



SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

DEVELOPMENTALISM AS STRATEGY

Interrogating Post-colonial
Narratives on India's North East

Edited by

RAKHEE BHATTACHARYA



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Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| <i>List of Tables</i> | vii |
| <i>Foreword</i> by C. P. Chandrasekhar | ix |
| <i>Prologue</i> | xiii |

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
|--------------|---|

Part I: Between Subsistence and Surplus

| | | |
|-----------|--|----|
| Chapter 1 | Traditional Economy, Sustainability and Subsistence: Understanding India's North East by <i>Tiplut Nongbri</i> | 45 |
| Chapter 2 | The Post-colonial Market: India's North East by <i>Samir Kumar Das</i> | 67 |

Part II: Developmental Impacts on People

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| Chapter 3 | Developmentalism and Consequences: Displacement and Marginalization in India's North East by <i>Walter Fernandes</i> | 91 |
| Chapter 4 | India's Developmentalism in Northeast Region and Its Consequences: Identity, Uncertainty and Migration by <i>Deepak K. Mishra</i> | 117 |
| Chapter 5 | Development and Women Labour Market in India's North East: An Empirical Understanding by <i>Archana Sharma</i> | 148 |

Part III: New Development at the Periphery

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Chapter 6 | Neoliberal Developmentalism: State Strategy in India's North East by <i>Rakhee Bhattacharya</i> | 169 |
| Chapter 7 | The Politics of Corridors: 'Seamless Connectivity', Trans-regional Engagements and Narratives of Development by <i>Anita Sengupta</i> | 192 |
| Chapter 8 | Development of India's North East: Cross-border Market, Trade and Sub-regional Cooperation by <i>Gurudas Das</i> | 214 |
| Chapter 9 | Development through Trade: Re-examining India's Act East Policy and the Northeastern Region by <i>Thongkhohal Haokip</i> | 231 |

Part IV: Alternative from Below

| | | |
|------------|---|-----|
| Chapter 10 | Environmental Security and Human Rights: Foundations for Real Development? by <i>Felix Padel</i> | 253 |
| Chapter 11 | Conservation versus Peoples' Entitlements: Contestations in Kaziranga National Park by <i>Akhil Ranjan Dutta</i> | 280 |
| Chapter 12 | International Financial Institutions in India's North East: Pattern and Impact on People and Environment by <i>Jiten Yumnam</i> | 305 |
| | <i>About the Editor and Contributors</i> | 328 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 334 |

Chapter 1

Traditional Economy, Sustainability and Subsistence

Understanding India's North East

Tiplut Nongbri

A major issue that dominates contemporary discourse on India's North East is the issue of development or, more precisely, the dearth of development. The region consisting of the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura is collectively seen as economically backward and characterized by an acute development deficit. Many attribute the region's underdevelopment to its locational disadvantage, landlocked and remote from the mainland, and the nation's economic and political centre. Some lay the blame at the doorstep of the central government, accusing it of neglect and failure to transform the rich natural resources that abound in the region into wealth. As a result, despite its vast endowment, practically all the states in the region are deficient, in varying degrees, in all parameters of development. What is a matter of serious concern is that this spectre of underdevelopment that haunts the region comes against the backdrop of a once self-sufficient and prosperous economy.

Though detailed information on the state of the economy in the distant past is lacking, the following observation made by the British

historian, Edward Gait, in his widely read book *History of Assam*, is illuminating:

Assam has been described as a country where there is no undue poverty or distressing starvation (*akala nai, bharalsnai*) and that indicates in a nutshell the general economic condition of the kingdom. Under the Ahom rulers the country was on the whole prosperous. It had developed a good system of agriculture, industry and trade. The existence of a strong and well organized central authority contributed not a little to make the country rich and self sufficient. That there was great economic progress has been attested to by the Muhammadan writers and the later British captains. Although the country was confronted with the Moamaria rebellion during the reign of Lakshminath Singh and Gaurinath Singh which was regarded as a disastrous period in Ahom history, there was no continuous economic crisis worth mentioning. (Gait 2010, 268)

Views on the same line have been expressed on tribes inhabiting the hill districts of the (Assam) Province. Commenting on the economic condition of the Khasis during the colonial period, B. C. Allen notes:

The people as a whole are well to do. They are enterprising and industrious and are not hampered by the spirit of conservatism which in many parts of India is so ill fated to all progress. On the southern slopes of the hills, the Khasis prior to the earthquake made large profits from lime, oranges and areca nut. Since that date their profits have been reduced but still considerable. The fact that the headquarters of the Administration are located in Shillong puts a large sum of money in circulation from which the people in the neighbourhood cannot fail to reap their profit. The Khasi have succeeded in keeping nearly the whole of the trade in their hands, this in itself must be a considerable source of wealth. (Allen 1905, 88–89)

These excerpts from two well-known texts focused on two different sites and points of history throw interesting light on the economic condition of the entity designated today as North East India. However, the sharp contrast in the picture represented in the above lines and contemporary understanding of the same call for close scrutiny of the economic practices prevailing in the region prior to Independence. The exercise is necessary not only to understand the nature of the economy,

which is broadly defined as ‘traditional’, the institutional arrangements on which it was based and the process of change that ensued, but also to look for possible clues that could help the people restore their self-sufficiency and rebuild their economic life with least damage to the environment from which they draw their sustenance or compromise the interest of the future generation. Of course, this would not be an easy task. The dearth of recorded information on the early period of the societies that constitute the region makes the attempt of tracing the contours of the traditional economy highly arduous. A related problem is conceptual: What constitutes traditional economy? Is it specific to a particular period of history? Given that change is an inherent aspect of human life can we speak of traditional economy as a static entity immune to the ravage of time?

Within the limits articulated above, this chapter focuses its attention on the livelihood practices that existed in the region during the colonial and pre-colonial period, remnants of which can be found vibrant and alive among many indigenous communities in Asia and Southeast Asia even today. The analysis is based on the information drawn from the accounts left by colonial administrators working in erstwhile Provinces of Bengal and Assam, academic literature on the region and personal observations and insights derived from years of research on the north-eastern region.

HISTORICAL BACKDROP

To begin with, though the northeastern region on which this chapter focuses has generally been looked at as a single political entity by planners and policymakers, it is by no means homogenous but marked by sharp variations in physical as well as in cultural, political and economic terms. Historically, while the Brahmaputra Valley which constitutes the centre of Assamese polity and culture has been a site of social and political encounters, as successive waves of invaders from the East and the West descended on the rich and fertile plain to conquer the land and subdue its people, the hill areas which are largely inhabited by the so-called wild and primitive tribes have remained relatively undisturbed. Though politically exclusive, the hill men were by no means a reclusive

race; evidence exists that suggests that tribes traditionally had trading relations with their neighbours in the plains¹ as well as with those on the other side of the border. However, the British policy of *laissez faire* and least intervention adopted in the administration of tribes not only broke the link but also served to keep the hill areas in perpetual isolation. Viewed as a frontier in colonial discourse, the area was kept outside the purview of general laws applicable in the rest of the colony.

The protectionist policy extended to the hill areas left a deep impact on their economy. It not only inhibited the flow of private capital into the area but also curbed the free exchange of goods that traditionally existed between the inhabitants of the hills and the communities in the plains to protect British interests, a process that deepened the difference between the hills and the plains, the tribes and non-tribes. Many scholars attribute the truncation of Assam in post-Independence India to this process. The issue however is beyond the scope of this chapter to address.

LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES AND PRACTICE: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

A perusal of the writings left behind by colonial administrators and ethnographers serving in the region reveal that Assam (the northeastern region in contemporary parlance) was characterized by what may be described as an 'integrated economic system', in which households engaged in multiple activities at one and the same time, combining agriculture with other trades depending upon the physiographic condition, customs and culture of the place they lived in. The earliest and most comprehensive account of these activities can be found in W. W. Hunter's *Statistical Account of Assam* (1998) a two-volume compendium on a variety of subjects ranging from the description of the physical characteristics of the districts, to population, diseases and pestilence and to State revenue and expenditure. The *Account*, covering 12 districts and published in 1879, was based on information personally gathered by Hunter from district officers over a period of 4 years (1869–73) and through visits to some of the districts as part of his duties as the Director-General of Statistics, Government of India. Other documents that yielded rich information included A. J. M. Mills' Report on Assam,

1853; Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the Northeast frontier of Bengal*, 1884; Report on the Administration of Assam, 1902–1903; district gazetteers; and ethnographic studies on specific tribes.

From the information sourced, it is revealed that though Assam possessed huge deposits of coal, petroleum and other minerals, none of these was worked upon by the people;² the main source of livelihood for the majority of the population was agriculture combined with manufacturing, trade and collection of products from forests. Broadly, two kinds of agricultural systems could be discerned, settled agriculture largely practised in the lowlands of the Barak and Brahmaputra Valleys and *jhum* or shifting cultivation predominantly practised by communities inhabiting the hills and the riverine and weed-infested tracks in the valleys.

The Brahmaputra Valley with its rich alluvial soil and vast expanse of land was highly conducive for settled agriculture, for producing crops such as rice, mustard, Indian corn, pulses, sugar cane and so on in abundance. This ensured not only good returns for the household but also revenue for the State, which explains why this was also the region with highly developed State formation. The abundance of land and high soil fertility enabled people to grow practically everything they needed. Rice, the staple food of the people in the region, was the main crop. Rice came in different varieties, which variety would be sown was determined by the nature of the land—dry or marshy—and the season. Some of the widely cultivated varieties were *Aus* rice, sown broadcast on high dry lands in January and February and reaped in May and June; *baou* rice, sown broadcast during February and March and reaped in June and July; and *Sali* rice, sown in June, transplanted in July and August and harvested in December and January (Hunter 1998, 45). In some districts, pulses and mustard were grown as second crops on dry lands where rice was sown. Crop was sown both for consumption and for sale. Ordinarily, each village was self-sufficient in its food production. Peasants generally produced enough food crops to meet the needs of the family with a little surplus, which they exchanged in local *hats* for salt, ghee, sugar, piece goods, brass utensils and sundry items.

Whereas settled agriculture was the hallmark in the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, the over-active monsoon and turbulence of rivers during the rainy season made permanent cultivation untenable in the riverine tracks or *chapani* lands. Similarly, in the sub-mountain region the nature of the land was such that it induced people into an itinerant form of agriculture.

Communities in the hills predominantly subsist on *jhum*, or shifting cultivation. The rugged topography, thin topsoil and poor irrigation facilities made settled agriculture a near impossibility in most districts except in lowlands or gentle slopes where rice and other crops were grown on well-constructed terraces. In *jhum*, a patch of forestland was selected and cleared by axing down the trees and scrubs and left to dry. The dried vegetal remains were then burned into ashes upon which seeds were sown with the aid of simple tools. No plough or animal power or fertilizer was used in shifting cultivation. The ashes from the burned vegetation served as manure, enabling the growth of a variety of crops on a single plot. Crops such as rice, maize, millet, beans, gourds, mustard, yam and cotton were grown on the cleared plot. A distinctive feature of shifting cultivation was rotation of the land as opposed to rotation of crops characteristic of settled cultivation. The land was put into use for 2 or 3 years or till fertility lasted, after which it was abandoned and the farmer moved to another plot to allow the land to regenerate before returning to it. In general, the period between cultivations or the 'fallow cycle' varied from 8 to 15 years, depending upon population pressure and the ability of the land to recover (Hunter 1998, 191, see also Allen et al. 2001, 63).

Because of the frequent abandonment and moving of sites, shifting cultivation is traditionally associated with community land ownership, in which villagers had occupancy rights but no proprietary rights over the plot they cultivate. Once a land was left fallow, other villagers could stake a claim to it. But the occupation of land was never arbitrary, a system was usually in place in which each household was allotted a plot according to its needs by the head of the village, who along with the council of elders also regulated its use. In general, membership in a village was mandatory for entitlement to a *jhum* plot.

Shifting cultivation is the oldest form of agriculture practised by humans. It is a mode of livelihood that marks the transition from food gathering to food production and is primarily geared towards subsistence than mass production of food. The people usually grew crops that met the requirements of the household, rather than catering to the market. Among many communities in North East India, the practice co-existed with collection of products from the forest. Although no caste or tribe solely depended on forest produce to satisfy their needs, the forest with its vast stores of lac, beeswax, honey, cotton, silk, black pepper and aromatic leaves constitutes an important lifeline for families whose yield from cultivation was too meagre to meet their needs. Tribes such as the Abors, Singhphos, Khamtis, Mishmis, Mikirs, Miris, Garos and Nagas traded in jungle products as a subsidiary occupation.

Manufacturing was another important source of income for a large segment of the population. During the period under investigation, manufacturing in Assam and the surrounding hills basically operated as an aspect of the domestic economy. To bolster household income and as a means to meet the family's requirements for clothing, tools and other items of daily needs, many enterprising individuals took to making things at home, resulting in the rise of manufacturing as a lucrative and vibrant industry. Assam was particularly reputed for its weaving industry, producing silk cloth of very superior quality that was much in demand especially by the wealthier class. Basically operating as a cottage industry, practically every home had a loom where the womenfolk weaved clothes for the family. The entire operation from the rearing of silkworms, to spinning and dyeing of the yarn, to weaving was carried out by individuals in the family without the aid of imported capital or labour. Of the varieties of silks produced, the most often mentioned included *pat* silk made from silks of worms fed on the leaves of mulberry trees; *muga* silk, made from silks of worms fed on *sum* and *soalu* tree; and *erid* silk made from the silks of worms fed on castor oil plants (Hunter 1998, 200).

Coarse cotton cloth for daily use and for use by the poorer classes was also widely produced. Like silk, the production of cotton cloth was a holistic affair, the individuals involved in the activity carried out all the vital tasks, from cultivation of the cotton tree, to plucking the

pods from the tree, to spinning. Though, not in the same league as silk, cotton had its own place in Assamese society, a fact illustrated by the humble *gamcha*,³ which today has become a symbol of Assamese identity.

Weaving as a craft was also widely practised in the hills inhabited by tribes. Like their neighbours in the plains, most tribes clothed themselves with materials woven and fashioned by the women of the family. To most of the communities in the region, clothes were not simply things to cover the body but also a marker of their identity and status. Among the Nagas, each tribe was marked by the colour and pattern of the clothes they wore. In the words of Allen

The miniature kilt worn by the Angamis as a loin cloth is made of dark blue thread and is often embroidered in cowries. Their outer cloth has generally a dark blue body, with a broad border of green and orange or red and yellow stripes . . . The Semas and Lhotas generally wear cloths made of broad stripes of white and blue, while blue and red is the favourite colour of the Aos. The Kacha Nagas affect a white cloth, with a narrow border of madder and blue. (Allen 1905, 50)

Clothes also marked the distinction between clans and the social position of the wearer. Among the Tangkhul Nagas, the designs that adorned the costume of a chief or a person of honour who had given the 'feast of merit' to his country folks were barred for the use of common people.

Though weaving, as an activity, appeared to have emerged as a strategy to meet the requirements of the household, it contributed significantly to the growth of trade. A perusal of items traded in the valley reveals that silk constituted an important item of export. Assam silk, in particular, was a much sought-after item both in the home market and in the markets of Bengal. *Muga* silk was a highly valued item among the southern tribes, such as, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos (Government of India 1882, 45).⁴ Similarly, in the Naga Hills, huge quantities of clothes from the Āo villages were sold to tribes like the Phoms and Konyaks who lacked weaving skills. According to J. P. Mills, 'In these villages, cloths of patterns specially admired by

their trans-frontier neighbours, but no longer worn by the Aos, are made expressly for this trade' (Mills 1926/1973, 104).

Other important items of manufacture included jewellery, pottery, knives, *daos*, mats, baskets and so on. Most of the articles were made from materials primarily sourced from the local bio-region. For instance, making judicious use of canes and bamboos that grew in profusion in many parts of the valley and in the adjoining hill districts, mats and baskets of various descriptions were manufactured as part of the local industry. From large baskets for storage, to sieves and trays for winnowing the grains at harvest, to *japis* (wide-brimmed hats) to protect the cultivator from the sun and rain as he toiled in the field, all were manufactured locally. The same was the case with other items. From pottery to tools, the basic ingredients were sourced from the local environment. As manufacturing was basically a home-based activity intended to meet local needs, there was no hereditary class of manufacturers in Assam (Hunter 1998, 201). Except for the Marias, a caste of brass makers who formed a distinct community and almost entirely depended on this trade for their livelihood, most families, which engaged in manufacturing, combined the activity with agriculture.

During the Ahom period, gold washing provided an important source of livelihood for many. Gold was extracted from the sands of Brahmaputra by washing the silt and taking out the gold particles embedded in it. Of the gold-producing districts, Lakhimpur and Darrang on the northern banks of Brahmaputra have been reported to yield the largest quantity. However, unlike manufacturing, which was primarily a home-based enterprise, 'gold washing was done by a guild known as Sonow Khel, who paid to the Government a tax of four *annas* weight or five rupees worth of gold per annum' (Gait 2010, 272). Gold washing as an economic pursuit, however, suffered a decline with the entry of the British. The high tax levied by the government and the strenuous process of washing huge quantities of sand for a small amount of gold made the activity economically unviable for its continuance.

In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, extraction of iron was a vital part of the traditional economy, a practice that continued well into the colonial period. The ore was obtained by washing the excavated earth

to separate the grain from the sand. The extracted ore was then taken to the woods for smelting and the product was exported to markets in Assam and Sylhet both in the raw and in the manufactured form. According to information provided by Captain Lister in his letter to A. J. M. Mills, 20,000 maunds of iron ore were exported from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills annually into the plains of Assam and Sylhet (Mills undated, 39). The presence of iron also led to the establishment of a flourishing manufacturing industry, which provided large segments of the population, especially in the Khasi uplands where the activity was widespread, with an important source of income.

Like gold washing in the plains, the incursion of colonialism into the hills rang the death knell for iron trade. Though iron from the Khasi Hills was a much sought-after product because of its greater malleability (Hunter 1998, 235), the arrival of cheap pig iron from England pushed the Khasi ore out of the markets of Assam and Sylhet.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The account presented in the foregoing paragraphs broadly brings out the livelihood practices that existed in early colonial and pre-colonial Assam and the surrounding hills. The account however tells us little about how the economy fared in the wake of social change. The extension of the colonial rule and the vast changes it effected in the administration of the land and forests, taxation and revenue could not have left the traditional economic practices unaffected. However, except for stray and fragmented information on certain issues, information on the process of socio-economic transformation in the region is conspicuous by its absence. Commenting on the matter, historian Manorama Sharma of the North-Eastern Hill University declares that the problem has less to do with the paucity of sources as with the way in which history is written, which was concerned more with the narration of facts than with interpretation. She comes out strongly against the imperialist tradition, exemplified by Gait's work *History of Assam*, for its preoccupation with dynastic and political history and for treating dynasties as the sole source and vehicle of change. She is equally critical of the nationalist ideology for its fixation with Indian culture

and glorification of that culture without much critical assessment of historical reality (Sharma 2004, 4–5).

Sharma's⁵ umbrage is basically directed at the works of historians, which she avers are devoid of conceptual framework and therefore blind them to 'the link between the information provided in the sources and the process of socio-economic transformation' (Sharma 2004, 4–5). The same can be said of the large body of works left behind by the colonial masters, on which this chapter is based. Today, a large volume of this material is available in the published form. However, as bulk of the works was originally compiled as government reports, gazetteers and ethnographic accounts on specific tribes, commissioned by the administration primarily to advance the economic and political interests of the empire than for academic purpose, the information collected and presented is more in the nature of a descriptive account devoid of analysis. As a result, though many of the works contain a wealth of information on diverse aspects, customs, culture, diet, dress, occupation, religion, kinship and political institutions, they tell us very little about how the people respond to the forces of change, how they structure their relations or what are the social and structural mechanisms which make the societies work.

A major problem with the information provided in colonial accounts is the absence of people from the narrative. The facts are not only presented in a cut-and-dried fashion divorced from the people on whom they are based, but also treated as static and unchanging, insulated from the world around. This is particularly true of information pertaining to the economy. There is a tendency to treat the economy as an autonomous institution unrelated to other spheres of life; therefore, economic behaviour can be read and presented on its own, without relating it to the norms, values, customs and practices or experiences and expectations of the concerned people. This perspective goes against the functionalist view of society advanced by sociologists (Durkheim 1933, 1938; Parsons 1951; Radcliffe-Brown 1952), who view society as an interactive whole or a 'system' made up of different parts or sub-systems which are in constant interaction with each other, such that a change in one part leads to a change in other parts. Viewed thus, we cannot hope to understand economic

behaviour unless we relate it to the social, economic and political processes and to the norms, values and culture of the people and society within which it is embedded. This is especially true of simple or small-scale societies like many of those in North East India and other parts of South and Southeast Asia, where society is more cohesive and the hold of tradition firmer.

When we apply the functionalist perspective to the livelihood practices documented in the earlier section of this chapter, the data assume new significance. To begin with, it would be well to recognize that the livelihood practices, which constitute a key element of the economy, are not genetically derived but represent a process of adaptation to the physical environment and are shaped, in part, by the socio-cultural system within which they are embedded. Both settled agriculture and shifting cultivation discussed earlier are illustrative of this fact. The favourable combination of geography and hydrology in the lowlands of the Brahmaputra Valley made settled cultivation the ideal choice. Similarly, the physiographic conditions in the hills with their rugged terrain and poor soil characteristics made shifting cultivation the best form of land use that could guarantee food security to people.

Unfortunately, shifting cultivation is one of the most misunderstood and maligned livelihood strategies worldwide. It has not only been labelled 'primitive', 'uncivilized', 'unscientific'⁶ and ecologically hazardous but has also been at the heart of governments' attempts internationally to eliminate the practice and replace it with alternative modes of cultivation. In 1957, FAO declared shifting cultivation as the most serious land use problem in the tropical world (FAO 1968, cited in Erni 2015, 8). For more than a century, colonial and post-colonial governments in Asia have devised policies and laws to eradicate shifting cultivation, in the name of forest conservation and development (Erni 2015, 8).

Studies conducted on the subject have challenged the perception that shifting cultivation is ecologically unsafe (Christanty 1986; Dove 1985; Ramakrishnan 2001). Shifting cultivation not only has an in-built mechanism for conservation but was also found to be an ideal solution for agriculture in the humid tropics (Christanty 1986).

Studies from North East India reveal that among many communities, shifting cultivation is accompanied by a number of sustainable practices. In Meghalaya where 83 per cent of the indigenous population engaged in agriculture, farmers adopted tree-based cultivation and conservation-linked harvesting techniques to minimize the negative effect of shifting cultivation (Jeeva et al. 2006). Traditional tree-based farming practices, in which varieties of crops are grown along with ecologically and culturally valued trees, 'help in conserving and improving the field, optimizing the combined production of forest and agricultural crops' (Jeeva et al. 2006, 11). To improve soil fertility, during the harvesting of grains, only the ear heads are plucked and the straw is left in the field to decompose naturally, so that when it rots and gets fused with the earth, it enhances soil quality. Indeed, so strong was the people's concern for the environment that use of the sickle for reaping is traditionally taboo⁷ among the Khasis (Gurdon 1907/1975). Among the Aos of Nagaland, farmers construct vegetative bunds along the contours of the field, as part of fallow management, to reduce soil erosion and water run-off and quicken the regeneration of the vegetation after the land is abandoned (Jamir 2015, 161–202). Among the Angamis where land was too elevated, farmers successfully adapted terrace cultivation to shifting cultivation, in which terraces were constructed at different levels on steep slopes and were held up by stonewalls, where rice and other crops were grown (Report on Administration of Assam 1903, see also Allen et al. 2010, 63). These practices not only point to the deep knowledge indigenous people had of nature, drawn as it was from their close and intimate interaction with the natural world, it also suggests ecological prudence.⁸

Even in areas where settled agriculture was in place, close examination of the data presented reveals that by and large the practice was underlined by strong moral and ecological principles. Although exact figures on the acreage under cultivation by households are not available, from the conditions of the peasantry and the frequent observations made by British officials about the 'indolent'⁹ habits of the Assamese farmer (see in particular Hunter 1998, 366, 369; Mills 1980, 5), one can infer that colonial and pre-colonial Assam did not engage in extractive farming, notwithstanding the coercive attempts made by the

Ahom rulers to induce people to clear more jungle and grow more crops (Gait 2010, 269). Simple in habit and with limited wants, each family took only that much land that the family's labour power could manage to work on to fulfil the requirements of the household. They supplemented what was deficient by engaging in small-time manufacturing or by collecting products from the forest, which they traded in local *hats* for items they lacked. Indeed, the long chain of markets that existed along the foothills mainly thrived on bartered goods, which comprised surplus from the farmer's field and loom, forest products of various kinds gathered by poor peasants and tribes in the hills and imported items brought in by travelling salesmen.

The livelihood practices that prevailed in the region point to a system that accorded high value to self-reliance and self-sufficiency. By relying on simple technology and self-help, the people not only sought to produce everything that the household needed, but also made judicious use of materials available in the local environment, a fact that comes out sharply in manufacturing. From rearing of silkworms, to growing cotton, to dyeing, spinning and weaving, everything was carried out within and by the household. Raw materials that could not be grown or prepared at home were sourced from the local bio-region.

In the final analysis, what stood out in livelihood practices focused in the discussion was the role of trade in bridging the link between the local and external economies. Even as people sought to manage their life in accordance with the requirements of the natural environment and the socio-cultural milieu within which they were embedded, they were organically linked with the outside world through the exigency of trade. Mention has already been made of trade in farm surplus and in jungle products carried out through local *hats* and markets situated along the foothills. Trading relations also traditionally existed between Assam and communities across the frontier (Mackenzie 1884/2001, 15–16). Facilitating the relations were passes or *duars* in the Himalayan range, bordering Bhutan and Sikkim, which served as passageways through which goods and people moved, taking trade through the heartland of Bhutan into Tibet and China (Barpujari 1996, 275).

Trade not only meant exchange of goods but also the transfer of ideas, knowledge, skills and tastes between peoples. Local narratives

are rich with stories of people spending weeks on the move, negotiating treacherous mountain passes and tiger-infested jungle tracks to bring back luxury items such as gold, coral beads, pearls and expensive Chinese and Burmese silks, in lieu of lac, cotton, *muga* and *endi* threads, black pepper, honey and so on. Trade has also led to the emergence of a class of people who made their living by acting as intermediaries in intra- and trans-border trade. Some of the frontier tribes such as the Abors, Khampas, Khamtis, Mishmis, Nishis and Singphos acted as middlemen between different groups of traders operating within and beyond the border (Ganguly 2000, 13). On the southern part, tribes like the Nagas and Lushais and the Meiteis of Manipur had direct trade relations with the people of Burma and neighbouring countries (Ganguly 2000, 13). On the other hand, the Khasis and Jaintias traded with Sylhet and, according to local stories, with China and Tibet. All in all, the network of trade that existed provided Assam and her people a natural outlet for their surplus and a source to draw from to compensate for the deficits. Trade also provided the people the platform to maintain relations with their neighbours within and across the frontier.

ROOTS OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

The facts presented in the discussion strongly challenge the popular view that Assam and the northeast hills were isolated entities cut off from the outside world. The data also raise pertinent questions about the state of the economy and its underdeveloped condition in present times. The historical data we were privy to neither talked of poverty nor debt, the two basic ingredients in the underdevelopment recipe. On the contrary, frequent references were made in colonial writings to the contented state of the peasantry, their strong disinclination to wage labour and aspiration to be *bhala manus* or gentlemen (Hunter 1998, 48), farmers with a field and a plough of their own capable of fulfilling the requirements of the household. References were also made to the vast expanse of uncultivated land and rich mineral resources, waiting to be tapped (see in particular Allen et al. 2010, 79–80). These facts do not point to an economic State that was impoverished or incapable of meeting the needs of the people. If that were the case, what then accounts for the underdevelopment, or what some scholars term ‘crisis

of development' (Bhaumik 2009; Uberoi 2010), that plagues India's North East in present times? Clearly, the fault does not seem to lie at the door of the traditional economy. Hence to arrive at the root of the matter we need to turn the lens elsewhere, more appropriately to the forces of change that rocked the region in the nineteenth century.

The 'underdevelopment' of North East India cannot be disassociated from colonialism. The advent of the colonial rule with its thirst for power and revenue, and its ideology of improvement, were to put the traditional economy under serious threat. The small-scale subsistence-based economy, which was the hallmark of Assam and the hills, was antithetical to the British's idea of progress, for whom progress meant extracting the maximum from nature to maximize profit. Hence the vast expanse of uncultivated land in the province was seen as 'wastes', which needed to be put under crops or transformed into plantations to render them productive. That these perceived wastes had their own use critical for the survival of the people and their time-tested economic system was oblivious to the colonial administration. The discovery of tea in upper Assam in the 1830s and Britain's ambition to break the monopoly of China in the world tea market added urgency to Britain's quest for reforms in the province. The wasteland settlement policies that ensued and the opening up of Assam to foreign capital to promote the establishment of tea plantations led to drastic effects not only on the Assamese peasantry but also on tribes in the hills.¹⁰ At the same time, the introduction of money economy and increase in taxation on lands (Barpujari 1996, 224–25) added to the burden of an already stressed agrarian population, that it induced many farmers to grow opium for cash at the cost of other crops (Guha 1991, 166). The economic stagnation that followed reduced Assam into a market for imported goods.¹¹

The revenue-oriented and resource-intensive policies of the British set the tone for the underdevelopment of India's North East. There was no space for subsistence farming or small-scale manufacturing in its scheme of things. The ideology of improvement, with its inherent bias for profit, also worked against the interest of the peasantry and the artisans. There was also no space for the kinds of economies practised in the hills. The hill areas had little in the form of revenue to offer to the British. Though blessed with immense resources, the poor means of

communication and difficult terrain acted as a constraint for the British to exploit them, let alone invest in them, leading to their utter neglect and isolation that were reinforced by the policy of non-interference and inner-line regulation.¹²

TRADITIONAL ECONOMY, RESILIENCE AND CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Notwithstanding the odds ranged against it, the traditional economy has exhibited a tremendous capacity to survive. Not only in North East India but a large number of communities in South, East and Southeast Asia continue to rely on the traditional economy for their subsistence. Rooted in tradition and customary practices, the traditional economy has shown remarkable ability to withstand the forces of change. What added to the resilience of the traditional economy are its basic characteristics: small-scale operation geared to subsistence, use of simple technology that causes least disruption to the environment, lack of specialization which ensured the easy transfer of skills from one generation to the next without having to go in for specialized training of the kind that is mandatory in industrial production and cooperative and egalitarian ethos. These characteristics are at sharp variance with the ideology of improvement and its post-colonial successor, the State-centred development paradigm, and its compulsive obsession with economic (read material) growth and progress, at the cost of well-being of the people and stability of the environment. If the processes in the recent years are any indicator, the vulnerability of the traditional economy has increased manifold. This, however, is an issue that requires a separate paper altogether.

Suffice it to say, there is hardly any room for traditional economy in the model of development followed by states today. Notwithstanding the much-hyped concept of 'sustainable development' put forward in the report by the United Nation's World Commission on Environment and Development *Our Common Future* (UN WCED 1987) and the 'sustainable livelihoods approach' advanced by liberal-minded economists (see, in particular, Chambers and Conway 1992), the traditional economy remains a largely neglected sector. In the

context of India's North East, this finds vivid reflection in the *North Eastern Region 2020 Vision* document (Government of India 2007), a roadmap for the development of the northeastern states, jointly crafted by the Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region and the North Eastern Council, a statutory body constituted under an Act of Parliament to coordinate development activities in the northeastern states. While the document comes up with an impressive list of strategies to usher 'peace, progress and prosperity' so that the region 'catches up with the rest of the country', the model of development envisaged continues to be suffused with the ideology of improvement unmindful of people's wisdom and time-tested practices. What is worrisome is in its bid to accelerate growth, the architects of the *Vision* document had little option to offer other than the much-critiqued approach of damming the rivers and mining the land to extract the hydrological and mineral wealth that abound in the region. Professing to know what the people want the document states, '[T]he people would like to see the large river systems converted into a source of prosperity. Mineral wealth can be used to create employment and increase income' (p. 17). Not to speak of the likely effect such a strategy can have on the environment, who benefits from it is anybody's guess.

What really takes the wind out of the traditional economy is the document's call for structural change in the economies of all states, which entails a double shift from *swidden* to settled agriculture and from the production of food crops to cash crops (Government of India 2007). How this will affect the livelihood of the poor time alone can tell. Settled cultivation and cash cropping may have their advantage, but in a scenario where large segments of the population depend on the produce of land for their sheer survival, such a shift can have disastrous effects. It is also pertinent to note that North East India is severely deficient in food with bulk of its requirements coming from imports, a fact clearly brought out by the Shukla Committee in its report *Transforming Backlogs in Basic Minimum Services and Infrastructural Need* (Planning Commission 1997). The *2020 Vision* document not only appears to miss out on this vital fact but also ignores the principles of self-sufficiency and self-reliance that underline the traditional economy.

NOTES

1. During the Ahom rule, several frontier chiefs received grants of *khats* as well as allotted *paik* land or fishing waters on the plains from the Ahom kings like ordinary Assamese nobility (Mackenzie 2001, 91).
2. On this, see Hunter 1998, Vol. I, 137, 200, 259; Vol. II, 196, 234–35. From the record, the only minerals in Assam worked upon on a commercial scale were coal, limestone and petroleum oil carried out by the British. The most extensive were in Lakhimpur and Sibsagar Districts. In 1903 there were five mines worked upon by the company under the supervision of nine Europeans. As no labour was available locally, the labour force had to be brought from outside (Allen et al. 2001, 79). Grants were also given to anyone willing to mine coal (personal communication, Ms Rani, coal mine owner, Sohra). In the Khasi Hills the British took a lease from the Cherra chief to mine the rich coal deposit in their land (Allen et al. 2001, 79, also Hunter 1998, 234–35). The other reported case of mining was limestone in southern Khasi Hills. Here too there was little involvement by the locals. Professor Syiemlieh opined that the Mughals were probably the first to have made use of the product, which was exploited by the British to make gains out of it (Syiemlieh 2004, 30). One of the earliest known exploiters of the product was Robert Lindsay, who was appointed Commissioner of Sylhet in 1778. To carry out trade, Lindsay made Pandua his base and made considerable fortune out of it (on the latter see Lindsay 1849, 176).
3. This is a long narrow piece of cotton cloth about 1.5 yards long and three-fourths of a yard wide with red borders and elaborate weaves on the fall. It can be used both as a towel and as a scarf.
4. Report for the Administration of the Province of Assam 1892–93, Reproduced in *Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam*, Shillong, 1896.
5. Sharma also questions the relevance of the oft-used word ‘pre-colonial’ in the context of the North East as there is no uniformity in the process of historical development in the region. For instance, while 1826 marks the end of the pre-colonial phase for Assam, most of the societies in the hills were still in the pre-colonial phase (Sharma 2004). In the absence of a more suitable equivalent, we are constrained to retain the term ‘pre-colonial’ in this chapter.
6. The report for the administration of the Province of Assam describes shifting cultivation as a ‘barbarous system of agriculture’, reproduced in *Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam* (Province of Assam 1896, 26).
7. Use of iron in the construction of houses was also considered as *sang* or taboo among the early Khasis. For more on this, see Syiemlieh (2004).
8. Shifting cultivation was not simply a livelihood strategy or a form of land use that evolved in certain ecological conditions, it was a way of life underlined by strong communitarian and egalitarian ethos. As a way of life, shifting cultivation was closely tied up with the socio-cultural life of the people. Practically

- in all societies that practise shifting cultivation as a mode of livelihood, feasts, festivals, ceremonies and rituals revolved round the practice.
9. In this context Hunter wrote, '[A]lthough the soil is very fertile, yet owing to the paucity of population and the *excessively indolent habits of the people*, only sufficient grain is raised to meet the wants of the local population' (Hunter 1998, 369, italics added). Hunter also attributed the Assamese's reluctance to take up wage work to their indolence: '[T]he people are averse to working for daily wages, as they affirm that by doing so they will compromise their respectability. *The most probable cause, however, of this repugnance is their natural indolence*' (Hunter 1998, 366, italics added). It would be pertinent to note that while the so-called indolence of the Assamese peasantry was an expression of their freedom from wage labour, it also gave legitimacy to the British population policy of importing a large number of migrant labourers from Bengal to work on the wastelands of Assam to render them productive.
 10. The encroachment of plantation space into the hills generated a series of conflicts with frontier tribes centring on rights over land, giving rise to frequent attacks on British outposts and raids on inhabitants in the plains (see in particular Mackenzie 2001, 97).
 11. Colonialism also had a crippling effect on manufacturing. Except for weaving which was widely pervasive and had a wide market, most of the crafts struggled to survive. As many of the crafts were practised by a small number of people, with limited capital and technological know-how, their products could not compete with cheap industrial goods that flooded the market. Some of the activities that flourished in the pre-colonial and early colonial period fell into disuse altogether. Gold washing and iron smelting, popular in many districts in Assam and among the Khasis and Nagas, respectively, disappeared with the arrival of the British, putting iron- and gold-based crafts under serious threat. The decline in handicrafts not only entailed a loss of livelihood, it also meant the loss of indigenous knowledge. A chilling example of this can be seen in dyeing, an activity closely associated with weaving and the manufacture of cloth. According to Saikia, out of over three hundred known varieties of plants traditionally used in dyeing in Assam, the use of only three or four varieties has survived and less than 10 per cent of the people can identify local plants that have dyeing properties (Saikia 2000, 53).
 12. The effect of the inner-line regulation on the hill tribes comes out sharply in Singh's study of the Lushais. See, in particular, pages 27–29 in Singh (1996).

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