



Stereotyping of the “North East”: When did it start?

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When one hears the word “Northeast”, certain stereotypes come to mind. Almond-shaped eyes, short stature, aggressiveness and Christianity are some of the things that one associates with people who come from the northeastern parts of India. Most of the time, the people tend to look alike and seem to come from the same state. This paper will attempt to make a connection between the homogenising and stereotyping of the culture and lifestyle of the people of the Northeast to the early writings of the British administrators who had ruled over these regions. Geographically, when we say “the Northeast”, the region covers the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

It will not be possible to deal with these eight states individually in this paper; therefore, this paper will concentrate on the three states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. It will try to understand from anthropological books the homogenising and stereotyping of the region that is so prevalent today. The writers of these “monographs” were well acquainted with the land and the people they were writing about, being a part of the administrative exercise for the government. If one were to look at the contents table of the monographs, one would find that they are almost the same. The physical appearances of the people, the laws and customs, the religion, the folktales and the language are some of the headings in the books. In this

paper it will not be possible to cover all the divisions in order to make my argument. Therefore, certain sections that are described in the monographs will be taken to explore the extent of the stereotyping and homogenising of the people that had been done.

***The Khasis* by P. R. T. Gurdon:**

P.R.T. Gurdon mentions in his book *The Khasis* that the people from the hills were troublesome and had to be “tamed”. This chain of thought is found in the other books on the Ao Nagas and the Lushais too. The British administrators were extending their territory and conquering lands, so they had to find a way to exert their power over the people. In order to rule over a land, the knowledge of the people is of the utmost importance, hence the need for these monographs. These books could be used for the contemporary British as well as for administrators who would later be posted in the regions. It would prepare the later rulers for fewer surprises when they would be possibly transferred to these regions. It would be interesting to note here that the first contact with the Khasis that is mentioned in the book is found in the Introduction:

The outbreak of the first Burma War, in 1824, brought us into closer relations with the Raja of Jaintia, and in April of that year Mr. David Scott, the Governor-General's Agent on the frontier, marched through his territory from Sylhet to Assam, emerging at Raha on the Kalang river, in what is now the Nowgong district. This was the first occasion on which Europeans had entered the hill territory of the Khasi tribes, and the account of the march, quoted in Pemberton's Report, is the earliest authentic information which we possess of the institutions of the Khasi race. (Gurdon xv)

The main reason that the British came into contact with the Khasis appears to be because of a war, which connects with the writer saying that they need to be “tamed”.

The missionary influence is found in the three states that have been selected and each of the three books mentions this in some way or the other. In the case of the Khasis, it is mentioned by Gurdon that the advent of Christianity had its positive and negative effects. On one hand, the embrace of Christianity led to a better living condition for the Khasis.

Khasis of the interior who have adopted Christianity are generally cleaner in their persons than the non-Christians, and their women dress better than the latter and have an air of self-respect about them. The houses in a Christian village are also far superior, especially where there are resident European missionaries. (Gurdon 6)

However, on the other hand, Christianity led to the demolition of many stone monuments which were considered to be pagan, thus leading to a loss of heritage and tradition. One of the stereotypes that is found even today is that people from the “Northeast” are mostly Christians, which is true for some of the states but not all.

The similarity with some other tribes from other parts of the world is something that is mentioned in the introduction to the book by C. J. Lyall. He mentions previous works that had been done on the Khasis and how these works connected and found similarities between the Khasis and other tribes. (xviii) It is interesting to note that in this book, the physical appearance of the Khasi is compared to that of the Chinese and Japanese, which is still done even today: “It would be interesting to compare some head measurements of Khasis with Japanese, but unfortunately the necessary data are not available in the case of the latter people... Eyelids are somewhat obliquely set, but not so acutely as in the Chinese and some other Mongols.” (Gurdon 3) Therefore, it would not be wrong to assume that the comparison that was started in the early twentieth century by these writers is continued even today.

From the writer’s point of view, it appears that there is already a demarcation between the plains people and the hills people. “The people are cheerful in disposition, and are lighthearted by nature, and, *unlike the plains people*, seem to thoroughly appreciate a joke.” (Gurdon 4, my italics) When describing the general disposition of the Khasi, Gurdon mentions: “These are traits which are not found usually in the people of India.” (5) Although Gurdon seem to be applauding the positive attitude and friendly nature of the Khasis, he is creating a divide between the “plains people” and the “hills people”. Paradoxically, on the same page, Gurdon writes: “The Khasis, like other people of Indo-Chinese origin, are much addicted to gambling.” (5) – Homogenising of the people from a certain area.

Lushai Chrysalis by Major A. G. McCall:

Lushai Chrysalis was written by Major Anthony Gilchrist McCall, who had spent some time in the Lushai Hills as an administrator. The main purpose of this book appears to have been an attempt to study a “backward” people and the ways they could be administered (7). The writer is aware that this exercise will be helpful for his countrymen who will have an opportunity to travel to the land about which he was going to write. Therefore, Major McCall has done an extensive study of the lifestyle, practices, customs and beliefs of the Lushais. He describes the “General Theme” of his work, *Lushai Chrysalis*, and writes:

The main purpose of the book is to show the following points through the subject

taken, viz., Lushai:-

- (a) What happens when a backward people are exposed, undirected, to stronger culture impacts.
- (b) The necessity for fostering development along healthy and appropriate lines in cases where the backwardness of a people is such as to preclude them from fostering their own ordered development.
- (c) The necessity for a closer link of understanding of the difficulties of such people with those in the Homelands, without which the flow of suitable officers prepared to labour, suffer, and endure must become progressively less.
- (d) The projection through appendices and photographs of proof that the treatment accorded to the Lushais resulted in their support in times of trouble.
- (e) The Book contains authoritative matter compiled by me, the author, over a period of nearly twenty years’ close study under conditions of much isolation and hard living.
- (f) Anthropological terminology has been omitted by me to widen the field of readers, though the principles of anthropology have been strictly applied.

(McCall 7)

It is clear from these points that the British needed to know more about the people they were going to rule.

They found it necessary to create a source which could be accessed by the present as well as the future

administrators of the Mizo country. Therefore, it was necessary for the administrators to formulate a way of understanding the people they were going to conquer. The words used to describe the Lushais seem to make a hierarchy between them and the British administrators. For instance, according to McCall, the Lushais are “a backward people” who need outside help to make “development along appropriate lines.” The British who are posted in the Lushai Hills seem to be depicted in this General Theme as men who have made sacrifices for a better cause as they have to “labour, suffer and endure” while they are in this region. The author himself had to live through “much isolation and hard living” while writing *Lushai Chrysalis*. Hence, from the first few pages of the book, a gap has already been established, where the Lushais are placed at a much lower level than the Britishers.

It would be interesting to have a closer reading of the title of the book by McCall. The word chrysalis means “pupa of a moth or butterfly enclosed in a cocoon.” One of the reasons that McCall could have used this particular word would have been to imply that the Lushai Hills was an area that was still not fully developed, which is still in the process of growing up. A chrysalis conjures up an image of a thing that is enclosed and in the initial stage of growth. If one were to bring together the image of a chrysalis and the Lushai Hills of that time, the comparison might have been appropriate from the point of view of A. G. McCall. The Lushai Hills was an area that had not been explored to a large extent, therefore, “enclosed”. It was an area that was still under the administration of the British, hence, in the initial stages of development. McCall might have had all these in mind when he chose this particular word for the title of his book. On the other hand, this choice of the word might not have been appropriate from the point of view of the Lushais because in their eyes, they might not have been in the process of development. Such assumptions could have been made from a Western point of view. All these could add to the stereotyping of the people and the land.

***The Ao Nagas* by J. P. Mills:**

In the Foreword to *The Ao Nagas*, Henry Balfour, a British administrator who had an association with the Naga Hills, wrote about the similarities and differences that might be found in the tribes of the people.

For, although the Nagas as a whole exhibit a general similarity of culture and possess many ideas, habits, and occupations in common, there are very many tribal traits which differentiate the culture of one group from that of another. Variations in physical type, in language, and in customs afford material for classification and segregation into more or less well-defined ethnic divisions. (Mills xix-xx)

It would appear that the writer of this foreword is aware and alert to the differences that are present among the tribes, yet finds it difficult to pinpoint the exact factors. This seems to be a problem that is shared by J. P. Mills, who, when writing about the appearance of the Ao Nagas states: "Aos have a distinct average appearance of their own which distinguishes them from other tribes, though it is difficult to put into words just where the difference lies." (27) Mills and Balfour try to establish that the Aos are distinct in some way from their neighbouring tribes, yet since this appears to be an elusive factor and in the end, they have to resort to finding similarities and connections between the Aos and the other tribes.

In the Introductory chapter of the book, Mills includes a section titled "Character", which seems to bear a sympathetic tone towards the Aos. The noisiness of the tribe and the seemingly inhospitable nature are some of the first descriptions of the Ao character. He, however, makes an attempt to understand why a man might not invite him to his home. Mills writes that it is the pride of the Ao which prevents him from inviting a visitor to his home unless the visitor shows an interest in the house. The fear of a rebuff makes the Ao seem inhospitable at times. On the whole, Mills tries to see the distinctness of the Ao character and he does this by comparing the Aos with the other tribes of the Naga Hills.

An interesting feature of the book *The Ao Nagas* is that it has supplementary notes by Prof. J. H. Hutton. The footnotes are at times long and informative; and given the fact that Hutton was a prominent figure who had done a lot of work among the tribes of the northeastern regions of India, he had access to material collected and written about the people of the region. Therefore, he is someone who is able to see the connections between the Khasis, the Aos and the Lushais. Many of the footnotes describe the similarity that the Aos have with either the Khasis or the Lushais. For instance, in the chapter on religion, Hutton's notes make the connections between certain belief systems. When describing the belief of a "World of the Dead" (227), Mills records the Ao belief that, "On their way to it the dead must cross a stream called Lungritsu, the boundary between the dead and the living." (228) In the footnote, Hutton points out that this is very similar to the "Lushei river of Lunglo". In the same paragraph, Mills records the fate of the souls who never reach the World of the Dead: "Unwanted babies, killed because they are bastards, or infants dying before they have been acknowledged by their fathers and named, turn into wild animals on the way and never reach it at all" (228) Hutton finds this belief very similar to that of the Khasis who believe that "The spirits of those whose funeral ceremonies have not been duly performed are believed to take the forms of animals, birds, or insects, and to roam on this earth" (Gurdon 105-106) the Aos, the Khasis and the Lushais all believed in the presence of a world after death and Hutton points out the possibility of a connection and a similarity among these three different tribes.

Remarks:

Folktales are an important part of the culture and history of the Khasis, the Lushais and the Aos. The British administrators knew this and it appears that they made use of these folktales to the utmost. In an article titled "India on the Map of 'Hard Science' Folkloristics", Heda Jason writes: "The first to pay attention to the lore of the simple folk in India were the well-educated British ladies and gentlemen of the colonial administration in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of this century [twentieth century]." (Jason 105). The reasons behind such an effort could vary – from being an interest in a people that were unknown, to it being an attempt to comprehend the land and the people and also to add to the knowledge system of the British. One might even say that these efforts were for administrative purposes as well as to enrich the knowledge of the colonial rulers. Richard M. Dorson establishes the relationship between the folklore studies in England and the collecting done in the new colonies in the nineteenth

century in this manner: “In the glorious century of the Pax Britannica, Englishmen traveled, taught, preached, and administered all over the globe. From some of these missionaries, travelers, and colonial officers resident in Asia and Africa and browsing in Europe came important collections and translations of folk traditions, directly stimulated by the interest and theories in the subject at home.” (Dorson 309)

The use of folktales as a colonial store-house of information and knowledge about an “exotic” people may also be dealt with. Sadhana Naithani, in an article called “The Colonizer-Folklorist” lists out clearly the reasons behind a Britisher’s interest in the folktales of India. While referring to the writings of Richard Carnac Temple, Naithani writes: “Whereas the collections of European folklorists in Europe were published and received as cultural goods or expressions of culture, Indian culture (in terms of religion, philosophy, and history) had to be studied for understanding the folklore.” (Naithani 5) In the same article, Naithani further mentions that the target audience of these folktale collections is already determined, as Naithani writes how “the texts were produced for readers in the home-country of the collector, where the tales were discussed as ‘tales,’ i.e., in terms of their narrative structures, thematic concerns, and types, dissociated from the meanings they had for their carriers, listeners, and believers.” (12)

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes about the British enterprise: “...knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.” (Said 36) This is true in the case of the Khasis, the Nagas and the Lushais where knowledge was gathered for better administration and understanding. One cannot deny the fact that the works which have been dealt with in this paper are an important part of the history of the Khasis, the Lushais and the Aos. They are prominent and efficiently executed works of competent administrators. However, one has to know how to negotiate the prejudice that might have been in the making of these books/monographs. There is an attempt at finding out connections and links between tribes even though the works make excellent study of the people of the lands. One cannot ignore the fact that these works would have shaped the outlook of many people within and outside of India in the early and mid-twentieth century. Therefore, it is important to raise questions and arguments in relation to these works.

Conclusion:

There will always be the possibility of stereotyping of a certain section of people and one may argue that this happens in many of the states of India, in works written by the British administration. My argument, however, is that these stereotypes that were part of the works of British administrators have most probably paved the way for the general outlook that people have of the “Northeast”. It needs to be asserted that the physical difference of the people from the hills is one major issue for the stereotyping and homogenising of the “Northeast people” but it is not the only factor. The views of the colonial masters and the subsequent colonial hangover might have contributed to the idea of the “other” that is applied to the people from the Northeast. When one does research or wants to look at the history of the “Northeast”, one has to inevitably look to the early writings on the people and the region done by the “outsider” administrator. Even if one wants to reject these writings, an awareness of the early works is imminent so cannot be ignored, so in a way these works could affect the contemporary researches.

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