the Company officers were considering the 'reduction of the flat country and the flight of the Rajah beyond the hills' thereby gradually moving to establish a hills plains dichotomy and a conscious prospect of demarcating the company control over the foothills adjoining the district of Sylhet. The Company officers were conscious about the economic value of Sylhet and its adjoining areas especially in the foothills adjoining Sylhet which, before the imposition of colonial control was well within the Khasi-Jaintia special and territorial imagination. Colonial officers like Thackery knew that,

> Sylhet… was an important one for purposes of trade. Its vast forests produced some of the finest timber in Bengal… Chunam (line) was an even more important export and formed the staple product of Sylhet, a hundred to a hundred and twenty thousand maunds being sent down annually. The land-tax due to the Company from Sylhet amounted to the equivalent of seventeen thousand pounds sterling, and the whole of this sum was paid in cowries, which still formed the recognised currency of this remote district. As no fewer than five thousand one hundred and twenty cowries went to make one rupee, the difficulties not only of collecting but of remitting the revenue were great.[11]

Therefore when the Khasis repeatedly raided the foothills and the plains adjoining Sylhet as a mark of asserting their claims over a territory that they feared losing to colonial control, colonial officer, Robert Lindsay was quick to point out to Company authorities in Dhaka that "for some past the people under Jointah have been exceeding troublesome to the adjoining pergunnahs dependant on Sylhet by commiting depredations and plundering several villages." [12] to which the Company Government was pleased to promptly allow an establishment of sepoys in the form 'of *burgandossies* for your station' and 'erecting two mud forts' the expense of both not exceeding two thousand rupees.[13] But over time the company's hostilities with the Khasis

became more intense. In a letter to John Shore dated 2nd November, 1783, Robert Linday reported that,

> "One of the Cosseahs, an inhabitant of the mountain having been treated with indignity by a havildar of the sepoys, the affront was considered as an insult upon the community, and the petty Rajahs , though constantly at enmity with each other, united upon this occasion to claim redress. This they demanded of me and I certainly would have given it upon the spot, had their expectains been confined within reasonable bounds; but nothing less than the havildars head would appease them which of course could not be granted. In consequence of the refusal they attacked the Thanah of Ponduah, a small Kh-llah for the protection of merchants which they repeatedly assaulted with considerable loss on both sides but not succeeding in carrying it, the place has been blockaded for nearly two months."[14]

But owing to the prospect of rich transactions by the Company and its officers across the hills and the plains along the region, there was an urgent desire on the part of officers like Lindsay to close the hostilities with the Khasi chiefs but it was of no avail as the Company officers were only contributing to deepen and widen the hills-plains divide by their insensitivity. In fact, the Company was in constant warfare with the Khasi chiefs. In a letter addressed to Edward Wheeler, dated March, 1784, Robert Lindsay observed that,

> "for upwards of eight months past I have been in a constant state of warfare with the Casseahs or inhabitants of the mountains from whence the stones were drawn. I have myself sustained very considerable loss. All my chunam works were burnt to the ground, and many of my servants cut to pieces: and these incursions upon the lowlands was likely to be attended with serious consequences had it not been for the active part I took myself in opposing them in person…."[15]

But these wars were not merely raids and punitive retaliations. Robert

Lindsay, the District Collector, in a letter to John Shore pointed out that, "the hill people having collected additional forces have become more troublesome and at the same time more formidable than ever. …"[16] Over time, these encounters were continuous negotiation between the two powers to determine their boundaries and spheres of control and influence. Soon the Company officers began to create stereotypes about the hill communities like the Khasi- Jaintias. Robert Lindsay in his report of 1787 pointed out that

> The Soormah or Sylhet River is the General Boundary of the Sylhet Province on the north. A chain of high Mountains on the North side runs nearly parallel to its Course, which is from east to west, at the distance of 10 to I6 Miles from it, forming a narrow tract of flat country in extent 60 Miles long & from 10 to 16 Broad. This Tract which is known by the general name of Cossyah, or the Country of Freebooters or Plunderers, is subject to Several petty Rajahs. among which the Jentyah Rajah is the principal. His Territories include… The eastern part of the above tract, together with the hilly country between that and Assam. His whole Territory may be Reckoned 40 miles long and 30 broad, one half of which is flat, arable Land, the remainder Mountainous... The Western Cossyahs possess the Country between Gentyah&Laour. I understand tbt they are subject to several distinct Rajahs ... and that they are often quarrelling & fighting among themselves.The only Town of note in these Parts is Pundua which is the mart where the Bengali, Assam, and Garrow Goods, are bought and sold. The Cossyahs' Country in general and especially the western part of it, is woody and almost impenetrable. Their force is very contemptible, both from the smallness of their numbers, and the nature of their weapons which last are Bows and Arrows and Short Lances, but when attacked in their woods, they are reported to make use of a variety of stratagems to ensure their pursuers…[17]

And finally argued that,

> I learnt from experience that immediate retaliation by following them back into their own country was the only means of keeping them within bounds- this was never attempted during the Moghul government but I found it attended with every good affect I wished for and of late years they have been perfectly quiet…[18]

It is interesting to note that between 1763 and 1787 the English East India Company had, at least on paper and their own understanding constructed a boundary between the hills and plains of Bengal ignoring the territorial claims that the Khasi-Jaintias had since time immemorial by seeking to confine them within 'their own country'. By 1798, the Company succeded in formalizing and granting legal legitimacy to this partition.As the Company's goal was to monopolize the natural resources of the Khasi Jaintia foothills and generate profit through taxation, attempts were made to define territories when the Company came into more direct contact with the Khasi-Jaintia community in northern Sylhet. Therefore much to the surprise of the Khasis, the Governor General in Council resolved on 19th of November, 1789 and directed the Board of Revenue that,

> "Having taken into consideration the several papers laid before us by you and the collector pf Sylhet respecting the inroads of the Cosseahs and the unsettled state of the frontier of that District we have requested the Commander-in Chief to detach three companies of sepoys to the assistance of the Collector, whom you will instruct as follows, …
>
> That the Hill Cosseahs be not permitted to hold to hold any lands in the low country within the Company's limits, either as proprietors or farmers or under any tenure what so ever and he attach all lands within such limits as are now in their possession and transmit an account of them to you to be laid before us for our information.
>
> That he acquaint the Cosseahs that they will be allowed a free

> intercourse with the Company's territories for the purpose of trade, provided they conduct themselves peaceably towards the inhabitants; that they will not be permitted to come down in armed bodies, and should they ever appear in their hostile manner within the Company's limits or make any inroads into their territory, that a force will be immediately detached into their country to punish them as public enemies and invaders…
>
> That the military force now sent to his assistance is to be employed in establishing his authority in the low country to the north of the River Surmah within the Company's limits and obliging the proprietors of the soil and the inhabitants at large to pay due obedience to law, that is, not to march the force beyond limits of the Company's territories unless they shall be first invaded by the Cosseahs or hill people , in which case he will direct the troops to follow them into their own country as far as they may be able to proceed with safety to themselves, and chastise them as invaders and public enemies.[19]

At the whims of the colonial administration, the character of the Khasi-Jaintia and their holdings across the hills and plains of the plains and hills of Sylhet and its adjoining areas lay altered. Therefore the initial intervention of the Colonial power to change the Khasi-Jaintia territorial holdings and sense of social geography was an interesting concoction of combining colonial commercial interests with their idea of maintaining order and law, as they understood it in lands that was gradually coming under their control and they were beginning to administer. They therefore ascribed the epithet - 'hill people' to the Khasi and the Jaintia since the eighteenth century itself, that stuck to these communities' post- independence and festered on to become a major predicament in their community life post partition. It would not be out of place to trace the Khasi and Jaintia trajectory of deprivation, anxiety and demarcation from the early history of their colonial encounter, a reality that resonated even in their post-colonial experience.

Post-partition denial and deprivation

Post-partition history in Northeast India began by denying the Khasi-Jaintia their partitioned reality. Oblivious of the situation on the ground, the Boundary Commission headed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe concluded in their report on the Sylhet partition that partition of Sylhet was,

> … limited to the districts of Sylhet and Cachar, since of the other districts of Assam that can be said to adjoin Sylhet neither the Garo hills nor the Khasi and Jaintia hills nor the Lushai hills have anything approaching a Muslim majority of population in respect of which a claim could be made.[20]

Partition perpetuated the uncertainty in Khasi Jaintia lives even on the eve of partition coming into effect. The Political officer of the Khasi States, Major R.A. M. Major, in a letter to the Advisor to the Governor of Assam pointed out that,

> I have the honour to inform you that though the boundary of the Khasi states and Sylhet and Khasi States and Kamrup have been notified, they have never been demarcated. The notifications are in many cases vague quoting such boundaries as the foot of the hill, where the hill gradually merges into the plains it is impossible to say where the foot is. I have repeatedly pointed out the necessity for demarcation the boundary by pillars as there are constant quarrels between the Khasis and plainsmen. The failure to demarcate a boundary now becomes important with Sylhet going to Pakistan and will be a source of still more friction with plainsmen who are always the aggressors to the disadvantage of the Khasis.[21]

But despite these exchanges, the border demarcations remained fragmentary and incomplete. Though the Government of India was able to complete the accession of the twenty-five Khasi States into the Indian Union by 1948, the last being the Syiem of Nongstoin, a chiefdom located on the India-Pakistan border, who signed it on the 19th of March, 1948,[22] the demarcation of boundaries were hardly resolved as there was "a misunderstanding by

the Pakistan Government of the boundary between Pakistan and Indian Dominion in which the Pakistan Government claims parts of Khyrim, Cherra and Shella States territories on the southern slopes of the Khasi states adjoining Sylhet District." The imposition of the border also had long lasting effects on the people especially where certain areas along the border were being disputed between India and Pakistan. Though partition had been effected, the demarcations had not been completed as disputed territories were put up for joint surveys of the boundary by the representatives of the Indian Dominion and Pakistan Government.[23] Although the Radcliffe Line claimed to be precise and detailed on paper, people had little idea of its actual delineations. For instance, the Pyrduwah (also known as Padua) in the Khasi-Jaintia hills district, which adjoins the Sylhet district about 6. 5 km was left un-demarcated.

Though mostly unacknowledged in official reports, partition adversely affected the Khasi-Jaintia lives in many ways. The links connecting the Khasis and Jaintias to Sylhet were permanently disrupted. At the stroke of a pen these people were internally split into Indians and Pakistanis depending on their residence. The traditional inter-community linkages in the area were so strong that these hill tribes for ages depended on their trade with the plains.[24]Centuries old prosperous border-trade based economy was killed by closing the borders and erection of check-posts. In the pre-partition scenario, the plains of Sylhet used to be the main market for the produce of the hills and foothills of the Khasi Jaintia lands. As a result of the partition of Sylhet, a border of about 150 miles in length was created across the Khasi –Jaintia hills. The boundary of the new state of East Pakistan partitioned the lands inhabited by the Khasi, Jaintia as boundary came to be demarcated "from boundary pillar no 1071 located at the tri-junction of Rangpur district of Bangladesh, west Garo Hills district of Meghalaya and Goalpara district of Assam and ends at the boundary pillar no 1338 at the tri-junction of Sylhet district of Bangladesh, Jaintia Hills district and Cachar district of Assam."[25] Partition and the amalgamation of Sylhet with East Pakistan caused "a virtual economic blockade of the Khasi hills."[26]The Administrative Report for the Khasi states pointed out,

> the troubles that inevitably followed on the borders after partition resulted in their being unable either to export their produce to the normal centres of trade or to obtain their staple diet of rice from Sylhet.[27]

Nari Rustomji who was the Advisor to the Governor of Assam on Tribal Affairs clearly mentioned in his memoir that:

> In Partition days, the main market for the produce of the Khasi Hills was in the District of Sylhet skirting their Southern border. With Partition, Pakistan embarked on a virtual economic blockade of the Khasi Hills. Movement of goods between the Khasi hills and Sylhet was discouraged…… The object of the exercise was no doubt to put pressure on the Khasis and create among them a feeling that they would be better off in Pakistan. The hill people on the extreme southern borders of the Khasi hills were driven to a state of near panic…"[28]

The movement of goods was initially discouraged and subsequently stopped from moving between Khasi-Jaintia hills and East Pakistan. While the Khasi- Jaintia people of the hills found themselves cut away from their kinsmen in the plains they were also reduced to penury without a market for their agricultural produce and mineral resources. Trade which amounted to more than three crores of rupees annually in the pre-partition days came to a standstill which resulted in the tribal communities residing at the borders between Khasi Hills and Sylhet being brought to the brink of starvation.[29]Political changes had serious effects on the supply of rice. Rice imports from Sylhet to the villages on the southern foothills ceased altogether and a small quantity that trickles through the border shot up to exorbitant rates.[30]The affected in the Khasi Hills district amounted to about 80,000 people and about 16,000 households This resulted in largescale migration of people from these border areas to new settlements selected for their relocation in the Ri-Bhoi region of present day Meghalaya.[31]While the Khasi- Jaintia people of the hills found themselves cut away from their kinsmen in the plains they were also reduced to penury without a market for

their agricultural produce and mineral resources. Trade which amounted to more than three crores of rupees annually in the pre-partition days came to a standstill.[32]

Another major concern for the Khasi and Jaintia people living in the border areas was their loss of land. As most people found their cultivable lands located within East Pakistan, they were regularly confronted with incursions and theft of their produce by the Pakistani nationals. Though the Khasi and Jaintia people had title deeds indicating their ownership of land located in territories which had become East Pakistan, the Pakistani cultivators were cultivating these lands after the boundaries were demarcated and the transfer affected. A petition submitted by U Lobsing of Lakhat Bazar Khyrim Syiemship in a memorial submitted to the Minister In-Charge of Tribal Areas Department dated 21st September, 1961 pointed out that,

> That your petitioner peacefully owned and possessed one plot of Paddy field at Lakhat Bazar since generation without any disturbance by anybody. The Land is about 8 acres in area.
>
> That on the recent resettlement of boundaries between India and Pakistan the said land fell in Pakistan.
>
> That during the resurvey of boundaries by the two sides-India and Pakistan your petitioner had been assured that even though any plot of land which used to be in his occupation should now fall to Pakistan yet his request to the property would not be disturbed but that he should cultivate as usual and should pay the usual land revenue to Pakistan when rent is demanded.
>
> That before your petitioner could take steps in matter and immediately on the refixing of boundary stones, one Pakistani who is known to our people as Mor Ali of Noagaon (just below Lakhat Bazar) took possession of the said land of your petitioner by ploughing the same under protection of Pakistani Armed Forces against the protest of your petitioner….[33]

Though the Minister, in his note to the Secretary of the Department observed that,

> … It is not understood how a Pakistani is cultivating the land now. There will be other cases in which the lands belonging to our people will fall in Pakistan after the boundary has been finally demarcated and the transfer affected. The Deputy Commissioner may be asked to prepare a list of persons likely to be affected after final demarcation and transfer…[34]

there were indeed many people who had similar predicament. Presenting an account of his tour of the border areas, Shri Maham Singh, the minister observed,

> When I visited Bholaganj, a complaint was made to me by the villagers of Bholaganj, Naya Bosti, Nalpara, Chakla, Dharam Bosti that no action has uptil now been taken on the petition submitted by them on 9.12.61 regarding the loss of paddy fields due to the recent demarcation of boundary between India and Pakistan. The paddy of the Indian Nationals was also forcibly reaped by the Pak Nationals. The area of the land which has fallen into Pakistan now will be about 100 Bighas and they have forcibly reaped the paddy for about 30 Bighas of the land which was cultivated by the Indian Nationals and the loss of paddy would be about 300 maunds.[35]

There were also petitions from Khasis from the Indo-Pakistan border areas calling upon the state government to give them compensation for the lands that had been included in Pakistan. U Ram Tangsong hailing from Darrang Village, at Dawki P.O. pointed out that,

> According to the present demarcation of Indo-Pak. boundary, my land will fall in Pakistan territory when the transfer of land be made to Pakistan as a result of the of the present demarcation. The site of my land is at a place called Mawbang near Khad-umkrem, Khyrim Syiemship p.S. Dowki and

> the area is about 5 acres approximately more or less. The approximate number of Betelnut trees (grown up) 3000 trees and the young ones about 2000 Nos. The area falls within our own private lands. If the land is going to be transferred to Pakistan, I request that reasonable compensation be made to me to prevent me from the big loss and to enable me to get a substitute land for the same as I cannot become a Pakistani nationalist.[36]

But this loss of land brought the Khasi and Jaintia people to the brink of starvation. Ka Shingai Tynsong from Darrang informed the undersecretary, Department of Tribal Affairs that her land,

> "measuring more or less 305 Bighas has been included in Pakistan territory thereby causing misery and starvation to me on day that Pakistan obstructs me from utilizing my land. I have also all the necessary documents on this matter of ownership. In addition to the above I also beg to sate that I have allowed 23 other persons to cultivate more than 150 bighas of land with paddy, oranges, betelnuts, etc. and all these people will also suffer the same fate. ... My land in question is full of plantation of various kinds and estimated loss will amount to crores of rupees when calculated the value of plantations and the land.

The greatest impact of partition on the community was however through the violent disruption of the lives of indigenous communities who shared the border with the new Islamic state of Pakistan and who found themselves split between India and Pakistan. The new border became part of routine border disputes in the subsequent years. For example, on 25th February, 1950 the CID, Sub Inspector Shillong, B. Mawlong, stated that at Bholaganj, Shella that most of the Muslim shopkeepers of Bholaganj Bazaar fled to Pakistan the night before, taking with them their respective valuables and movable properties as they were robbed by the Hindus. Under such circumstances he requested the government to take possession of those houses which were once occupied by the Muslims. On the other hand, there were reports that

there were also incidents of Hindus in East Pakistan being forced to convert to Islam and their properties was also pillaged by them. As a result most of them left East Pakistan to come to India.[37]

Apart from destroying the daily economic activities of the border people, the issue of national identity became one of the main anxieties at the borders. Construction of borders with defined boundary lines made the borders the zone of maximum securitization and assertion of national identity. Often such security concerns would translate into cases of harassment by state representatives at the border. Allegations of East Pakistani encroachers into India and vice-versa were common. Perhaps the most extensive impact of partition on work in the borderland had to do with agricultural work. With partition the people's access to the agricultural lands came to an end. Cultivable agricultural lands along the border were neglected for many years because of the border disputes. Numerous cultivators found that they had become separated from their most valuable source of income- land. Land owners found that the borders ran between their homes and their fields and secondly inhabitants of the borderland might decide to migrate across the border thereby becoming separated from their fields. Working the land on the other side of the border continued to be a common practice but there were several cases of threat, intimidations and kidnapping forcing many of the people to give up their lands or to move across the border to keep them. The Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills reported from the Balat sector that four Indian nationals who went to their orange and betel nut plantations were arrested by the East Pakistan Rangers on 28th December, 1961.[38]

Partition introduced the 'foreigners' dimension into politics in North East India with the introduction of passport system in 1952. Though there was no restriction of people from East Pakistan to Assam in the initial years after independence, gradually the provincial governments and the Government of India began to discourage migration of people from East Pakistan to India by 1950. The situation became critical as the initial trickle of people wanting to migrate to India from East Pakistan became a flood by 1950 as the political atmosphere in East Pakistan became increasingly hostile to the

minority communities. The Census Report for Assam, Manipur and Tripura, 1951 observed, that, "the recent influx of Hindu refugees from Pakistan constitutes the biggest migration stream into Assam during the last decade. As there was no improvement in the situation on the ground and many displaced "most of the refugees … from the bordering district of Sylhet"[39] preferred to settle down in Assam including the hill areas. Along with the plains of Assam, the hill areas also took on the brunt of the settlement and rehabilitation of the displaced. The Census of 1951 revealed that as many as 14,509 persons moved into the hill areas.[40] In Shillong, in the Khasi Hills District about 66 acres of land was requisitioned by the Government of Assam in two blocks of Bhagyakul estate and Umpling village for the settlement of 351 families. It was almost prophetically noted in the Census Report of 1951 that, "the far-reaching effects of this loss will continue to be felt by Assam as well as India for many years to come."[41]

The Past cradles the Present: In Lieu of a Conclusion

Despite the passage of seven decades since the transfer of power, partition continues to affect the lives of the Khasi and Jaintia people as many other trans-border communities in Northeast India. Over years, the unresolved boundary question in North East India and the continuous acrimony over the legality of migration across the created state-nation boundaries has become a pointer to the assertion that partition is not an event but a process which is far from its closure. Though the impact of partition, 1947 persists on the lives of the land and the people of India, there are few attempts to negotiate with it. However it is sad that political expediency and short term strategies often, contributed to 'memoside' and resulted in the loss of thousand testimonies, over time. But lived history would rarely allow the Khasi and Jaintia people to forget their transborder connections and their painful post-partition experiences. When the Government of India signed the Land Boundary agreement with the Government of Bangladesh, the streets of the Khasi Hills erupted in protests. Though the Standing Committee on External Affairs pointed out that Meghalaya stood to gain 240,578 acres including right to draw water, fishing at Muktapur and protection of homesteads as well as economic activities of Indian citizens

in lands across the border, the sentiments could hardly be assuaged.[42] As Meghalaya would lose 41,702 acres of Land in the Lobacherra-Nunacherra sector to Bangladesh, the CCIB, an umbrella organization of several local organizations, NGOs, Traditional Chiefs and land owners of the Indo-Bangla border of Meghalaya became vociferous in its opposition to the agreement. G.S. Kharshanlor, the spokesperson of the CCIB pointed out that "the total land under adverse possession is 599.7 acres. If 240 acres come to Meghalaya and 41.7 to Bangladesh, what about the remaining 278 acres of land?" This was a persistent question posed by the CCIB to the Government of India since 2011 when the first concrete steps were taken to bring the border demarcation question to a close by the Manmohan Singh Government.[43] The people could never forget their experience of dispossession in the past.[44] The President of the Khasi Students Union, Daniel Khyriem pointed out that "Since we have already lost substantial land to Bangladesh since the 1971 war, we have been demanding that no more land should be transferred. …"[45] Matters became aggravated with the Government of India initiating steps to complete the process of border fencing. Border demarcation was a sensitive issue and the CCIB again raised the question of hardship of the local population especially those staying along the international borders including the issue of adverse possession and its impact on life and livelihood. A major problem lay in the fact that the borders between the two countries, across the Khasi and Jaintia hills was a fluid one, a point that was articulated in the petition of the local people from 1960s itself. In a letter to the Chief Secretary of Assam in August, 1962, S. Khongwang, the Sirdar of the Darrang Elaka along with a number of local traditional leaders pointed out that,

> Originally the boundary is the natural Pyian River, but now the boundary runs at a distance of average 5 furlongs from the bank of the river, in some places, the boundary runs at a distance of about a mile from the river, and between the river and the pillar, we have a number of gardens and paddy fields which may be valued at several lakhs of rupees not to speak of the price of land now tagged to Pakistan and now we are faced with a very dangerous position.[46]

In a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister in 2016, the CCIB resonated the same sentiment when it pointed out that,

> the recent protocol/agreement signed at Dhaka on September 6, 2011 is a total deviation from the original agreement of 1958. By now the Border Boundary Pillars have been shifted by hundreds of metres inside India (State of Meghalaya in particular) as a result surveys and resurveys from time to time especially by the Joint Boundary Working Group (JBWG) of the Government of India and Government of Bangladesh in 2010-11. Most of the common rivers which have been treated as natural boundary have now been encroached by Bangladesh eg, Piyanan river at Dawki in particular. Some boundary pillars have now been erected across several rivers inside India resulting to loss of lacs of square metres of cultivable land and use of common rivers for economic and commercial pursuits.[47]

When the Government of India began to seriously engage with the process of border fencing after the signing of the Land Boundary Agreement, the predicament of border demarcations prominently came to the fore yet again with local groups calling for realignment of the Indo- Bangla boundary line from Nongjri (B.P. No.1251) in East Khasi Hills District to Jaliakhola (B.P. No. 1299) in West Jaintia Hills District. Opposition to border fencing grew as the people of the border areas would be separated from their land and denied their livelihood, a prospect which was familiar to the Khasi and the Jaintia people since 1947. It was of little surprise that the land-owners of the border areas were opposed to construction of the fence also either at 150 yards from the border or construction of the fence at Zero Line as the boundary had never been clearly and definitively defined since partition of 1947.[48] The Zero Line was still to be properly identified as Kmen Myrchiang, the Secretary of CCIB pointed out that "till today we did not have the permanent boundary pillars and we cannot identify the real zero line."[49] While debates continued on the location of the border fence, and the Government of India pushed on its agenda of completing the process of border fencing in the border areas

of Northeast India, with almost 80 percent of the fencing (of the 443 KM Meghalaya- Bangladesh border) getting completed by 2022. There was no doubt that the Khasi and Jaintia people again found themselves threatened with the renewed condition of losing their homelands and cultivable fields which they possessed 'since time immemorial'. Dabling Khongsdir, the matriarch of Lyngkhong one of the 90 residents of the Lyngkhong village and a land owner pointed out that, "It is not fair that our village will fall outside the territory of India once the fence is built. We do not feel safe. We have lived here since time immemorial…the Government should do something for our safety and wellbeing,"[50] While the Government of Bangladesh had given its concurrence to the relaxing of the 150 yard norm in seven locations of Meghalaya and the state government pushed for border fencing at zero line, the fencing work remained incomplete as opposition to the process continued to perist in areas such as War Jaintia and Amlarem. The struggle of the Khasi and Jaintia people with the process of borders and boundary demarcation that started in the eighteenth century still continues to persist. Though some attempts have been made for an academic engagement with it in recent years, these have been far from adequate and lack a comprehensive character. Though recent attempts have been to overcome the hiatus between the nation and the popular in historical discourse, in real terms, the gap has only widened over the years as most of the partition narratives suffer from their inability to engage with the reality of partition as an ongoing process and the politics that arises in its wake. We can only conclude that the partition story in Northeast India is a complex story far from the possibility of a definitive conclusion. Here, partition is a living history which we are still only beginning to remember. The Khasi and Jaintia story is its live example.

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Delineating Naga Trauma: A Study on the Impact of the Naga People's Political Struggle on the Naga Society

Neena Kishor*

Abstract

The Naga Movement for self-determination, which was marked by the declaration of their independence on 14 August 1947, eventually led to the long-drawn Naga Conflict which still remains inconclusive even after years of violence, negotiations and peace talks. Conflicts always have a bearing on the land and the people and the trauma associated is immense. Violence and violations have become part and parcel of the lives of the Naga people from the 1950s onwards. This paper, by analyzing select texts, chronologically delineates the trauma of the Naga people and their land, as a social phenomenon, by examining the trauma of the turbulent past due to the military reign and also trauma of the present due to the Naga Armed Movement. It thus lays bare the impact of the conflict on the Naga society and argues that the Naga Conflict has indeed left an indelible imprint on the Naga people and their land over the years.

Keywords: Naga Conflict, Trauma, Violence, Violations, Wounds

'Dear Dad, the way to freedom is too long. Come back home' (Haksar & Hongray, 2019, p. 374). These were the only words scribbled by his children on a Christmas card that Medem Jamir, who held prominent positions within the Naga Movement, received once. The poignancy of the Naga imbroglio is well-captured in these words. Indeed, the Naga people's political journey for emancipation has been long and it remains incomplete. A conglomeration of more than sixty tribes, the Naga people in the bygone decades that is during the epoch of headhunting, identified more to their clan and to their tribe than to nomenclature 'Naga' and in fact this term was alien to many of them.

* The author is Assistant Professor, Department of English (SF), Mar Ivanios College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

The arrival of the British and later the American Baptist Missionaries in the 1800s were detrimental to the Naga people, as they brought about inevitable changes in the Naga-dominated areas. While the British played a major role in the annexation of the Naga Hills, the American Baptist Missionaries imparted education to the Naga people giving rise to a group of educated elite amongst them. With education, English began to be commonly spoken by the different tribes, thus bridging the linguistic gap, for otherwise the languages spoken in variance with the tribes were unintelligible to each other. The dwindling of the practice of headhunting with the conversion to Christianity along with English as a common language for communication facilitated the exchange of thoughts amongst them. All of these provided the fertile ground for the birth of the Naga Movement. The Naga people declared their freedom on 14 August, 1947, a day before the Indian independence. This eventually led to the unleashing of violence over the Naga-dominated areas for battalions of Indian Armed Forces were deployed in the Naga Hills to tackle what was then considered as a law and order problem by the Central Government of India. This led to the formation of the Federal Government of Nagaland and the Naga Army which openly confronted the Indian Army in 1956 triggering the long-drawn yet to be resolved Naga Conflict. Though violence and violations have not been alien to the Naga people from the 1950s onwards many of these remained undocumented for years. The world outside remained unaware of the mayhem within for decades. But in the recent past writers like Kaka D. Iralu, Vsier Meyasetsu Sanyü, Nandita Haksar and Sebastian M Hongray have tried to bring out the Naga story and have recounted the Naga Conflict from the perspective of the Naga people themselves. Kaka Dierhekolie Iralu was a Naga activist and a prominent voice from Nagaland and he was born and grew up in the conflict-ridden land. His work *The Naga Saga: A Historical Account of the 62 years Indo-Naga War and the Story of Those Who Were Never Allowed to Tell it,* first published in 2000, was one of the first books that

captured the attention of the people outside the bounds of North East India or even Nagaland. It describes the various tragic incidents that took place in the early years of the conflict and the recounting is done on the basis of personal interviews that he conducted with hundreds of Naga people who have been affected by the conflict and also with the people who were involved in the Movement. Visier Meyasetsu Sanyü, retired Professor of History and Archeology, was the first Head of the Department of History and Archeology at the University of Nagaland and has a PhD in History and also a degree in Theology. His book, *A Naga Odyssey: My Long Way Home,* authored along with his friend Richard Broome, an Emeritus Professor of History at La Trobe University at Melbourne, Australia, is a memoir and it narrates not just his but the story of a generation of Naga people who grew up in a conflict-ridden land with the sounds of gunfire, fear and unnatural deaths and it covers a span of around sixty years. Nandita Haksar is a Supreme Court lawyer, a human rights activist and also a writer. She, along with her husband Sebastian M. Hongray, brought out the work *Kuknalim: Naga Armed Resistance Testimonies of Leaders, Pastors, Healers and Soldiers* which, as the title suggests, is a compilation of the testimonies of the men and women involved in this Movement, collected through personal interviews by them, and the Naga people testifying had, and some still holds, prominent positions in the Movement. Many newspaper articles and other sources also assist in delving into Naga trauma. This paper explores, through select texts, the impact of the conflict on the Naga people and the land by delineating and studying their trauma, as a social phenomenon, and argues that the Naga Conflict has indeed left an indelible imprint on the Naga people and their land over the years. The trauma is examined in two fragments, that is trauma of the past (1950s to 1970s) which is dominated by that caused by the military occupation and the trauma of the present (1980s to present) which is predominantly by the Naga Armed Movement.

As a social phenomenon Jeffrey C. Alexander expounds that trauma

occurs ‘when members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways’ (Alexander, 2012, p. 6). By 1950s, when the armed forces came to occupy the Naga Hills, village after village across clans and tribes were burnt down. Except for a few hundreds of Nagas who were in co-operation with the Central Government, the rest of the Naga community bore the scars of conflict then. The people were intimidated and terrified. There was a mass flight to the jungles to escape terrorizing and they survived in the jungles for months. ‘*Nhanumia*- jungle folk’, this was how the Naga people who lived and survived in the jungles were referred to (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p. 48). For the months and years that followed, the jungles provided them with shelter and protection from the military. But life was extremely miserable and thousands died owing to various forms of extremities that they had to deal with. By 1957-58 with the intervention of the then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills, Rashid Yusuf Ali, the Nagas were called back to their villages and a general pardon was offered. But as they came back, many villages were clubbed together and crammed into a single village. The miseries of the jungle life continued here and people began to die in great numbers. The *Nhanumia* now are the Naga people who were fortunate enough to survive both of these, when thousands died, and the atrocities that followed which led to the death of many more. The events that unfolded marked the memories of generations of Nagas and this era transformed the entire community completely for the past still rears its head in the present.

There is a dearth of official records relating to the events that occurred in the past. Therein lies the significance of narrations from Nagaland by the Naga people. Yes, memories are elusive. Anxieties do revolve around the reliance of memory in comprehending the past, especially one that is immensely disturbing, but it has been contended that, a ‘faulty seismograph

doesn't mean that there has been no earthquakes' (Argenti & Schramm, 2010, p. 19). It cannot be denied that violence that affected the people immensely was widespread in the Naga-dominated areas. Cathy Caruth calls trauma as an 'unclaimed experience' because 'trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature-the way it is precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on' and while talking about trauma as a wound that makes an attempt to narrate a truth, she explains that this' truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (Caruth, 2016, p. 4). The narrations of the people are all that of traumatic events and not trauma. The personal memories focus on the violence that was inflicted, for this is what is known. The challenge lies in trying to bring to surface the unknown, which is the trauma. Trauma as Caruth describes is 'always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (Caruth, 2016, p. 4). This description aids in the gleaning of the trauma of the Naga people, engrained as traces in their narrations in the select works, and through it the wounds or trauma that were inflicted socially.

Nostalgia and trauma share a bond both in theory and practice says Legg and he points out that, 'While nostalgia denotes a positive attachment to a past real or imaginary home, trauma denotes the negative inability to deal effectively with a past event. While both conditions represent problematic engagements with the past, nostalgia often focusses on a time and place before or beyond a traumatic event' (Legg, 2004, p. 103). Many of the narrations in the select texts begin with the description of their village before the arrival of military, a time when everything was certain and had a rhythm of its own. For instance, Sanyü gives a prelude by describing his special day wherein he, as a little boy of five, was to perform *sekre,* an important

ritual that would welcome him into the *morung,* the men's dormitory, and he writes, 'Cockerels were crowing and dogs were barking, anticipating the excitement to come . . . This was the beginning of Sekrenyi, the Festival of War, the most important celebration of the Naga year, during which a new crop of boys began their odyssey to become men' (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p. 1). These memories invoke a fond attachment to the past that had its own ebb and flow. The tranquility of the village life as they harbor in their memories are best described in these words. Harrower contends that horrors that lead to trauma become evident in the backdrop of shalom and they occur when 'shalom is undone and chaos reigns' (Harrower, 2019, ch.2). Sanyü's words also resound this as he says, 'Six months later these old certainties were thrown into chaos when the Indian Army invaded our village. As the year 1956 unfolded, traditional life gave way to calamity and violence' (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p.1). The arrival of the Army is described in collocation to the peace and tranquility or shalom that they once enjoyed and their memories are marked by their negative inability in dealing with this, for the advent of the military designates the beginning of their turbulent past and this past still rears its head in the present. From nostalgia, the memories thus move to the undoing of shalom, that is peace, and to a past that still haunts their present, the reigning of chaos, and this juxtaposition of shalom with chaos designates their wound of displacement.

In the jungles, they watched in desperation as the flames consumed their villages and their homes and Iralu's words describe the poignancy of the situation as he writes, 'From their hiding places, far away in the forests, the villagers watched and wept bitterly as they saw all their accumulated wealth going up in flames' (Iralu, 2009, p. 82). Paola Filippucci deduces that, 'The violent destruction of places is profoundly painful for individuals and collectivities because places are repositories and indeed objectifications of identity and continuity' (Filippucci, 2010, p.165). The Naga people always bore a close affinity to their land and leaving it was unimaginable.

The village was everything for the Nagas. In the bygone days each village was self-sufficient. The Naga people's sustenance depended completely on their land. Almost every family had land to cultivate food and also land where plantation was grown that provided raw material to build their shelter, weapons, baskets, and so on. The men and women worked hard in the fields all-round the year and observed certain festivals pertaining to their own tribes to celebrate the harvest-the fruits of their labour. Since crop rotation was practiced, the fertility of the soil was maintained. Villages had huge granaries to stock grains which guaranteed the continuity of cultivation. Grains stored in these granaries also ensured that the Naga families don't go hungry throughout the year either. 'Every single grain in these village granaries had been procured with great sweat and toil (Iralu 2009, p. 82). Their village also contained the tangible objects that boast the Naga uniqueness and identity. The man who starts his life again as a poor man after giving away his wealth through the prestigious Feast of Merit is in turn gifted a special shawl or a home to mark his 'honoured status as Man of Merit' (Sanyü & Broome, 2009, p. 29). Their traditional Naga shawls and their ornate bead ornaments were the results of the creativity and the labour of the Naga women. Each family also had their own family heirlooms handed down from generation to generation. From the village gate, to the walls of their individual homes spelt out their uniqueness as Nagas. Many bemoaned the loss of these. Sanyü narrates that Khonoma villagers had a little time to themselves before the flight and so they buried their heirlooms and he states, 'This added to their sorrow as precious household items were abandoned and their survival left to chances' (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p. 47). Therefore, the memories of this violence on land, the wounding and destruction of their village and everything in it individually designates their wound of lost home and material possessions. But for the larger collective of the Nagas as a whole it denotes their wound of lost sense of stability and continuity since the Naga villages were the repositories and objectifications

of Naga identity and permanence.

In the jungles the Naga people became a lot of 'sick, starving and dying villagers huddled in many canyons and ravines' (Iralu, 2009, p.91). Temporary shelters were built in the jungles out of bamboo. Temperatures dropped low in the hills and parents covered the children with banana leaves for warmth (Iralu, 2009). Wild animals posed a constant threat, for instance, Sanyü mentions his family encountering a tiger (Sanyü & Broome, 2018). Disease and death became an everyday event. Epidemic of scabies and many other ailments including malaria, cholera, and typhoid broke out killing people in large numbers. Sometimes whole families were wiped out completely. An anxious mother, Zakiezhüü, recounts watching helplessly as her husband and five children died and in her desperation she decided to go and search for something to give her daughter and the last words of her daughter, 'Mother, please don't leave me behind', still haunt her (Iralu, 2009, p. 90). Thus, their memories of the days, months and years that ensued in the jungles are tainted by the 'systemic violence' which prevented them 'from satisfying their basic needs' (Ruggiero, 2020, p. 11). This systemic violence was not just limited to their stay in the jungles but continued throughout the grouping period later wherein four or five villages were grouped together and put under watch and this was done to effectively quarantine members of the rising Naga Armed Movement from their families for they provided the resources to keep the Movement going. The Naga people were thus for a long time denied access to the basic necessities of food, shelter, medical facilities, education and many more. The memories of the systemic violence in effect, thus, spells out their wound of lost sustenance, individually. As a collective it can be deduced as designating their wound of lost sense of sustainability. From richness, they were reduced to abject poverty overnight. Rebuilding their homes and life remained a long dream for many Nagas as mass displacement and destruction of their land became a part and parcel for many villagers, even after this grouping period, since their villages

were burnt multiple times, forcing the villagers to go through the similar conditions over and over again.

With the advent of the military, the wounding of the Naga bodies, physically, also commenced. All the narrations abound with the large-scale atrocities unleashed on them. Torture and massacre became an everyday reality for the Nagas. Richardson contends that they are 'almost always an open secret, a tool of population control and repression of dissidence' (Richardson, 2018, p.4). To decipher the Naga trauma due to bodily violence it is therefore important to first unearth the psychological motives behind the many acts of these bodily violence. In the Naga Hills, the fact that the people were made to be spectators of many of the acts of bodily violence point to the military motives behind it. For instance, the villagers at Longpha recount the killing of five men in their village on 6 June, 1956 (Iralu, 2009). The men who were massacred that day weren't accused of any wrong. In fact, the villagers, though they had seen neighbouring villages from where the members of the Naga Movement carried out their activities being burnt down, were confident that they would be spared. But still they were murdered. This is therefore one of the many instances where the psychological motive behind was to inflict terror amongst the people. The Setsü villagers' memories are marred by the massacre of five starved fathers who were toiling hard in the jungle, trying to cultivate some food for their starving families (Iralu, 2009). They were accused of being aligned with the Naga Movement and though they pleaded that they were just hungry people trying to cultivate food they were not spared (Iralu, 2009). As they were lined up two boys in the group were released and made to watch the shooting of the others. They were then commanded to go back and inform others of what they witnessed (Iralu, 2009). The accusation that the cultivating villagers belonged to the Naga Movement and the fact that two boys were made to witness it and commanded to go back and inform others all that they saw illustrates this as one of the many incidents wherein violence was

used as a warning -to instill fear in the Naga people and intimidate them.

As in any conflict-ridden places, the Naga women were targeted and subjected to belligerence. Often, when the villagers were forcefully gathered to the common ground, women are segregated from the men and subjected to molestations. They were stripped and flogged in public and during the grouping period when people were stamped on their bodies when they went to work, the women were intentionally stamped on their breasts (Haksar & Hongray, 2019). Women in the Naga Hills were frequently subjected to gang rapes and mass rapes. Ruggiero contends that, 'wartime rape of women has been identified as part of the rules of war . . . the elevation of masculinity that accompanies war as a way of destroying the enemy's culture' (Ruggiero, 2020, p.142). As any other form of bodily violence used, rape and threats of rape were strategically utilized to achieve the military motives. It was also recurrently made as a public spectacle. Mayangkokla in Ungma village recounts her ordeal of being beaten up and marched from her home to the Church compound where she was raped by the soldiers, in 'full view of the remaining villagers' (Iralu, 2009, p.185). Her story is representative of the many women who had to go through similar experiences. It can be argued that the attacks on women were explicit attacks on the Naga men too. Even during the headhunting days, amongst some tribes, getting a woman's head was considered to be exceptional because 'they were usually protected in the heart of the village by the opposing fighters' (Hattaway, 2006, p.6). In a place like Nagaland where women were once completely relegated to traditional roles, it was considered the duty of the men to protect their women. Sentries that guarded the villages, made sure that the women and children are well-sheltered within. So the physical assaulting and the raping of the Naga women can be read as not just an act to demonstrate the dominance of the men in the military, but also as a means to humiliate the Naga men. Mayangkokla's gang-rape exemplifies this psychological motive, for her ordeal was made as a public spectacle and as the 'villagers could not bring

themselves to watch this sadistic sight and turned their heads away', they 'were all seized with terrible anger but none could do anything' (Iralu, 2009, p. 186-187).

Like in many conflict-ridden places, in Nagaland also, as the above incidents exemplify, both the land and the individual bodies had marks or scars of the brutality for the visibility of the violence is evident (Das & Kleinman, 2001). The specific people who were wounded weren't quite a matter of concern for the military. The particular people who went through the atrocities and those who witnessed it, however, had to live with the psychological wounding all their lives. Many narrate aspects that fall under the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Hamber reminds that the symptoms of PTSD 'must be viewed from a position of understanding the origin of violence and the meanings of those involved, as well as the social and cultural context' (Hamber, 2003, p. 79). Therefore, the psychological motives behind the bodily violence and the categorizing of the symptoms of PTSD of the people who were affected leads to an understanding of the wounds inflicted individually and socially. Herman contends thus:

> Trauma inevitably brings loss. Even those who are lucky enough to escape physically unscathed still lose the internal psychological structure of a self securely attached to others. Those who are physically harmed lose in addition their sense of bodily integrity. And those who lose important people in their lives face a new void in their relationships with friends, family and community. (Herman, 1992, p.188)

All of them experienced loss. Death of a loved one, however it occurs, creates a void. But deaths that fall under the category of traumatic deaths wound the living even more. A death is considered traumatic 'if it occurs without warning; if it is untimely; if it involves violence; if there is damage to the loved one's body; if it was caused by a perpetrator with intent to

harm; if the survivor believes that the loved ones suffered; or if the survivor regards the death, or manner of death as unfair and unjust' (Barlè et al., 2017, p. 127). Many of the Naga people had to undergo this. The families of the people who were massacred at Setsü village are representative of the hundreds of people who dealt with the unexpected deaths of their loved ones. This points to the Naga people's individual wound of traumatic deaths. Years after the incident Mayangkokla, the rape survivor, narrates, 'I see them in my dreams and wake up screaming. I see them even when I am awake' (Iralu, 2009, p.187). Re-experiencing through frequent recollections and also the sensation that the event is happening again, that is to have flashbacks that are intrusive, are symptoms of PTSD. Like Mayangkokla there are thousands of Naga women whose memories are scarred by the sexual violence they were inflicted with. Women who relive the traumatic event through nightmares and trauma triggers whose memories are marked by their individual wound of lost sense of bodily integrity. Many Naga people lived through haunting memories of witnessing torture and killings. For instance, in the case of Kilemsuba and Imna Niken, the little boys who were made to watch the massacre of their uncles at Setsü, recounts how the execution haunted them for months and years. Kilemsuba, even after forty years since the incident, still wakes up screaming in the middle of the night (Iralu, 2009). In the Naga context, this individually designates their wound of witnessing torture and massacre.

Examining the memories of bodily violence inflicted thus points to the psychological motives behind the physical wounding which are inculcating terror, instilling fear, intimidating, and humiliating the Naga people. The PTSDs of the Nagas point to their individual wounds, that is, their wound of traumatic death, wound of lost sense of bodily integrity and their wound of witnessing torture and massacre. The PTSDs also evidence that the original psychological motives of the military were affected on them and this in turn leads to the wound inflicted socially, as a community, which can be argued

as their wound of lost security. As with any survivors of trauma, the notion of the world as a safe place was shattered forever for them. Wounded, they constantly lived and their children grew with a constant lookout for danger.

A study on Naga trauma would remain partial if the trauma caused by the atrocities perpetrated by the military alone is explored since the decades after 1970s saw the domination of the Naga Movement in the political scenario of Nagaland. Studies formulated by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in the 1990s have shown that trauma at both the individual and collective level has at times propelled a growth- a positive change after disastrous events, an altered outlook to life itself. Known as Post-traumatic Growth (PTG), it involves positive response in 'appreciation of life, relationship with others, new possibilities in life, personal strength, [and] spiritual change' (Collier, 2016).

But this was not evident in the Naga society after the atrocities of the turbulent era of the 1950s to the 70s. There was no Post-traumatic Growth on a collective level. Then how it was for the Naga society is the question that emerges. For the Naga people and their land, trauma has been vicious. The Naga Movement began with confronting the Indian Army here and there, but over the years it transformed into a full-fledged Armed Struggle with specific objectives, recruiting and training cadres to take the Movement forward. Every facet of Naga lives came to revolve around and be influenced by this Armed Movement. Moreover, contentions that fermented within the Movement came to directly affect the society as a whole too. The aftermath of the Naga Movement on the Naga society therefore cannot be ignored.

The sense of loyalty and allegiance to one's own village and tribe is deep-rooted in the Nagas. The Naga National Council (NNC), the recognized political body of the Naga people in the 1960s and 70s, was indeed successful in bringing the different Naga tribes under one political banner and the large-scale operations by the Indian Army prompted the Nagas to stay together,

forgetting their tribal affiliations, to fight back. Puni, a member of the Naga Movement, reminiscing on the bygone days states, 'There was no feeling of division between Nagas . . . .We were all Nagas. . . .In those days we felt Naga and loved each other' (Haksar & Hongray, 2019, p. 326). But eventually tribalism slowly began brewing within the Naga Movement. As the Nagas in the 1970s thus began their tussle with tribalism within their Movement, differences that were beyond their tribal loyalties also cropped up paving the way for factionalism too in Nagaland. The Shillong Accord of 1975, an agreement to the surrender of arms which was signed between the representatives of the Naga Movement and the Central Government, led to the formation of a new caretaker Government with Isak Chishi Swu as the Chairman and Thuingaleng Muivah as the General Secretary which later along with S.S Khaplang became the National Socialist Council of Nagaland/Nagalim (NSCN) faction. They condemned the Shillong Accord and branded those who accepted it as Accordists and anti-national. From here the Naga Movement took a dreaded turn and a long bloody journey of fratricidal killings commenced. NSCN also, over the years, splintered into many political bodies all with the same goal of the emancipation of Nagaland.

The simmering cauldron of factionalism and tribalism did not just stay within the ranks of the Naga Armed Movement. Its pangs began to be felt in the Naga community and in every common Naga household in particular too. Caruth contends that the survival of trauma is '. . . the endless *inherent necessity* of repetition, which ultimately may lead to destruction' (Caruth, 2016, p.65). Repetition lies at the core of trauma. Cycles of brutalities and the pain and loss related to it, that ironically sometimes mirrored those that dawned on them with the reign of the military in the past, began to be repeated in Nagaland from the 1980s. Sanyü who lost a dear friend, Pastor Shimray who mediated in bringing peace between two rival groups but was shot down in the process, best describes in these words the general air of

terror that prevailed in Nagaland during the initial days of factionalism:

> A person might be a dinner guest one evening, and after you farewelled them and they walked into the night, they could be shot on the journey home. It was a horrible and taxing time. People were shot in the neighbourhood every week. You feel angry, frustrated and powerless in the face of such acts. But you just had to survive and endure it all, as this was our home, and where I earned my living at the university to support the family. (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p. 181)

The Pastor's death was a consequence of a mix of both tribalism and factionalism. NSCN members had then recently killed a General Povezo who belonged to the Chakhesang tribe and in consequence the Chakhesang tribe had issued a quit notice to the people of the Tangkhul tribe from their area (Sanyü, 2018). As a reply to this the NSCN had stated a deadline to withdraw the quit notice along with death threats. Pastor Shimray, who was a Tangkhul Naga, was a mediator in bringing this rivalry to an end and he was successful in that but was shot dead in front of his whole family in consequence (Sanyü, 2018). Incidents like these were not uncommon in Nagaland from the 1980s since inter-factional killings were and still are rampant bringing with it a wave of pain to the families who are to bear the brunt of it.

Tragedies like these did not remain within certain isolated households either and this brings us to the repercussions of the Naga Movement in the Naga society from the 1980s. As in the bygone days of the terror of the military, the enmity between the rivaling factions as Sanyü states 'led to renewed killing- even massacres, the burning of villages, and subsequent starvation, due to the destruction of food supplies' (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p. 179). From the 1990s, with the splits within the Naga Movement, the feud between rivalling factions increased and so did the atrocities. While reflecting on the 1980s and 1990s Sanyü mentions a 'grim humour' that

the Nagas came up with those days – 'So the people would look at the newspaper, and say: 'Oh, this newspaper looks very boring today, because no-one was shot yesterday, not one person was shot yesterday'' (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p.183). This wry humour emanated as a 'way of coping with the stress' for this points to the grim reality in Nagaland wherein the violence and the wounds it caused has become very much part of their lives, so much so, as he says, the 'expectation was that each day you got out of bed was a day people would die of fratricide (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p.183). Though the general public remained resilient throughout, their despair sometimes erupted, which are pointers to the fear and terror with which they survive and live each day, and their desperate desire for peace in the land

With factional and tribal rivalries and also the retaliation by the security forces due to the activities of the Naga Armed Movement, violence on land continued in the decades that followed from the 1980s, and so did the bodily violence and these were no different from the ones that occurred during the reign of the military in the past. Over the years, the conflicts caused by factionalism and tribalism within the Naga Movement never receded. R.N. Ravi the former interlocutor of the Naga Peace talks has put down a rough number of 3000 fratricidal clashes that led to 1800 Naga deaths, between the 1997 and 2013 and prior to this period from the 1980s around 940 Nagas died in 1125 clashes which included the ones with the security forces (Ravi, 2014). These just designate the clashes within the bounds of the state of Nagaland alone, so evidently there is more, since the Naga people are spread across the states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh also. The Naga people themselves paid with their lives and the remnant remain wounded for life because of the divergences within. The wounds inflicted with the reign of the military due to violence on land and bodily violence, Naga trauma of the past, thus, continued in the era of the Naga Armed Movement also.

Exploring trauma as a social phenomenon in Nagaland cannot just be

constrained to massacres and gun-battles, for it has seeped much deeper into the Naga society. The signing of the ceasefire between the Central Government and factions of the Naga Armed Movement from 1997 has inadvertently led to the establishment of parallel governments in Nagaland. The running of any full-fledge government requires an extensive funding. In fact, the functioning of any such political movement requires adequate material resources as much as human resources. Financial backup is required to keep the Movement going and so the members of the Naga Movement began extortion by imposing taxation on the people. The employed and the unemployed, educated and the uneducated are expected to pay. Sanyü who in 1995 was the head of the Department of Archeology and History in the then newly-formed Nagaland University, talks about factions extorting money, which to them is collecting taxes, from the lecturers of the University. He says, 'Some factions demanded up to 50 per cent of one's wages and it was pay up or be shot. This is what our nationalist movement had become!' (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p.189). At present, in Nagaland, extortion in the guise of taxation is a means to run these governments, which has budgets that are annually drawn that often run to crores. They reach out to the public and demand money. The burden of extortion in Nagaland was finally felt in the protest rally where around 5000 Naga people took to the streets of Nagaland in 2013 under the banner of ACAUT which was then expanded as Action Committee Against Unabated Taxes. They were people from various sectors including businesses, students and other social organisations who came together in protest with a slogan 'one government, one tax'(Wouters, 2018, p.3). It is to be noted that the protesters made it abundantly clear that nobody is against the Naga Movement, for this one government that they cried for is one Naga Government. All that they desire is unification of the different factions so that the menace of paying taxes to multiple governments can be put to an end. Today ACAUT stands for Against Corruption and Unabated Taxation and the protests and cries of the common

people again resonated the streets of Nagaland in 2018 under this banner where everybody 'strongly resolved to stand united irrespective of tribe, community and social position against the menace of illegal collection of tax which has crippled and threatened the survival of the citizens' (Gogoi, 2018). Taxation by the many factions is a burden on the society. With the heavy taxes imposed, the common people are left with little to spare to fend for their family, while the people who are considerably well-off still feel the weight of this taxation which is in effect extortion. This illegal taxation depletes the resources of the common people and it is a form of systemic violence inflicted by the Naga Armed Movement on the Naga community as a whole.

It can't be denied that the Naga Armed Movement has also played a huge role for the staggered growth in Nagaland. Underdevelopment remains a huge problem that is yet to be resolved even though the Central Government has and is still pouring in huge funds for the developmental works in Nagaland. But the greed for money has come to be deep-rooted in the political scenario of Nagaland and so corruption is equally rampant. The armed factions along with many bureaucrats and politicians of the state have swindled the bulk of the lot leaving the common people to suffer again (Santoshini, 2016). Underdevelopment, along with it, has ushered in the problem of unemployment in Nagaland. Since Nagaland offers little to no employment opportunities, people are forced to migrate to other states in search of suitable jobs in order to make a living to survive. With economic deprivation and forced migrations, in effect, the systemic violence that was inflicted during the reign of the military still continues as the aftermath of the Naga Armed Movement, but in a different form. In addition to all of these, the very fact that people live in a conflict-ridden zone has resulted in wide-spread substance abuse, especially amongst youngsters. Hanso Phang appreciating a couple's commendable work amongst drug addicts and HIV patients in the Tuensang area of Nagaland says, 'Young people are talented

here, but we rarely get to channelize it because of the years of trouble and conflict' (Agarwala, 2020). The issues related to substance abuse finds its way into the Naga homes tearing apart families. Sanyü mentions that five of his many nieces and nephews, who consumed alcohol and drugs died due to its impact and he says that it is because they were 'living in a traumatised and unstable society, which was a major reason why many young people, including my nieces and nephews, abused alcohol and drugs' (Sanyü & Broome, 2018, p. 190).

The Naga people and their land from the 1980s continue to live in the shadow of violence. With factional and tribal contentions in the Armed Movement, violence on land and bodily violence continued in these decades, therefore their sense of security and stability still remained alien socially. A different form of systemic violence was also inflicted with taxation in the guise of extortion, economic deprivation and forced migrations bringing with it the wound of lost sustainability as in the past. Thus, violence on land, bodily violence and systemic violence continued as in the past, the only difference is that these were mostly self-inflicted. Since the violence inflicted by the Naga Armed Movement has close parallels with those inflicted by the military in the past, the wounds, that is the Naga trauma of the past were, and still continues to be inflicted again making Naga trauma a destructive phenomenon in Nagaland.

The series of violence that commenced as early as the 1950s, and spanned over many decades, have significantly wounded and continue to wound both the Naga people and their land. In ruined land and homes, in their disfigured and mutilated bodies and in their psychological disfigurations, the cruelty inflicted on the Naga people is perceived. By identifying and exploring the Naga trauma, or Naga wounds, of the past and present as a collective, as a society, it can be contended that Naga trauma was multifaceted since it did not evade any aspect of their society. Their wounds which are the trauma traces embedded within their narrations of the traumatic events, are the

wounds of the loss of everything that held the Naga society together, that is, stability, continuity, sustainability and security. The memories of violence during their turbulent past and present are therefore, in effect, their lament of the blow to the very social fabric of the Naga society. Therefore, it can be contended that the Naga Conflict has indeed made an indelible imprint on the Naga community. But the Naga people are resilient as evidenced in how they survived decades of violence and healing of the trauma is not impossible. The resolution of the conflict, which has been much awaited, will mark the beginning of their healing process as a society. But it is no doubt that as much as their way to freedom has been long, their road to the healing of their wounds, to be restored as a community, is also going to be long.

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Implementation of the Right to Information Act, 2005: Role of the Meghalaya State Information Commission

Batskhem Myrboh*

Abstract

Right to information is critical in democracy in which government is based on the principles of transparency and accountability of the rulers to the people. India adopted a democratic constitution in 1950, yet the Official Secrets Acts of 1923 continued depriving the citizens of the right to information. It was the Supreme Court through its successive rulings that brought to the fore the importance of the exercise of the right to information and that it was part of the freedom of speech and expression enshrined in the Indian Constitution. After protracted efforts, the Right to Information Act was eventually enacted in 2005. For its effective implementation, the Act provides for the establishment of the Information Commission at the Centre and the states as well. Mandated by the Act, the Meghalaya Government constituted the Meghalaya State Information Commission to oversee the implementation of the Act in the state. This paper, therefore, examines the role of the State Information Commission in the implementation of the Right to Information Act, 2005 which assumes for furthering democratic governance in the state.

Keywords: Transparency, Accountability, Right to Information, Fundamental Rights, Meghalaya

I. Introduction

The Preamble of the Constitution of India begins with "We the people of India" thereby declaring that it is the expressed will of the people to adopt a Democratic Secular Socialist Republic based on popular sovereignty

* The author is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

which draws power from the people. Such a system demands that public authorities exercising the power of the state should imperatively uphold the principles and practices of openness, transparency and accountability. Juxtaposing to what was theoretically proclaimed, in practice governance in India prior to 2005 was marked in a comprehensive manner by an opaque and obscure system obligated by an archaic colonial law, the Official Secrets Act, 1923 (hereafter Act of 1923) which restricted any act of transmission of information from the government to the public under the façade of protecting the interests and security of the state. The continuity of the Act of 1923 post adoption of a democratic constitution ran contrary to the hopes and aspirations of the people of independent India. The Act of 1923 was designed to protect the colonial interests of the British rulers from the people of India.

Right to information assumes significance because of the growing realisation of the imperativeness and adoption of liberal democracy as the most appropriate and desired form of government but which makes deeper sense only when the rulers are accountable to the people. Right to information does not make sense in other system of governments as they are not based on the principle that power is sourced from the people. Right to information, according to Laura Neuman (2005) of the Carter Centre[1], is important for citizens because it "allows them to participate in priority setting and decision-making, to hold their government accountable, and to assure equal treatment and equal justice. Information belongs to the people; governments simply hold information in their name." This statement underlines the importance of right to information in democracy which empowers the citizens not only to fix accountability upon the government but also to enable the people to participate in the country's process of development. P.N. Bhagwati of the India's Supreme Court in the S.P. Gupta versus President of India and Others (Supreme Court of India, 1981) opines that right to information is fundamental in a democratic country as it

enables its citizens to make it truly democratic with their active participation in it and not merely participating in customary election of representatives periodically. He further states, "No democratic Government can survive without accountability and the basic postulate of accountability is that the people should have information about the functioning of the Government" (Supreme Court of India, 1981: 51). The former Vice President of India, M. Hamid Ansari in 2016 stressed the importance of right to information considering it as a critical instrument capable of reinforcing democracy by promoting accountability and transparency through active participation of the citizens (Press Information Bureau, 2016). According to Sergio Adorno and Nancy Cardia (2013: 24):

> The right to information in contemporary democratic societies was therefore seen as a crucial factor in the struggle for citizenship; it is the foundation upon which all rights are built. Just as there is no democracy without the protection of human rights, so there can be no viable human rights agenda without respect for civil and public liberties, amongst which is the right to information.

The above statements and observations underscore strongly the importance of right to information in a democratic country where citizens' welfare and interests assume the underlying position of the entire system. Without right to information democracy is hollow and has least significance for the citizens. Instead of being a people's centric form of government, democracy without right to information is positioning the rulers as the end of the state; it is reduced to a system where the people are used as mere agents legitimising the rulers.

Right to information is one of the basic human rights that the United Nations has enunciated in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(UDHRs) adopted by the General Assembly in 1948. Human rights according to the United Nations (UN) are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and such other rights that are fundamental for the development of an individual. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination. Article 19 of the UDHRs states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the right to...seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers". In spite of the fact that the UDHRs lack any legal status and it is non-binding in nature upon signatory states yet, its significance lies in the fact that it sets a universal point of reference to measure the performance of a state in terms of its ability and efforts in promoting and protecting human rights.

The Indian representatives - Hansa Mehta who was also a member of the India's Constituent Assembly, Mr. Masani and Lakshmi Menon considerably contributed towards the drafting of the UDHRs at different junctures (Kothari, 2018) particularly on the question of gender equality (Government of India, 2012). When on December 10, 1948 the Draft UDHRs was placed before the UN General Assembly for its adoption, India together with other 47 one of member states voted in favour. The close association and contributions that the Indian delegates had with the drafting of the UDHRs impacted the drafting of the Indian Constitution as well. Consequently, to a large extent the Constituent Assembly was influenced by the provisions of the UDHRs. A number of those rights enshrined in the UDHRs have been incorporated in its Chapter III and Chapter IV dealing with the provisions of Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy respectively.

The right to information, like any other human rights enshrined in

the UDHRs, assumed a legal status with the adoption of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPRs), in 1966 and its final enforcement in 1976 vide Article 19. Similarly, India acceded to the ICCPRs on the 10th April, 1979.

In spite of the avowed commitment of the Indian state towards human rights promotion and protection agenda as set forth by the UN through its various declarations and covenants, a paradoxical situation emerged where a number of those rights were not granted to the Indian citizens, the right to information being one of them. It was neither provided as a fundamental right in the Constitution of India nor made a legal right under any of the statutory measures though it is a critical premise upon which the right to freedom of speech and expression is built. However, it was by dint of progressive interpretations of Supreme Court in various litigations that brought the right to information into a point of focus which later undoubtedly inspired the citizens of India to fight for legal provisions to enjoy it. It was after a protracted struggle by the citizens and the civil societies that in 2005 the Parliament enacted a strong Right to Information Act to the satisfaction of the public. The Act was finally implemented partly on June 15, 2005 and October 12, 2005.

According to its Preamble the RTI Act, 2005 was enacted, *inter alia,* because of the following reasons:

1. India is a Democratic Republic.

2. For a democratic country, knowledgeable citizens along with availability of information are a pre-requisite as this will help to control corrupt practices and demand accountability from the governmental machineries.

The enactment of the RTI Act, 2005 has been hailed as one of the most progressive step towards bringing a deeper democratic system. Since its operationalisation, the Act has been widely employed by citizens across

the country to bring transparency and accountability at different levels of government (Satark Nagrik Sangathan and the Centre for Equity Studies , 2018: 1).

II. MSIC: Constitution, composition, powers and functions

For the effective implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 at the state level, provisions have been provided for the establishment of the State Information Commission (SIC) to be named after the State concerned. Accordingly, the Meghalaya State Information Commission was constituted by the Government of Meghalaya on October 3, 2005 as the statutory body to oversee the implementation of the Act by the public authorities within the jurisdiction of the Government of Meghalaya (hereafter state government). However, it was only in February, 2006 that the MSIC became functional with the appointment of G.P. Wahlang, a retired member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) as its Chief Information Commissioner (Pariat, 2006). As per Clause 2 of Section 5 of the RTI Act, 2005, the State Information Commission is to include the State Chief Information Commissioner (SCIC) and other State Information Commissioners which the number should not exceed ten. The Department of Information and Public Relation (DIPR) initially served as the nodal department under which the budget of the MSIC was made and through which it had to submit the annual report to the Government of Meghalaya. In 2008, a change in this regard was effected whereby the Personnel and Administrative Reform Department of the state government was made as the nodal department. The MSIC, however, claimed in its 2008 Annual Report that making the government department as the institution under which it had to function did not impede the independence of MSIC as it was not accountable to such department (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2008: 8).

In 2011, C.D. Kynjing was appointed as the Chief Information Commissioner (Diengdoh L. , 2011) who was subsequently succeeded by

B.P.O. Warjri in 2016 (Diengdoh L. , 2016). Presently, the SIC is headed by H. Nongpluh a retired officer in the Indian Police Service (Lyngdoh R., 2021). As per Sub section 2 of Section 15 of the RTI Act, the SIC should consist of the State Chief Information Commissioner (SCIC) and other State Information Commissioners which the number should not exceed ten. However, the MSIC has always been a single member commission.

Looking at the background of those occupying the office of the Chief Information Commissioner of the MSIC, it is revealed that all the Chief Information Commissioners have been the retired officials of the state bureaucracy. This practice of appointing retired members of the civil service at the helm of affairs of the Information Commissions (ICs) is not peculiar only in the case of the MSIC but it has been a general trend even for the appointment of other Chief Information Commissioners and Information Commissioners of both the Central Information Commission and other State Information Commissions as well to which the Supreme Court of India took a critical view and disbelief that only bureaucrats have the expertise of occupying such offices. The Court observed , "It is difficult to fathom that persons belonging to one category only are always found to be more competent and more suitable than persons belonging to other categories." (Supreme Court of India, 2019: 33).

According to the Satark Nagrik Sangathan and the Centre for Equity Studies (2018: 11) there are two sides of arguments which stand for and against the domination of retired bureaucrats in the ICs. While those favouring their appointments argue that they are best people in terms of knowledge about the availability of information and to make them available to the citizens because of their long experiences in administration. On the other hand, the critics point out such bureaucrats turned Chief Information Commissioners and Information Commissioners would develop camaraderie with the serving bureaucrats thereby helping them in scuttling the efforts to bring in transparency.

Looking from the workload perspective, it is justifiable for the MSIC to be a single member commission as Meghalaya is a small state with less number of applications and appeals or complaints. However, this can be a source of disadvantage as the Chief Information Commissioner may be deprived of the opportunity to consult with the other ICs having expertise in other fields and this may in turn have wider ramifications for the effective implementation of the RTI Act, 2005.

For the effective operation and functioning of the SIC, the state government is statutorily required by the RTI Act, 2005 under Sub section 6 of Section 16 to provide with officers and staff as needed. Accordingly the other officers and staff have been deputed by the state government to be engaged in the Commission. There is one Secretary and ten other staff working in the Commission (Meghalaya State Information Commission, n.d).

The MSIC has the mission to safeguard the rights of the citizens to gain access to information as per the provisions of the RTI Act, 2005 while it envisions that public authorities function and work with transparency and accountability in order to contain corruption. The commission also has an objective to carry out the duties mandated by the Act (Meghalaya State Information Commission, n.d).

III. MSIC and the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005

The MSIC like any other ICs created under the RTI Act, 2005 exercises a number of powers and functions which are critical in the effective implementation of the Act. The working of the MSIC in the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005[2] can be looked into by taking into context those powers and functions which can be discussed under the following heads:-

1. Receiving and Disposing Complaints and Appeals

Fulfilling one of its statutory mandates as provided vide Section 18 and 19 of the RTI Act, 2005 the MSIC has been performing the task of receiving,

examining, inquiring and disposing the complaints and appeals duly filed by the information seekers against the commissions and omissions of the Public Information Officers (PIOs), the Departmental Appellate Authorities (DAAs) and the public authorities. From the figures in Table 1.1 it is visible that the MSIC did not receive numerous complaints.[3]

Table 1.1: Complaints in the MSIC

Year	No. of complaints received	No. of complaints disposed off	No. of complaints rejected	No. of complaints Pending
2006	11	09	01	01
2007	39	38	13	01
2008	37	36	12	01
2009	47	45	12	02
2010	41	32	07	02
2011	31	31	00	00
2012	43	39	00	04
2013	32	32	00	00
2014	27	25	00	02
2015	51	51	00	00
2016	40	40	00	00
2017	37	37	00	00
2018	15	15	00	00
2019	10	10	00	00
2020	08	08	00	00
Total	469	448	45	13

Source: Meghalaya State Information Commission Annual Reports (2006-2020)

More than one reason can explain the low filing of complaints before the MSIC. One such reason has been the low application of the RTI Act which can be observed from Table 1.2 especially in the initial years. This low application can be partly due to the low level of awareness among the people especially in the rural areas and also due to the fact that the RTI Act, 2005 does not have the punitive clause for those who are alleged of committing

corrupt practices as revealed by the disseminated information. Another reason for the low rate of complaint before the MSIC is the efficiency and ability of the PIOs to provide timely and appropriate responses and decisions. According to the findings of the Right to Information Assessment and Analysis Group (RAAG) in their survey among states found out that "Meghalaya stands out as the quickest, the most compliant, and also the politest amongst all the states surveyed, in responding to RTI applications –largest the percentage of responses with all the information requested were received from Meghalaya" (As quoted in Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2008, p. 4). Even at the district level, the RAAG similarly found out that Meghalaya along with Karnataka were the most compliant states in responding to right to information applications (As cited in Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2008). The findings of the RAAG are corroborated by the data submitted annually by the different public authorities to the MSIC. It was found that almost all RTI applications were disposed with only a small percentage of them being rejected as can be observed from Table 1.3 signifying the good compliance of the PIOs and public authorities in responding to the RTI applications as required by the law (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2006).

Table 1.2: Number of RTI Applications in Meghalaya

Year	No. of RTI Applications
2006	310
2007	537
2008	360
2009	676
2010	836
2011	1074
2012	1289
2013	1625
2014	1816

2015	2663
2016	2132
2017	5231
2018	2611
2019	3357
2020	2644
Total	**27161**

Source: Extracted from table 7.2.2 of the MSCI Annual Report 2020

Table 1.3: RTI Applications Disposed and Rejected by the PIO

Year	No. of RTI application disposed	No. of RTI rejected
2006	310	28
2007	537	10
2008	360	02
2009	676	04
2010	836	04
2011	1074	07
2012	1289	16
2013	1625	30
2014	1816	23
2015	2663	06
2016	2132	01
2017	5231	81
2018	2531	69
2019	3225	67
2020	2529	115
Total	26834	463

Source: Extracted from table 7.2.2 of the Meghalaya State Information Commission Annual Report 2020

Another important function that the MSIC performs in the implementation of the RTI Act is to receive and decide the second appeals preferred by the RTI applicants against the decisions of the DAAs. From the figures in Table 1.4, it can be observed that few second appeals were preferred by

the RTI applicants against the decision of the DAA with average of around 12 appeals per year from 2006-2020. Besides, the less number of RTI applications filed and the high compliance of the PIOs to the requests for information, the effectiveness of the DAAs of different public authorities in deciding and disposing the first level appeals as can be observed in Table 1.5 also contributed towards the less number of second appeals preferred before the MSIC. In terms of the effectiveness of the MSIC to dispose the second appeals, it can be observed from Table 1.4 that the MSIC was able to achieve a high disposal rate (including those rejected) of more than 93 per cent while the pending cases of appeals was negligible.

Table 1.4: Appeals Received and Disposed by MSIC

Year	No. of appeal received	No. of appeals disposed	No. of appeals rejected	No. of appeals Pending
2006	06	06	00	00
2007	18	18	00	00
2008	23	20	00	03
2009	37	34	00	03
2010	17	14	01	02
2011	13	08	05	00
2012	08	04	00	04
2013	17	15	00	02
2014	14	13	00	01
2015	15	15	00	00
2016	11	11	00	00
2017	12	12	00	00
2018	04	04	00	00
2019	05	05	00	00
2020	02	02	02	00
Total	202	181	08	15

Source: Meghalaya State Information Commission Annual Reports (2006-2020)

Table 1.5: First Appeal Filed, Disposed and Rejected by the DAA

Year	No. of first appeals received during the year	No. of first appeals disposed	No. of first appeals rejected
2006	21	20	1
2007	108	106	2
2008	23	23	0
2009	39	39	0
2010	42	36	6
2011	94	94	0
2012	118	117	1 carried over to the next year
2013®	78	66	NA
2014®	123	120	NA
2015®	122	131	NA
2016®	112	154	NA
2017	239	237	2
2018	77	71	6
2019©	138	125	21
2020	191	164	27
Total€	1525	1503	65

Source: Extracted from Table 7.3.2 of the Meghalaya State Information Commission Annual Report 2020.

® Number of appeals disposed included those carried forward from the previous year.

© In the Report the total number of appeals that was disposed and the appeals that were rejected did not match with the total number of appeals that were received during the year.

€ There is a mismatch between the total number of appeals and the total number of appeals disposed and the number of appeals that were rejected.

NA stands for Not Available.

One of the critical sections of the RTI Act, 2005 which makes its enforcement strong has been Section 20 by which the IC can impose penalty on the erring PIOs. It can also direct the public authorities to compensate the RTI applicants in case he or she has suffered a loss due to the non supply of information requested from the PIO of the public authority concerned. Also, it has the power make recommendation to the concerned public authority for disciplinary actions against the PIOs who acted in contravention to the obligations set forth in the Act. From Table 1.6, it can be observed between 2006 and 2020; the MSIC imposed 48 penalties on different PIOs of different public authorities. The MSIC also recommended four cases of disciplinary actions to be taken against the PIOs under the relevant service and conduct rules governing their services during the same period. The MSIC also imposed compensation in 12 cases.

Table 1.6: Penalties, Disciplinary Action and Compensation

Year	No. of penalties imposed	No. of recommendation for disciplinary action	Compensation
2006	00	00	00
2007	03	00	00
2008	02	02	03
2009	08	00	03
2010	05	01	03
2011	02	00	02
2012	04	00	00
2013	07	00	01
2014	03	01	00
2015	12	00	00
2016	02	00	00
2017®	00	00	00
2018®	06	00	00
2019	06	01	00
2020	05	00	00
Total	48	04	12

Source: Meghalaya State Information Commission Annual Reports (2006-2020)

® The data were not clearly shown in the report but they were based on the perusal of the orders of the Commissions as included in the respective reports

In spite of the fact that the RTI Act, 2005 does not lay down the maximum time limit for the ICs to dispose complaints and appeals, yet the MSIC in 2007 proactively decided to dispose them within 60 days after receiving such complaints (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2007, p. 13). Early disposal of complaints and appeals is significant for the successful implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 as it helps in keeping the hopes and faith of ordinary citizens as well as the leaders of different civil societies in the effectiveness of the Act to bring about the qualitative improvement of the political system. However, it can be seen that, the MSIC was in certain cases unable to dispose the appeals and complaints within the self-imposed time frame. But the MSIC claimed that it was able to dispose appeals and complaints within a period of 90 days except those cases where the complainants or RTI applicants lodged further complaints for the inaccurate and incomplete compliance of the PIOs/public authorities to execute the orders of the MSIC (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2008: p. 27). This clearly establishes the efficacy of the MSIC in the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005. It may be noted that in the case of Central Information Commission as well as the other SICs, cases are pending for years before their final disposals (Bhatnagar, 2022).

The MSIC again during the tenure of the first Chief Information Commissioner tried to adopt a pro-public approach where it tried to reach out to the people by creating an enabling environment for them to exercise the right to Information. In 2007, the MSIC envisaged the creation of the district level cells in order to make it more accessible to the public and at the same time to have a better monitoring of the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 (Annual report: 2007). However, till date the MSIC has not been able to fulfil this dream. The inability to establish the cells at the district level did not stop the MSIC from trying some other efforts and means to reach out to the people. In 2011, the MSIC conducted one day hearing of complaints and appeals filed by the citizens from Garo Hills in Tura (MSIC Annual Report,

2011: 11) and in 2012 the two day hearings were conducted (MSIC Annual Report, 2012: 10). But this innovative practice has been discontinued citing the impracticability to conduct such hearings outside the headquarters as the Commission is expected to dispose of the cases as early as possible from the date of the receipt of complaints or appeals (Warjri, 2020).

2. Capacity building

Section 26 of the RTI Act, 2005 lays stress on the importance of building capacities of the citizens, APIOs, the PIOs, and the DAAs that the governments whether central or state should undertake whether through training programmes or publishing relevant literature. Accordingly, in Meghalaya a number of such programmes were organised especially in the initial phase of its implementation. The MSIC played an important role in this sphere of activity. In 2008 the MSIC utilised a certain amount of its resources for organising awareness programmes in different districts. For several years, the former Chief Information Commissioner, G.P. Wahlang and the former Secretary of the MSIC, S.F. Khongwir had been part of quite a number of capacity building programmes conducted by the offices of the Deputy Commissioners of different districts as represented in Table 1.7. The Chief Information Commissioner and the Secretary of the MSIC had been part of many training programmes for the APIOs, the PIOs, the DAAs and other government officials in the early years of the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005. Their participation in such training programmes assumed significance in view of the fact that when they were well trained and informed of their duties and the processes of supplying the information as required by the RTI Act, 2005, it would greatly improve the success rate of timely supply of information sought by the citizens. The discussion on the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 through case studies as had been done in those training programmes would definitely have gone a long way in building the capacity of the PIOs and the DAAs in understanding the complexities of implementation of the RTI Act, 2005. Similarly, the former

Chief Information Commissioner and the former Secretary of the MSIC participated in awareness programmes for the citizens, leaders of self-help groups (SHGs) and members of the civil societies in different parts of the State. It is highly significant to build the capacity of the citizens for the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 as they are the primary stakeholders in the entire gamut of the intent and process of the implementation of the Act as they are the ones who can set the ball rolling.

Besides participating and attending these programmes, the MSIC published in 2008 the *Guide for the Information Seekers* in three languages- Khasi, Garo and English. The booklet was written in a simple but effective style which would have definitely helped the common people in understanding the law and in applying it. Besides, the Chief Information Commissioner attended other workshops and programmes outside the state convened by different organizations.

Table 1.7: Capacity Building Programmes participated by the MSIC

Year	Number of training programmes for PIOs and other officials	Awareness Programmes
2007	08	01
2008	04	01
2009	08	06
2010	11	04
2011	10	06
2012	05	Nil
2013	02	Nil
Total	50	20

Source: *MSIC Annual Reports 2006-20*

3. Streamlining the Public Authorities

In the initial years of the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 many

government departments barring a few found it difficult to correctly identify public authorities and accordingly to appoint officials responsible to implement the Act in such public authorities (Annual report: 2007, p. 13). Moreover, it was found that there was lack of necessary detailed information about address, contact details of the officials appointed as APIOs, PIOs and DAAs in various public authorities and there was also obscurity about the kind of information that such officials were dealing with (Annual Report: 2006, p. 32). All this created a situation where the citizens found it difficult to get access to information. In this aspect, the MSIC made significant contributions by conducting several meetings with different government departments whereby useful advices were given to rationally identify public authorities and to accordingly appoint the officials required to operationalise the Act (Annual report: 2007, p. 13). Also, the MSIC in its Annual Report of 2006 prepared a consolidated directory of public authorities along with the address and contact details of the APIOs, PIOs and DAAs which was updated in the subsequent annual reports. Such a consolidated list assumes significance for the common man in their exercise of the right to information as provided by the RTI Act, 2005 without much difficulty in identifying the public authorities and their designated officers dealing with the RTI Act, 2005 thereby helping them to get their applications flow in the right channel.

4. Recommendations

The MSIC since its first annual report made for the year 2006 has been making several recommendations to make the RTI Act, 2005 more effective by bringing amendments to the principal Act and also other recommendations. For the sake of brevity only some of the more important recommendations would be discussed in this section.

In its 2006 Annual Report (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2006: 36), the MSIC recommended to bring in two amendments that it felt required. The first recommendation was in relation to Sub-section (1)

and (2) of Section 20 of the RTI Act, 2005 seeking to empower the ICs of both the centre and the states to impose penalty or recommend disciplinary action against the PIO or public authorities that repudiate to execute the decree of either the CIC or SIC. The second recommendation relating to the amendment required to be made to the principal Act, amendment proposal was the empowerment of the ICs enabling it to put into effect the orders passed by it requiring the recovery of the amount imposed in the form of penalty or compensation be treated as public demand as provided in Section 3 of Bengal Public Demands Recovery Act, 1913.

While the second recommendation was already accepted by the State Government by incorporating it in the RTI rules notified by the Government of Meghalaya in 2007 which are known as the Right to Information (Appeal & Procedures of the State Information Commission) Rules, 2007 (RTI Rules, 2007). As per rule 9 of RTI Rules, 2007 that in case the PIO fails to deposit the penalty amount with the Commission within the time prescribed 'the amount shall be deemed to be a public demand as defined under the Bengal Public Demands Recovery Act, 1913' (Som, 2007).

The other recommendation though crucial to strengthen the RTI Act, 2005 yet the state government has not taken any initiative in bringing the recommendation to the attention of the Government of India in this regard as making amendment to the principal Act falls under the legislative authority of the Parliament. Also, no civil society organisation has taken note of the important recommendation and makes necessary demand to initiate such amendment. However, this recommendation was also continued in the subsequent annual reports of the Commission.

Another significant recommendation of the MSIC was the necessity to bring a formal linkage of the village administration either with the state government or the Autonomous District Councils through legal measures by which the village authorities can be brought under the ambit of the RTI

Act, 2005 (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2006; 37). It was recognised and realised that the information under the control of the village authorities are needed to be brought into public domain to strengthen democracy at the grassroots level as it was done in other parts of the country where the panchayatiraj institutions are operational (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2006: 37)

The MSIC took cognizance the important role that the PIOs play in the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 and to make them more compliant to the Act, the MSIC made carrot and stick recommendations for such officers. It recommended in the early years of the implementation of the Act to provide necessary supports to the PIOs by creating contingency fund and providing other facilities to them to enable them to execute their duties as per the requirements of the Act (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2007: 39-40). It also made a recommendation that PIOs should be provided with honorarium which is commensurate to the number of applications handled by them (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2007: 40). This recommendation assumes significance in view of the fact that the PIOs have huge responsibilities besides handling the other normal official duties. However, while being sympathetic with the challenges faced by the PIOs, the MSIC also took a strong view against the erring PIOs whereby it recommended that the disciplinary proceedings and actions taken against them for their failure to carry out the duties as required by the RTI Act, 2005 should be reflected in their service books/service records. Also the MSIC recommended that the track record of the officers in the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 should be made in their annual confidential report (ACR) or annual assessment report (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2007: 41). The acceptance of this recommendation would place the erring PIOs in a difficult position as it would directly affect their career and therefore, would act as deterrence for non-compliance to the mandated requirements of the Act. Therefore, this suggestion if accepted and implemented would

hugely contribute towards the success of the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 as simply imposing penalty in monetary term may not be counted seriously by some PIOs as a few thousand rupees is not really impacting their financial loss.

In the preparation of annual report, the MSIC is required by the law to get the report of the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 from the different heads of departments and institutions. However, over the years the MSIC found it difficult to receive such reports from certain departments thereby, making it difficult for it to prepare a comprehensive and objective report on the implementation of the Act in the state. In connection with this problem, the MSIC therefore, recommended in 2008 and its other subsequent annual reports that the state government should seriously take failure of the heads of those departments by reflecting such failure in their ACRs in order to compel them to comply with the requirement of the law and directive of the Commission (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2009: 89).

Another recommendation of the MSIC to bring about a wider spread implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 was the necessity to strengthen the awareness programmes for the people especially the youths. Therefore, a recommendation in 2009 was made that the RTI Act, 2005 should be part of school curriculum (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2009: 89). Earlier in 2007, the MSIC made an important recommendation that civil societies and non-governmental organisations should be provided with financial assistance to continue with their popularisation of the Act among the people and creating capacity building among them. It cannot be denied that the civil societies especially those working under the umbrella of Meghalaya Right to Information Movement (MRTIM) have been playing a critical role in the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 in Meghalaya especially among the underprivileged section of the society such as the poor and illiterate populace in rural areas.

It is evident that the MSIC has over the years made important observations and recommendations to further strengthen the RTI Act, 2005 and also to better its implementation across the state. However, most of the recommendations have not been accepted by the state government. Therefore, those recommendations consequently became superfluous when the government concerned is not committed to the spirit of the Act, i.e., to bring about transparency and accountability to the highest possible extent. The lack of response from the government might be a factor responsible for the non-making of any observations and recommendations since 2015 by the MSIC.

5. Coordination with Civil Societies

The MSIC developed a positive attitude towards the role of the civil societies in the state for the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005. It is interesting to note that the first Chief Information Commissioner, G.P. Wahlang in spite of the fact that he was a former bureaucrat, abandoned the bureaucratic attitude in the execution of his role and responsibilities. Due to his welcoming attitude, the civil societies were able to make good contribution towards the efficiency of the MSIC through their constructive suggestions (Annual Report: 2008, P. 6). However, this synergy that was developed and maintained during the tenure of G.P. Wahlang, prominent leaders of MRTIM felt, could not be sustained and carried forward. It was lamented that with the change of the Chief Information Commissioner in 2011, there was a shift in the manner in which the MSIC approached to the implementation of the RTI Act. Also, they observed that there has been a change in the attitude of the MSIC towards the public authorities whereby they have become pro public authorities against the interests of the citizens and that the rapport with the civil societies suffered a decline (Syiem, 2019; Rngad, Bhartiya, & Pyrtuh, 2020) This allegation against the MSIC is quite grave though it came even when the MSIC in its

2012 annual report mentioned about the positive role played by the civil society organisations (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2012: 2). However, what is striking in this context was the stand taken by the MSIC in its Annual Report of 2014 where it was remarked that there was a visible misuse of the RTI Act, 2005 in the state to harass the PIOs by seeking voluminous information on different subjects (Meghalaya State Information Commission, 2014: 1). This observation may not be totally untrue but it may also reflect some element of truth in the observation of the members of the civil society against the way the MSIC has been functioning post G.P. Wahlang period though further study is required in this matter.

V. Conclusion

From the above discussion on its working, it is evident that the MSIC has been performing powers and functions which are diverse in nature and as per the mandate and requirement of the RTI Act, 2005 and to some extent even beyond the normal requirements. It its functioning as the apex body to oversee the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 the first Chief Information Commissioner tried his best to make its operation as smooth as possible every level. The MSIC put much effort with enthusiasm in the initial years to lay a strong foundation for the operation of the Act in the State. Therefore, it cannot be denied that through its various activities that it has been performing to successfully implement the RTI Act, 2005 the MSIC has played an important part in transforming the nature of democracy whereby people shifted their role from being simply the legitimising agent of power to that of a being that actually share power in the state. The MSIC has been able to rekindle hope among the people in the democratic system. With the final enforcement of the Meghalaya Lokayukta Act, 2014, it is hoped that the citizens would be more involved in the implementation

of the RTI Act, 2005 and the effectiveness or otherwise of the MSIC will be more visible. It may be noted that the Lokayukta has the power to investigate into matters of corruption and prosecute all those accused when they are proven of their corrupt practices.

But it is quite disheartening to learn that prominent members of the civil societies who were deeply engaged in the process of implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 among the masses showed their concern with the manner in which the Chief Information Commissioners who occupied offices later have been functioning. In spite of such a concern it cannot be denied that the MSIC has been overall able to function effectively in the implementation of the RTI Act, 2005 judging from the rate of disposal of appeals and complaints and also from the number of penalties imposed on the PIOs However, the ability of the MSIC and the other ICs will be tested in the future when their autonomy is to a certain degree compromised by the Right to Information (Amendment) Act, 2019 which made critical amendments to the principal Act. According to the Amendment Act the term and service conditions of the Chief Information Commissioners as well as the other Information Commissioners of both the CIC and the SICs were affected. According to the new provisions, the terms of offices as well as the service conditions such as pay and allowances of the CICs and the other ICs are to be determined by the Central Government. This Amendment has been criticised by the RTI activists as well as the former Information Commissioners as a regressive step diluting the effectiveness of the Act which would have negative repercussions in the independence of the Information Commissions (Business Standard, 2019).

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Endnotes:

[1] The Carter Center is a non-governmental organisation that works for the advancement of democracy and human rights across the world apart from other activities.

[2] 2006 to 2020 is the period that is taken to examine the working of the MSIC.

[3]The figures in the table and the sub-sequent tables lack accuracy. The total number of

complaints disposed and those rejected taken together do not tally with the total number of complaints that were received by the commission. Therefore, these figures should be taken as indication not as absolute truth.

Festival Tourism Development in Meghalaya: An Analysis

Chandana Bhattacharjee*
&
Madhuchhanda Das Gupta**
&
Rosemary Debbarma***

Abstract

Festival tourism has emerged as a dynamic and multifaceted activity, blending cultural, societal, financial, and ecological aspects. It shapes destination identities, invigorates local economies, and provides enriching experience for tourists. The paper attempts to understand and analyse two popular festivals of Meghalaya–Shad Nongkrem and Cherry Blossom festivals vis-à-vis tourism. Both quantitative and qualitative research approach has been used to get an in-depth insight into the festivals under study. The study reveals that, with time the festivals have grown in scale and attractiveness alluring both national and international tourists. The study also highlights the factors which are likely to influence participation of the local community in tourism activity and the perception of tourists on various aspects of the festivals. The rise in tourist footfalls over the years has induced the authorities to improve the attractiveness of the festivals through inclusion of various events based on consumer demand. Hence, to ensure sustainable tourism development, the endowed natural resources including cultural heritage may be organised and deployed in a manner that gives comparative advantage to the destination and enhance its ability to compete for tourists.

Keywords: Cherry Blossom, **C**ulture, Festival, Hima Khyriem, Nongkrem, sustainable tourism

* The author is Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Women's College, Shillong.
**The author is Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Women's College, Shillong
*** The author is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Women's College, Shillong

Introduction

Culture encompasses combinations of cultural elements, the structural arrangement and operation of these elements, forming a dynamic system that undergoes constant evolution and transformation. This ongoing process leads to changes in its components over time. An individual's connection to a specific society is established by their adherence to cultural norms and practices. It is crucial to acknowledge that 'culture' serves as a tool for survival, and any alteration or inclusion of novel aspects within it reflects humanity's endeavours to enhance survival strategies.

Edward Burnett Tylor defines "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871). In a nutshell, a culture holistically is represented through the structural function of a society. The society evolves by introducing new culture, modifies the existing cultural practice, etc., as and when necessity emerges. The basic aspects of culture have universal requirements. All that appears as a practice for generations in a society evolves with its 'value' at the core.

Festival is one of the aspects of culture that is rapidly evolving as a potential product that can expedite tourism development. The discourse surrounding festivals within society and culture, encompassing their functions, significance, and effects, has achieved considerable advancement. In recent times, both scholars from conventional disciplines and those from diverse fields have been investigating festivals from a wide array of perspectives. These include their contributions to shaping localities and collective identities, the societal and cultural repercussions tied to festivals and festival-based tourism, the cultivation of social and cultural assets through organising festivals, promotion of artistic endeavours and safeguarding of heritage practices, as well as the various personal benefits stemming from

festival participation. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD,2009) has highlighted the role of cultural assets in promoting destinations and attracting tourists. On the demand side, culture and heritage of a place are factors that attract tourists and provide them with unique experiences and entertainment. On the supply side, cultural tourism stimulates regional economies by generating income, employment, and enhancing competition in tourism markets. Due to the positive impact of cultural tourism in promoting growth, governments across the world are increasingly adopting it (Richards,2001).

Area of Study

Meghalaya, a picturesque state in North-Eastern India, is known for its lush landscapes, rolling hills, and vibrant culture. The state is home to diverse indigenous communities, each with its own distinct traditions and customs. The Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes are the major ethnic groups, contributing to Meghalaya's rich cultural tapestry.

Festivals in Meghalaya are colourful and lively, reflecting the state's deep-rooted traditions. Studying festival tourism in Meghalaya is important because it helps in understanding the rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions of the region. Festivals like *Wangala*, *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, and *Shad Nongkrem* etc., attract tourists, promoting cultural exchange and boosting the local economy. Moreover, it provides insights into sustainable tourism practices that can preserve the natural beauty and cultural integrity of Meghalaya while fostering community development.

Apart from the traditional festivals of the state, the government has initiated a series of events to attract tourists from all over. These festivals represent a blend of tradition and global culture. Due to various constraints, studying all the festivals was not feasible. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, one traditional festival, the *Shad Nongkrem*, and one government-initiated festival, the Cherry Blossom, have been chosen as representative

examples. This study aims to understand the cultural significance, social impacts, and economic benefits of both events. Despite the acknowledged importance of festivals in society and culture, along with the presumed necessity for celebratory events, research on these critical subjects has been rather limited. Furthermore, festivals are now being explored in relation to sustainability and their role as enduring institutions.

Literature Review

Studies across the world have revealed that festivals are emerging as potential tourism products. Through the exhibition of traditional culture, festivals exert strong influence on the development of a destination leading to sustainable tourism development. (Okech, 2011, Richard and King 2022). Festivals provide a space for interaction between the host communities and tourists. They create new channels for social interactions that provide opportunities for enriching identities and establishing social ties (Dychkovskyy and Sergii Ivano, 2020). Studies across the world have highlighted the role of festival tourism in fostering community cohesion, extending local heritage externally, increasing economic gains and improving livelihood (Felsenstein and Fleischer, 2003, Ahebwa et. al 2016, Swapna and Thyagaraju, 2020, Doe et. Al 2021). The visitors get an opportunity to explore and experience the unique culture and tradition of the host community. The pomp and gaiety of the festival motivates enthusiastic travellers to take a break from their mundane activities of life to explore and enhance life experiences.

Though festival tourism leads to greater community participation and increase in economic gains in the area, yet it has been observed that festivals are being curated like a carnival to boost tourism development. They now reflect the crumbling of traditional ethos to the paradigm of global modernity (Ghosal, 2006).

Festival tourism can be classified into two broad categories: traditional and modern. Traditional festivals are passed down the line of the community

to uphold its rich cultural heritage. Modern festivals are charted following the market demand, consumer behaviour, etc. (Huang, 2004).

Traditional festivals involve rituals and culture that are characteristics to a community. The community observes these festivals to preserve their ethnic identity. However, with the passage of time, festivals have started to gain attention from curious onlookers who are interested in exploring and experiencing diverse cultures. Increased inflow of visitors has encouraged tourism activities in the destinations, thereby adding glitz and splendour to the festivals. On the other hand, modern festivals are designed as carnivals which showcase a blend of traditional and cosmopolitan culture. The events are organised keeping in mind the amusement and allurement of the tourists who seek to experience indigenous culture juxtaposed with modern revelries.

Methodology

This paper seeks to understand and analyse two popular festivals of Meghalaya–*Shad Nongkrem* and the Cherry Blossom –vis-à-vis tourism. Primary data have been collected from the festival sites at Smit in the East Khasi Hills district and around the RBDSA Sports Complex at Madan Kurkalang, Bhoirymbong CD Block in the Ri-Bhoi district during the festivals and in the post festival period from November, 2023 to January,2024. Structured questionnaires have been used to elicit the necessary information. Samples of 354 respondents from the local communities under study and 116 tourists from the festival sites were taken following the simple random sampling technique. The study also draws on secondary data from published books, journals, newspapers, and the Official Web Portal, Tourism Department, Government of Meghalaya. Information was also gathered through non-participant observation and structured interviews conducted with officials of the State Tourism Department, the *Syiem* (traditional King) of *Hima Khyriem* (the traditional political territory of the Khasi tribe). Descriptive

and inferential statistics have been used to analyse the data. To assess the influence of socio-economic variables on participation or non- participation of local community in festival tourism, a probit regression model has been used in the study.

Model Specification

The model used in the study

$\Pr(Y = 1/X_1, X_2, ..., X_k) = \phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 X_1 + \gamma_2 X_2 + ... + \gamma_k X_k)$; ϕ is the cumulative normal distribution function

Y = Participation in festival tourism; 0 = non participation, 1 = participation

X_i = Predictor variables; where i=1…k

X_1 = Gender

X_2 = Age

X_3 = Monthly household income

X_4 = Dependency burden

X_5 = Employment and income opportunities; 0 = no, 1 = yes

X_6 = Skill enhancement opportunity; 0 = no, 1 = yes

X_7 = Establishment of external link; 0 = no, 1 = yes

The Festivals

Shad Nongkrem

The *Shad Nongkrem*, is a five-day annual celebration offering gratitude to the Almighty for good harvest and peace in the community. In the olden days, this festival was celebrated in the month of May (Gurdon, 2010), which was later shifted to October/ November. The *Khyriem Syiemship* capital 'Smit', approximately 30 kms from Shillong, is the venue of celebration for this harvest festival. The *Syiem* is bestowed with the responsibility of celebrating the festival and preserving the tradition and culture of the Khasi tribe.

Fifteen days prior to the festival, the *Khyriem Syiem* aided by other priests sacrifices a goat to invoke the Almighty for a good harvest. The community is then formally invited to participate in the festival and offer food, goats and pigs for sacrifice. The festival commences on the scheduled date with the sacrifice of a cock by the *Syiem* aided by the priests on a hillock to the God of Shillong Peak (*U Blei Shillong*). Powdered rice, liquor in gourd shell (*ka kyiad um*), betel leaves and betel nuts are offered on a silver plate. Thereafter, a goat is also sacrificed to the almighty. Amid the beating of drums, the high Priestess and the Head Priest perform all the rituals and pay homage to the ancestors by offering rice beer in the ceremonial house. Prayers are offered to God of the *Syiem* clan, *Ka Lei Long Kur*, for peace, prosperity, endurance of the *Syiem* clan, and the people of the *Hima*.

The rituals are conducted in the specially constructed cottage (*ïing sad*) made of bamboo, mud, and wood without the use of nails. Lanterns are used inside the cottage to dispel the darkness. The musicians are housed in this ceremonial house during the festival. (Chowdhury, 1996). On the second day, the ruling deities, namely, *Ka Lei Synshar* and *Biskorom* are beseeched for protection of land and its people. Prayers and offerings are made followed by the traditional warrior dance performed by men. The rituals are performed on the hill top in the evening of the third day, *Iewduh*. Musicians and sword dancers perform in the procession to the hill top and gun powder is fired to ward off evils. On that day, the musicians also receive new clothes (turban, shirt, and *dhoti*) from the *Syiem*. Apart from the rituals, the highlight of the fourth day, '*Lyngka*', is the dance performed in the courtyard of the house by the royal unmarried females and their maternal uncles. During the dance, the priestesses are surrounded by male dancers carrying sword in one hand and yak whisk on another, signifying the protection of females and matriliny. A large number of people gather to watch this joyful dance. The final day of the festival begins with rituals and honouring of the musicians with coins, betel leaves, betel nuts, and a special delicacy (*jadoh*) made of goat meat

gifted by the chief. The unmarried female dancers (*Ka Shad Kynthei*) and male dancers (*Ka Shad Mastieh*) dance to the soulful tune of traditional musical pipe (*Tangmuri*) and drums, dressed in traditional colourful attire. The male dancers encircle the females signifying their protective role. The dance ends before dusk and thereafter, prayer and sacrifice of a goat is done to mark the end of the festival. (Diengdoh, 2016)

Cherry Blossom

The Cherry Blossom festival of Meghalaya is an annual festival celebrated since 2016 by the Government of Meghalaya, akin to the 'Sakura' festival of Japan. The festival is organised to celebrate the magnificent flowers which are considered as a gift from the Himalayas and believed to bring good luck. Unlike in other parts of the world where cherry blossoms can be witnessed in spring, in Meghalaya it heralds the advent of autumn, lifting spirits and ushering in festivities. The capital city, Shillong popularly known as the 'Scotland of the East', gets transformed into a floral wonderland, attracting travellers to experience the mesmerising and surreal natural beauty.

A three-day cultural extravaganza is organised in November to enthral visitors who throng to the capital city to witness the ethereal flowers in bloom. Various events are organised in different venues. The festival showcases the indigenous culture through music, dance, and storytelling sessions. Kiosks representing delectable local cuisine, traditional wine, arts, and crafts of the tribes are displayed. Visitors can enjoy the local food, drinks, and purchase the indigenous handicrafts made of bamboo, wood, and silk. The festival also gives a platform to rock bands, singers, dancers, and musicians from the country, especially from the North East region to exhibit their talents and exchange knowledge and information. To enhance the appeal of the festival, international musicians are also invited to perform. The festival also features amateur golf competitions in the 18-hole golf course and archery competitions for sport enthusiasts. Alongside, the cultural events,

fashion shows, beauty pageants, and bicycle rallies are also organised to add excitement to the festival and enhance visitor's experience. In 2021, a literary festival was added to provide a platform to writers, readers, and authors of the state to connect with literati from other parts of the region and the country.

Results and Discussion

The five-day long *Shad Nongkrem* festival has successfully endured strong pressures from the forces of change. The *Syiem* and the elders of the Khasi community have played a significant role in safeguarding and preserving the age-old traditions, ensuring that they are passed down as a precious heritage to the young generations.

However, every society is inevitably influenced by the effects of advancement and modernization. The Khasi community and its cultural heritage are not exempt from this phenomenon. As time has passed, especially following the advent of Christian Missionaries in the Khasi Hills, the prevailing cultural conventions and age-old traditions have undergone certain changes.

Men carrying umbrellas for royal women dancers, wearing modern attire, can be witnessed today, which was absent traditionally. Likewise, dancers who once embellished themselves with classical gold necklaces adorned with red coral, now lean towards artificial jewellery choices. Transformations are also evident in the ceremonial house structure. Glass panels have been recently incorporated into the thatched roof to enable the infusion of natural light. The exterior walls have been shielded with tiles to enhance the house's durability. Additionally, solar panels have been installed to provide illumination for the entire complex.

The traditional Khasi festival, which has been celebrated for a long time, is now attracting visitors who are enthusiastic about engaging in a unique cultural adventure. The festival welcomes visitors on the final day,

and in order to make it even more appealing and meet the desires of tourists, a variety of stalls are set up. These stalls showcase delightful local food, beverages, crafts, and hand-woven items.

In order to create avenues for earning within the local populace, the '*Dorbar Shnong'* or Village Council provides stalls at a modest rate of INR 50/100. These stalls serve as platforms for vending tea, food, handicrafts, and handloom items. Interestingly, these stalls are not only utilised by local vendors, but also attract sellers from surrounding villages and towns. Furthermore, the *Dorbar* extends invitations to Government departments, allowing them to exhibit their offerings or share department-specific information. To facilitate this, complimentary sheds are provided.

The *Shad Nongkrem* takes place in the palace premises, with a dedicated public gallery, though small in size, constructed to provide an unobstructed view of the dance performance. Tourists visiting the festival have aired opinion on insufficient space to witness the festival. The adjacent ground is used for various commercial activities.

In spite of the society's matrilineal arrangement, it has been noted that predominant control and supremacy ultimately lie with the male leader, specifically the *Syiem*, and his assembly of associates. This dynamic of power is similarly evident in religious ceremonies, where the roles played by women frequently remain inconspicuous, operating quietly in the background.

A captivating aspect of the *Shad Nongkrem* festival is that only young unmarried women are granted the opportunity to partake in the dance. In contrast, no similar restrictions are imposed on the male participants. Despite the dance symbolising the safeguarding of women and the matrilineal culture, the principle of complete "equality," as implied by the original meaning of the word "identity", isn't overtly emphasised within the context of *Shad Nongkrem*.

Although in its nascent stage, tourism development is showing gradual progress in the destination known for its scenic landscape. The rise in tourist arrivals is invigorating the local community, offering them new found avenues for income generation. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that there is lack of necessary amenities for the visitors near the festival ground. Tourists are of the opinion that lack of safe drinking water and a sufficient number of well-maintained public toilets present challenges. Due to the close proximity of the Smit village to Shillong city, it hasn't gained much popularity among those seeking overnight stays. Consequently, options for accommodations catering to overnight visitors have been limited in Smit until now. Moreover, the absence of an effective waste management system poses a significant risk to the delicate ecosystem. Despite these challenges, residents remain optimistic, hoping that enhancements in infrastructure and communication networks will boost the village's appeal to more tourists. However, locals are divided on whether tradition can be compromised for the sake of attracting tourists.

Another notable aspect of the festival is that its religious practices, rituals, and ceremonies have been transmitted orally through generations. The absence of written records, however, threatens the preservation of this traditional culture over time.

In contrast to the traditional festival, the Cherry Blossom Festival organised by the Government of Meghalaya is an exhibition of traditional and modern culture in the midst of spectacular natural beauty. The festival's popularity, both within and beyond the border of the country, induced organisers to open its doors to international travellers since 2017. The state government partnered with Japan and South Korea to organise the festival on a grand scale in 2017 and 2018 respectively. A plethora of events showcasing the local, regional and international culture were exhibited.

To regain its popularity, post Covid-19 pandemic, in 2021, the government of Meghalaya organised the festival with a lot of fanfare and the

ambassador of Japan, Satoshi Suzuki graced the inaugural ceremony. The main aim of the festival was to promote music, art, culture, and provide a platform for local musicians to showcase their talents. The festival attracted an overwhelming number of visitors from within and outside the state, who were happy to come out of captivity which Covid-19 had forced on them. The festival won three awards from the prestigious WOW (Wonderful Outstanding Worker) awards which recognise various events in Asia and the Middle East.

Riding on the wave of success, in the year 2022, the government strategically organised the 'Road to Cherry Blossom' programme, spread across India, Thailand, and Malaysia, to attract domestic and international tourists to the festival. Events were designed to cater to consumer demand and provide an unforgettable experience to the tourists. The government pumped in investments with a view to generate revenue through ticket sales and rents from businesses in the festival arena. The Meghalayan Age Limited, established by the Government of Meghalaya under the Companies Act 2013 to brand and promote tourism, selected the Event Management Group, Rockski, from among the applicants to organise the festival.

Unfortunately, due to social unrest in the state, the festival had to be cancelled causing huge loss to the state exchequer as well as to private business. The loss was to the tune of approximately 3.6 crores. The EMG, Rockski, had to refund 1.25 crores worth on tickets alone (The Meghalayan, 2024). Hospitality sectors and small entrepreneurs who were looking forward to lucrative income during the festival suffered a huge loss. According to Rockski, the state of Meghalaya suffered a significant loss, amounting to crores in revenue that would have benefited enterprises in the hospitality, logistics, and other tourism-related sectors. (The Shillong Times, 2023)

The 2023 edition of the Cherry Blossom festival was held at RBDSA Sports Complex, Madan Kurkalang, Bhoirymbong in the Ri-Bhoi District

for three days, from 17thNovember. The festival was organised by the Meghalayan Age Limited in collaboration with the EMG, Rockski. The State Government provided financial assistance of an amount of Rs.1.99 crores, out of the total investment of Rs.9 crores, as well as security for the conduct of the festival, (Highland Post, 2023). The festival was a celebration of culture, music, and art. Visitors enjoyed soulful renditions by local, national, and international singers and grooved to the exhilarating music of acclaimed national and international bands. A wide range of contests, *viz*., choir, graffiti, art, karaoke, sports were organised to showcase the talents of the participants to the visitors. A literary festival was also organised in the capital city, Shillong, to provide a platform for participants to engage in conversation with authors, book launches, storytelling sessions etc. Kiosks displaying local cuisine, handicrafts, and handlooms were set up in both the venues to provide a glimpse of the culture and heritage of the state. The festival attracted 22,991 tourists from the country and beyond. The state generated 1.44 crore tax revenue from hotels during the Cherry Blossom festival (The Meghalaya news,2024).

Tourists and Festival Tourism

Of the 116 tourists considered in the study, 62.07% were males and 37.93% were females. While 47.41% tourists visiting the festivals were from other states of India, 12.07% were international visitors. 40.52% attending the festivals were found to be from within the state. Though visit to the mesmeric ecotourism sites was the main purpose of 43.97% tourists, many of them extended their stay to experience the unique culture exhibited in the festivals. However, 49.69% of the visitors were found to visit the state for attending the festivals. 22.41% of the tourists were found to avail home stay facilities to experience traditional food, drinks, and culture, the remaining opted mostly for hotels. Tourists were delighted with the cultural experience offered by the festivals and were willing to recommend the festivals to their friends and relatives. But 30.17% respondents were uncertain about

revisiting the festivals. Majority of the tourists (82.8%) felt safe in the festival site.

The Likert scale data analysis given in table 1 reveals that majority of the respondents had high perception on the ease of travel to the festival sites, availability of food and drinks, and cleanliness and maintenance of the site. Tourists were also satisfied with the availability and quality of accommodation available in the city. On the other hand, availability of handicrafts, and availability of basic amenities in the site were perceived to be below expectations. Tourists mainly had low perception on the information relating to the *Shad Nongkrem* festival. Locals were also perceived to be less friendly. It may be inferred that language may be a barrier in communication with outsiders.

Table 1: Tourist Perception on Festival

Statements	Excellent (%)	Very good (%)	Good (%)	Satisfac--tory (%)	Poor (%)	Mean	Sd	Decision
Information on festival	24 (20.7)	36 (31)	27 (23.3)	17 (14.7)	12 (10.3)	2.63	1.255	Low perception
Ease of travel to festival site	15 (12.9)	30 (25.9)	43 (37.1)	22 (19)	6 (5.2)	2.78	1.064	High perception
Cleanliness of the site	14 (12.1)	24 (20.7)	48 (41.4)	27 (23.3)	3 (2.6)	2.84	1.004	High perception
Friendliness of the people	23 (19.8)	26 (22.4)	37 (31.9)	22 (19)	8 (6.9)	2.71	1.187	Low perception
Availability of food &drinks	20 (17.2)	19 (16.4)	52 (44.8)	18 (15.5)	7 (6)	2.77	1.098	High perception
Availability of handicrafts	26 (22.4)	27 (23.3)	35 (30.2)	19 (16.4)	9 (7.8)	2.64	1.219	Low perception
Basic amenities at site	16 (13.8)	36 (31)	39 (33.6)	16 (13.8)	9 (7.8)	2.71	1.111	Low perception

Availability of accommodation in the site	12 (10.3)	37 (31.9)	44 (37.9)	14 (12.1)	9 (7.8)	2.75	1.054	High perception
Quality of accommodation at site	15 (12.9)	31 (26.7)	48 (41.4)	12 (10.3)	10 (8.6)	2.75	1.086	High perception
Maintenance of site	12 (10.3)	36 (31)	44 (37.9)	18 (15.5)	6 (5.2)	2.74	1.014	High perception

Grand Mean = 2.732

Source: Author's calculation based on field data

Table 2: Perception of Tourists on Cost

	Cost of Travel to Site	Cost of Lodg-ing	Cost of Food &Drinks	Cost of Handicrafts
Very High	5	24	27	16
High	22	35	42	43
Moderate	64	47	35	44
Low	11	6	12	13
Very Low	14	4	0	0

Table 2 reveals that 55.2% of the tourists found the cost of travel to the festival moderate but 19% rated the cost to be high. 20.7% found the cost of lodging very high, 30.2% and 40.5% found it to be high and moderate respectively. Majority are of the opinion that food and drinks and handicrafts are expensive. While 23.3% and 36.2% respondents rated cost of food and drinks to be very high and high respectively, 13.8% found the cost of handicrafts to be very high and 37.1% rated them as high.

Local Community and Festival Tourism

The demographic profile of the sample of 354 respondents shows that 69.8% are females and 30.2% are males. 61.6% are Christians and 20.6%

follow the indigenous religion. While 33.3% respondents have received only primary education, 30.2% have obtained secondary level education. Low educational attainments may be the reason for engagement in the primary sector (27.1%) and private jobs (39%). Only 8.8% have been found to be employed in government jobs. 20.3% of the households have less than Rs.10,000 monthly income, 38.1% are in the income group of Rs.10,000-Rs.25,000, 29.1% belong to the group Rs.25,001-Rs.50,000, and 12.4% are in the above Rs.50,000 category. Majority of the households earning less than Rs.25,000 monthly household income has been found to be from the Smit village.

Probit Model

Probit regression was conducted on a sample of population to ascertain the effect of the socio-economic variables included in the model on participation by the local community in festival tourism. The probit regression model is statistically significant as reflected by the Omnibus test, X^2 (9) =244.187, p = .000.

The results show that males are2.124 times more likely to participate than females. Since majority of the respondents are below 60 years of age, the beta coefficient of .001 indicates that with increase in age, people in the productive age group are more likely to participate in festival tourism activities to supplement their family income. Again, the positive beta coefficient of dependency burden (0.104) indicates that as dependency burden increases, people are more likely to participate in tourism activities. If the monthly household income in categories: less than INR10,000, between INR10,001-INR 25,000, and between INR25,001–INR50,000, increases by one unit compared to the greater than INR50,000 income categories, people are more likely to participate. On the other hand, increase in one unit on employment and income opportunity, skill enhancement opportunity, and establishment of communication link scales increased the people's odds of

participation by 7.395, 1.625, 1.111 times respectively. All the predictors, except age and communication link, have been found to be statistically significant.

Table 3: Coefficient Estimates of Probit Regression

Parameter	B	Std. Error	Hypothesis Test			Exp(B)
			Wald Chi-Square	df	Sig.	
(Intercept)	-4.072	.5979	46.387	1	.000	.017
[mon_income=1]	2.427	.4578	28.109	1	.000	11.325
[mon_income=2]	2.159	.4382	24.274	1	.000	8.662
[mon_income=3]	1.116	.4500	6.152	1	.013	3.053
[mon_income=4]	0[a]	.	.	.	.	1
Gender	.753	.2189	11.839	1	.001	2.124
Age	.001	.0072	.032	1	.859	1.001
Ratio	.104	.0533	3.816	1	.051	1.110
Employment	2.001	.2345	72.786	1	.000	7.395
Skill	.486	.1874	6.716	1	.010	1.625
Communication link	.106	.1948	.294	1	.588	1.111
(Scale)	1[b]					

Reference category

a. Fixed at the displayed value

Source: Author's calculation based on field data

Accommodation Providers and Tourism

There is a number of economy-to-premium ranged hotels in the state. With growth in tourism, many resorts, lodges, and private guest houses have been established to cater to tourist demand. The Government of Meghalaya is encouraging local residents, especially in the tourism sites, to offer home stay facilities to tourists. Residents can avail a total of 70% financial assistance under the Meghalaya Home stay Scheme (35% front-end subsidy provided by the Tourism Department, Government of Meghalaya and 35% back-end subsidy under the PMEGP scheme) for a maximum home stay project cost of Rs.10 lakhs. Taking advantage of this scheme, a few home stay facilities have also started operation in the festival sites considered in the study (Meghalaya Homestay Scheme, 2021).

Majority of these establishments around the festival sites have reported profitable business, especially in the autumn season, with 100% occupancy rates. The study reveals that the accommodation providers maintain strict vigil on waste disposal for sustainability of the environment in which they operate.

Conclusion

The festivals of the state exhibit a rich heritage of culture and tradition. They serve as an excellent magnet to allure tourists. Such occasions foster appreciation of culture through firsthand experiences as well as provide entertainment and relaxation to the tourists. Festival experience encompasses both artistic and scientific elements, relying significantly on insights from the environment to fully grasp the dynamics between individuals, surroundings, and the various components.

It may be argued that festivals are of short-term duration and have limited scope for ensuring sustainable growth in economic activities in the destinations. However, these festivals have been able to invigorate the community to engage in festivities. Large crowd that gathers create new

demand for goods and services in the festival site, thereby, enhancing economic activities. The cultural heritage is also on display at a price. While indigenously made products find a market, the festivals also provide the platform for local talents to reach a larger audience. With time these festivals have been successful in establishing the 'cultural image' of the destinations which can be capitilised to achieve sustainable tourism development.

The pomp and gaiety of the *Shad Nongkrem* festival has popularised the Smit village and positioned it in the tourism map of the state. Visitors, from within the state and beyond, throng to the seat of the *Hima Khyrim* to witness a unique culture on display amidst breath-taking natural surroundings.

The Cherry Blossom festival is a carnival showcasing both traditional and cosmopolitan culture in the backdrop of the beautiful Cherry Blossom trees in full bloom. The electrifying atmosphere enthrals visitors and exposes them to unique culture and unexplored terrain. The rise in tourist footfalls over the years has induced the government to improve the attractiveness and appeal of the festival through inclusion of various events based on consumer demand.

The crowd–pulling attribute of both the festivals may be leveraged to extend the tourism season by offering nature lovers opportunity to explore the verdant landscape and engage in ecotourism activities alongside partaking in the festivals.

The study highlights the factors which are likely to influence participation of the local community in tourism activity. Based on the perception of tourists, the study reveals the areas where interventions are required for the organisation of the festivals. While Cherry Blossom festival has wide publicity, better management and display of all kinds of indigenous products of the state, the study identifies the limited publicity of the *Shad Nongkrem* festival. Tourists are of the opinion that more local handicrafts and handloom products may be made available in the festival site. However,

basic amenities, such as toilets, drinking water facilities, waste management system, etc. need extensive improvement in both the festival sites.

Strategic planning, investment in tourism infrastructure, better service offerings, co-ordination among the stakeholders, and protection and preservation of culture and environment are necessary pre-requisites for sustainable tourism development. The endowed natural resources including cultural heritage may be organised and deployed in a manner that gives comparative advantage to the destinations and enhance their ability to compete for tourists.

Acknowledgement: This paper is an outcome of the Major Research Project sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi and the authors would like to thankfully acknowledge the support of ICSSR, New Delhi.

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Gandhian Philosophy of Self-Sufficiency and Livelihood of the Tiwa Tribe: A Study

Nabaprasad Nath*
&
Papori Dewri**

Abstract

The issue of survival had become a major concern during and after the lockdown period. The COVID-19 pandemic had only hampered the usual social life but also the economy across the world. In this context, the issue of self-sustainability re-emerged. Different measures have been taken to make the world economy self-reliant. It is noteworthy that certain societies of India already had economic self-sustainability which was not much influenced by the race of globalization. Among them certain ethnic groups are prominent. Here the Tiwa (*Lalung*) ethnic group from Assam can be taken as an example. The Home Economy of Tiwa may be well reflected in Gandhi's idea of *Swadeshi* and in the idea of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* promoted by the Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi. Here an effort has been made to see the similarities between the 'Home Economy' of the Tiwa and the Gandhian pattern as well as to see its relevance in the present global scenario. The issue of survival has become a major concern during and after the lockdown period due to a pandemic like COVID-19.

Keywords: Tiwa, Self-reliant, Economy, Sustainability, Handloom.

Introduction

The unexpected eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic put the whole world on pause. Such a crisis has not only hampered the usual social life of the people but also the economy across the world. In this context, the issue of a self-sustained economy re-emerged. Different measures have been taken to

* The author is Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Nowgong College, Nagaon.
**The author is Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Nowgong College, Nagaon.

make the economy self-sustained across the world by the respective nations. India is not an exception to that. In this tune, on the 12th of May 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared the '*Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan,*' a financial package of 20 lakh crore (alike to 10% of India's GDP) to revive the Indian economy after the damage of the pandemic. The literal meaning of '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*' is self-sufficient and self-reliant India. Thus, the goal behind launching it was to encourage domestically made products and services, which is the extended version of the 'Gandhian Home Economy'. We can say that the legacy of Gandhi's 'Home Economy' is reflected in '*Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan*'. Gandhi was talked about the self-sufficiency of the villages based on *Swaraj* and *Swadeshi*. '*Swaraj*' means self-ruled and self-dependence. '*Swadeshi*' implies the use of home-made things. These doctrines are employed for the protection of the home industry and are based on a feeling of concern for the economic stability of one's own country. Now if we see the lifestyle and economy of the ethnic groups of India then we may relate their livelihood to the Gandhian ideal. They have economic sustainability which is not much influenced by the race of globalization. Because of their self-reliant outlook and self-sustainable economy, pandemics like COVID-19 could not hamper their lifestyle much. Thus, the COVID scenario encourages the lifestyle and economy of such ethnic groups. Here one of the ethnic groups of Assam i.e., Tiwa (*Lalung*) can be taken as an example.

Objectives

The objectives of the proposed work is to focus on the Gandhian philosophy of home-economy, its similarities to the Tiwa tribe and to find its significance in the current global economic threat. It is an effort to uncover the socio-economic lifestyle of the Tiwa as a self-reliant ethnic group of Assam.

Methodology

The proposed work, being a qualitative research, will concentrate on the

'home economy' of the Tiwa tribe of Assam. It will focus on both Primary and Secondary sources. The secondary sources like books, journals, newspapers, published thesis etc. will be consulted and some of the Tiwa-dominated villages will be taken up as the primary sources. Required data will be collected by field-survey of the villages.

Gandhi's Ideal and Tiwa Tribe

Assam is a place inhabited by communities belonging to the *Tibeto Burman* linguistic groups like Rabha, Bodo, Dimasa, Mishing, Deori, Mech, Tiwa, Karbi etc. having their unique tradition, culture, dress, food habits and exotic way of life. Among them, Tiwa is one of the prominent and major tribes, which are mainly confined to the area of Morigaon, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts. There are a few Tiwa villages found in the Dhemaji district, Titabar area of Jorhat district and Sonapur area of Kamrup district. A small portion of the Tiwa people is also residing in the Nartiang area of the Jaintia districts of Meghalaya (Saha, 252). The economy of Tiwa society is mainly based on agriculture. Although their economy is found to be in terms of low per capita income but it is a self-sustainable one which is absolutely compatible with Gandhian ideals. Gandhi during his visit to Assam, praising the weavers of Sualkuchi village said that "Assamese women can weave dreams on their looms" (*The Sentinel*, 7th April, 2023). He believed that the *Khadi* industry would create new hope for millions of people which would save them from hunger and would increase the income of the poor. According to Ravi, B. "Gandhi advocated the use of *charkha* due to its advantages, as it requires a small amount of capital; it is simple in operation. It is a source of steady income; it does not depend upon monsoon; it helps in solving the problems of unemployment. Thus *Khadi* was the symbol of Indian economic freedom and equality" (Ravi. 663).

It is found that the Tiwa people took an active part in the Freedom Movement of India by producing *Khadi* items. For example, in 1926,

the main venue of the Indian National Congress meeting held in Pandu was decorated by the *khaddar* clothes woven by the Tiwa women folk of Barapujia and Raha from Morigaon and Nagaon Districts respectively of Assam (Senapati, 395). In 1931, a competition of spinning yarn in the spinning wheel was held where a Tiwa lady, Kutongi Lalungoni got first prize and also in 1933 her daughter Dinemaai Lalungoni got third prize respectively (Amsi, 112). Like Gandhi, in 1937 Jawaharlal Nehru also visited Barapujia of Morigaon district where he saw some old ladies spinning yarn in the spinning wheel and after perceiving those activities he said, "If all the Indian people become self-reliant by performing activities like spinning yarn in the spinning wheel or other handcrafts then freedom of the country will automatically come." (Senapati, 406)

Tiwa economy is basically a household economy and in the present time, almost 63.58% of the total residents are involved in cultivation (Dewri, 113). In the plain areas, permanent cultivation is practiced but the people of hill areas depend on shifting cultivation. The *Sali, Boro, Ahu, Bao* etc. are the major paddy crops of the Tiwas living in the plains. But horticultural cash crops and seasonal vegetables like *mātikalāi*, sugarcane, sesame, mustard, ginger, turmeric, chilly, pumpkins, gourd, brinjal, banana etc. are grown by the Tiwas living in both plains and hills areas. The most common horticultural crops are coconut and areca nut. They keep some portion of the cultivated rice and seasonal crops for consumption and sell the rest for buying necessary stuff. Bamboo and jute are also important plants cultivated by them for commercial purposes. Extensive use of bamboo is found in every house, used for making baskets and fencing, construction and repairs of the houses, building sheds for cattle and pigs as well as for building granaries. Thunu Kalita in her book mentioned that broom grass cultivation is another valuable resource of livelihood for the people of Kharakhunji village from West Karbi Anglong district of Assam (Kalita, 68).

Animal husbandry is also an important sphere that helps the economic

upliftment of the Tiwas. Cattle, poultry, duckery and piggery nurturing are shared practices in the majority of the families. They make a good amount of money by selling pigs. Poultry is also nurtured for selling eggs and chicken. Cow, goat and buffaloes are common animals reared by them for milk. Cow and buffaloes are reared also for the dual purposes of engaging them in agricultural work as well as selling. Ranu Devi in her thesis holds that "Dairy farming is an important occupation to the people of Dimoria block of Assam. Dairy farms maintain supply of milk for consumption to the people living outside of Dimoria block. In the past, dairy farms were under the control of Assam Government, but now all dairy farms have been privately owned. The rural Tiwa people produce substantial income from fishery. The ponds, *beels,* river etc. have been providing model ground for fish culture." (Devi, 52). Again, pounded '*Hukoti'* a traditional indigenous dry fish as well as '*kolakhar'* (outer cover of banana peels and stems dried, burnt and then ashes are filtered for use) produced by this community is now having a very high rate in the market.

Weaving is an important cottage industry among the Tiwas. Almost every household possesses a loom. Women are expert weavers and still wear their home-made garments. *Kasong, Faskai, Nara, Fali, Tagla, Thenus* etc. are names of some traditional dresses woven by them. These dresses are decorated with different colours and mostly made of 'Eri-Yarn' and 'Cotton'. Here we may take the example of a Tiwa handloom weaver named Mungsajo Lasti Mithi, who was awarded the National Merit Certificate and National Award in Handloom. She got the Award for '*Re-Chokodo*' (traditional *Tiwa* male wrapper), which she weaved with the traditional geometrical design and floral patterns (a revival of the lost fabric Re Chokodo of the Tiwas). Thus, they can reveal their creative talent in their fabric designs. As they are not economically sound therefore in most of the villages Tiwa women have adopted weaving as one of the means of their survival. The economically weaker section cannot purchase the

raw materials though they can produce traditional cloths since they are skilled weavers. Therefore, they would borrow the capital from others and purchase the raw materials. As per the prior agreements both the workers and suppliers share the productions. Afterwards, the surplus products are supplied to the markets for their livelihood. For example: Silaguri, Ulukunchi, Aamsoyaipar, and Tharakhunsi areas of West Karbi Anglong district of Assam, where almost all Tiwa women choose weaving as a way for their economic upliftment, weavers carry out such economic activities. Thunu Kalita in her book holds that the women of those villages sell home-made Eri cloths, Eri seeds, Cotton, *Laa* etc. for buying their necessities stuffs (Kalita, 64-67). Sericulture is also a notable practice of the Tiwa people for their livelihood. They are also experts in bamboo and cane works. Bamboo and cane products like *Japi* (traditional umbrella), *Dala* (bamboo tray or plate), *Saloni* (bamboo sieve), angling traps and other household equipment are the specialities of the men for their daily survival. (Bordoloi, 92)

Table:1 Nature of work participation of the Tiwas as per the Census Report 2011.

Tribe	Workers	Main Worker				Marginal Worker			
Tiwa	80892	51431 (63.5%)				29460 (36.4%)			
		Cultivator	Agriculture Labour	Household Industry	Other Work	Cultivator	Agriculture Labour	Household Industry	Other Work
		32701	5489	1778	11464	8995	13078	2683	4704
		63.5%	10.6%	3.4%	22.2%	30.5%	44.3%	9.1%	15.9%

(Source: Census Report 2011, Assam, Bhangagarh, Guwahati-5 and PhD thesis of Dadul Dewri)

The above data indicates that the Tiwa-economy is mainly based on cultivation. Though the household industrial economy is less, there is scope for its development. Tiwa household economy has two sides, one is for self-consumption and another one is for selling purposes. A section of Tiwa people sell their surplus produces in the markets for buying items of daily

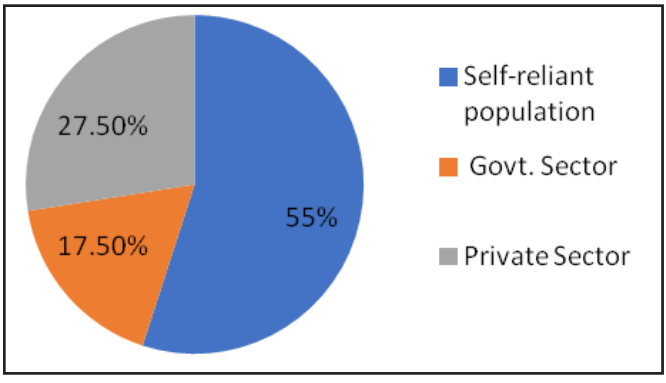
use. Nowadays, Tiwa society is also influenced by modernization like the rest but they have not given up their self-reliant attitude which can be found in their original lifestyle. For example, in our field study, it is found that 45% of people of some Tiwa-dominated villages under the Raha revenue circle namely Lawphulabari, Duboritoli, Tupakuchi, Balisara, Lathabori etc. are directly or indirectly engaged in government or private sector jobs while the rest of the people have created a sustainable self-reliant economic environment through agriculture, animal husbandry, fish farming, handlooms etc. which reflects the Gandhian concept of sustenance through small-scale industry.

Table 2: Self-reliant, Govt. and private sector working population group structure under Raha revenue circle namely Lawphulabari, Duboritoli, Tupakuchi, Balisara, and Lathabori villages.

Population	Self-reliant workers	Govt. sector workers	Private sector workers
Male	70	23	40
Female	40	12	15
Total	110	35	55

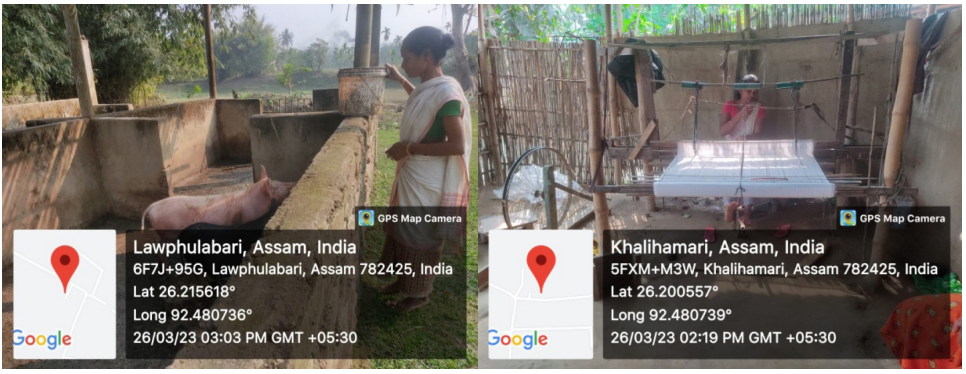
Source: Field Survey 2023

Figure 1: Percentage of working population based on table: 2.



Source: Calculation based on survey data.

Figure 2: Snaps of data collection



(The table:2 and figure:1 show that out of 200 total populations 110 are self-reliant workers, 35 are engaged in Govt. sector and the rest of 55 individuals have created livelihood through private sector.)

Present Global Scenario

Globalization implies the development of science and technology that makes the world a more connected and interdependent place. In this era, more importance has been given to large-scale industry, international trade, rapid economic growth etc. But such a developed way of life is quite impossible without hampering the environment. For example, big industries require huge amounts of electricity, for which 'dams' are needed. And it is well known that the big dams are a threat to the ecosystem. It also creates floods that displace or kill many organisms. It is beyond doubt that science and technology make life easier but at the same time it destroys the work culture of human beings or it makes man work-less.

Thus, it is noteworthy that too much industrialization not only leads to unemployment, poverty, and class struggle but most importantly it creates a threat to the eco-system. Limitless human desire is the key factor of such type of global problem. According to Gandhi *Aparigraha* is a virtue which means "being contented with the necessities of life and not to pine for more" (Lal,136). Tiwa tribe possess that simple way of living as well as a self-reliant attitude with their eco-friendly productions.

Tiwa Lifestyle and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is measured as the development that meets the needs of the present without negotiating the ability of future generations to meet their own requirements. Gandhi can be considered as the prominent advocate of the sustainable development who tried to show practically how the home-economy and life-style of minimum need can give us this type of development. He was against big-industries but not against the development of science and technology (Gandhi, 21-22). Rather Gandhi was in favour of cottage industries and use of own products which is closure to the home-economy of the tribes like the Tiwas. His ideas of *swadeshi* and home-economy can be very well reflected in the Tiwa way of living.

It is said, the lifestyle of indigenous people contributes to a healthy ecosystem. Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi said, "When people talk about sustainable development, we can proudly say that the world has a lot to learn from the Adivasis. Today, the demand for India's tribal products is increasing. We are exporting it to foreign countries. And among these are bamboo products, the demand for which is also rising" (*The Hindu,* 16th February'2023). In this context, it can be said, that the Tiwa as a group of Scheduled Tribe has a special tribal culture combining the hills and the plains. In their day-to-day life, they use natural resources for housing, food, medicine and living in accordance with the cycle of nature. Their traditional practices help to sustain the environment. For example, rotational agriculture methods such as double cropping, multiple cropping, shifting cultivation, sowing *roby* crops etc. not only protect and promote environmental diversity but are also the strategies for the mitigation of global warming. Instead of using chemical fertilizers, soil fertility is maintained by cow dung, organic wastes, and ashes, recycling of crop residues etc.

Secondly, some traditional beliefs and rituals depict a picture of having a strong bond with nature and the protection of natural resources.

For example, '*Deo-Seva*' is a ritual performed in the month of *Bhada* (late August and early September) every year, when new areca nuts are ready to eat. After performing this ritual, Tiwas begin to eat beetle nuts for the coming year (Baruah,19). Again, as the forest is considered an essential part of life as it provides vegetables, wood, bamboo, and much more, a section of the Tiwas observe the yearly rites of worshiping natural resources that imposes some taboos against certain activities like cutting certain plants and killing animals. These practices involve wildlife protection and limiting the use of resources to ensure their long-term availability. The protection of some sacred sites is also one of the important practices for the preservation of biodiversity.

The Tiwa tribe also emphasizes an intergenerational knowledge sharing system. For example, '*Shāmādi',* the youth dormitory found in Tiwa villages was the nucleus for training the youths in arts and crafts (Baruah, 23). As the ratio of population is higher than job vacancies, therefore through the home-grown production system unemployment can be reduced. Though the present global market is fully occupied by different machine-made clothes, still there is a heavy demand for the ethnic variety. Thus, the Tiwa household economy is not only a way to produce a sustainable economy; it will also save us from the negative effects of globalization, create a healthy eco-system; make people self-reliant and resilient towards unforeseen situations like COVID-19.

Conclusion

The planet Earth is in trouble, particularly because of the lifestyle followed by human beings. Lots of measures have been taken to protect the environment. But the race of the global economy, as well as the so-called modern lifestyle, has always become the major obstacle for sustainable developments. Because of too much competition in this global economy, the countries like Sri Lanka is struggling to meet basic needs. The post-

Covid scenario has compelled us to rethink these issues. Here Gandhi's idea of a self-sufficient village becomes relevant. If we learn how to live satisfactorily by following certain Indian norms like *Panchasila, Astanga Yoga* etc. the so-called rest-less competition will be meaningless.

Gandhi felt, "Mechanization is good when the hands are too few for the work. It is an evil when there are more hands than are required for work, as is the case in India" (Machinery and industrialization, 86). He was against too much industrialisation because big industries are capital intensive that enable absorption of wealth in the hands of a few and create social evils like drudgery and monotony. Village trades are grounded on household labour and require less quantity of capital where raw ingredients are collected from home-grown markets and produced goods are also vended in that local market. So, people would never face the problem of production, external market and unemployment. But Gandhi's idea was somehow ignored by people due to the influence of globalisation which in the true sense has produced generations of unsatisfied, dependent and restless individuals. The global scenario of Covid-19 has compelled us to practice again that line of Gandhian thinking; which can be noticed in the livelihood of the Tiwa tribe.

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