CHAPTER 2

REPRESENTATION AND POWER

Daud Ali in his introduction to *Invoking the Past* talks about the new needs of history-writing:

"Over the last decade or so, historians have had to face a growing consensus in their field that 'history' as a form of knowledge about the past is itself an object worthy of study, not simply from the already established philosophical and theoretical traditions on this subject, but at a more mundane level as well. How and under what conditions has the past been represented? For what uses and ends have such histories been constructed?"

In the previous chapter, I had looked at certain historical categories as have been traditionally defined in the "established philosophical and theoretical traditions." From here on I will structure my argument around debates in history-writing, which have gained ascendancy in the recent past. The present study uses as its starting point Edward W. Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). Although his work deals primarily with the Arab word and Western representations of it, his line of reasoning can be employed to look at other places of the world, which have been defined as the "Orient". Said’s main thesis was on the ideological power-play involved in the way colonizers represented the colonized. In one of his oft-quoted statements, Said defines Orientalism thus–

---

“. . . Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”

Said’s work involves itself primarily with the way the West has deliberately represented the Orient or spoken on its behalf because as Marx puts it, “They cannot represent themselves; they have to be represented.” The truth of the representation is highly suspect because of the impossibility of the Western scholar’s escape from ideas, images and motifs circulating about the Orient.

“The Orientalist ... scholar makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West ... The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation ... My analysis of the Orientalist text therefore places emphasis on the evidence, which is by no means invisible, for such representations as representations, not as “natural” depictions of the Orient.”

Post-Said thinkers have, of course, carried Said’s work further and have also pointed out several lacunae in Said’s arguments; chief among them being his silence on the possibilities of struggle, revolution or resistance among the

---

3 Ibid., p.21.
4 Ibid., p.21.
colonized. Recent scholarship has made it obvious that colonized subjects are not always passive recipients of the dominant colonizing power, but may become active agents whose discourses on their national self-hood may have important bearings upon their societies. The emergence of a nationalist language was, as Daud Ali says, "not simply mimetic, but involved a contradictory opposition to colonialism. It both supposed and contested the structures of colonialist historiography." This aspect of the colonial encounter is something that I will pay particular attention to in my third chapter. I wish to, however, make clear that resistance on the part of the colonized was not a simple, linear opposition. It was a complex, multi-layered discourse, which included subservience and subversion, appropriation and exclusion.

"The structures of colonialist historiography" used the stereotype of the racial other in order to show the racial inferiority of the colonized. Homi K. Bhabha has written that the reason behind most colonialist discourse is to "construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction." In this study, the degenerate and alien Other is the Assamese. It is imperative, of course, to try and explain, who exactly are the Assamese. This is no

---

5 Daud Ali, p.2.
6 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism", in Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the
easy task because there are various opinions regarding the actual identity of the Assamese. Several historians had attempted to find out about the Assamese in the nineteenth century, chief among them had been Robinson's Descriptive History of Assam (1841). Blochmann's researches on the Mohammedan invasions and Sir James Johnston's detailed narrative of Captain Welsh's expedition to Assam. Two histories were written in Assamese, one by Kāsināth Tāmulī Phukon (1844) and the other by Gunabhīrām Būruā Bāhādūr (1884). But Gait says, "Both are far from complete."

For the purposes of my thesis I will be primarily concerned with Sir E.A. Gait's A History of Assam, which was first published in 1905. It is written in a charming and engaging style. Meticulously researched, factually accurate and interestingly interpreted, it is the authoritative, standard text-book still prescribed in the colleges of Assam. Gait, in his introduction to the first edition of A History of Assam talks about the demographic divisions and writes that in Assam, "in the plains, large sections of the population, like that of Bengal, are of mixed origin (but) there are also numerous tribes who are almost pure Mongolians, and the examination of their affinities, in respect of physique, language, religion and social

---


Gait, p. vii.

27
customs, with other branches of the same family forms one of the most interesting lines of enquiry open to ethnologists.\(^8\)

The large "mongoloid" population of this newly annexed territory was of great interest to the hordes of ethnographers and anthropologists who became an inseparable part of the colonialist project. To come back to the point, Assam was a fertile place for such studies, on various "tribes". But it becomes quite clear that the Assamese identity did not include the identity of such "tribes". In order to find out the identity of the Assamese, Gait says that he utilised philological and ethnographical considerations. While clarifying that affinity in language matters does not point towards any racial affinity, he posits that language is a marker of social demarcations and of power.

"The Ahoms have abandoned their tribal dialect in favour of Assamese, and Rabhas, Kacharis and other tribes are following their example. The reason in these cases is partly that Assamese is the language of the priests, who are gradually bringing these rude tribes within the fold of Hinduism, and partly that it is the language of a higher civilization."\(^9\)

This "higher" is of course relative. In no way is Gait saying that the Assamese are faultless and infinitely superior. However, most British writing on the adivasis of Assam, was fuelled by an impulse to show the Assamese as "better" because of their religion. Their Hindu status somehow became the reason

\(^8\) Ibid., p.vii.
\(^9\) Ibid., p.1.
behind their superiority. Even George Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India* finds it surprising that the Āhōms have left behind so few linguistic traces.

"It is curious that in spite of their long domination, the Ahoms have left so few traces of their influence on the languages of the Assam Valley. (After the establishment of their power) the necessity of a *lingua franca* soon became apparent. This could only have been either Ahom or Assamese. The latter, being an Aryan language, possessed the greater vitality and its use was no doubt encouraged by Hindu priests who acquired influence over the ruling race."\(^\text{10}\) The British made very clear demarcations between the Assamese on the one hand and the various *adivasis* on the other. The marginally higher position given to the Assamese because of the prevalence of Hinduism is intriguing. According to Gait, large tribal populations were "still outside the pale of Hinduism or in the lower stages of conversion, where their adopted religion still sits lightly on them and they have not yet learnt to resist the temptation of pork, fowl and other articles regarded by the orthodox as impure."\(^\text{11}\)

The Assamese, then, were numbered among the original indigenous population but were smaller in number than the total *adivasi* population; however due to their religion, their "language of a higher civilization," were able to assimilate into their society quite a large portion of the *adivasi* population. This "Assamese" group kept adding to its numbers the immigrant population from

---

11 Gait, p.9.
Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. Anybody who spoke Assamese “became” Assamese. After 1826, the British followed a policy of gradual annexation of the entire Brahmaputra Valley which finally ended only in 1874. After the incorporation of the Bengali-speaking district, Sylhet into Assam and the separation of the administration of the Assam districts from the Bengal Presidency, in 1874, the province that emerged was as follows:

"(i) The pre-literate hills districts speaking diverse tongues,

(ii) the five Assamese-speaking districts of the Brahmaputra valley together known as Assam proper. These Assamese-speaking districts were: Guwahati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.

(iii) Goalpara of the same valley where the Bengali and the Assamese cultures overlapped and;

(iv) the two Bengali-speaking districts of the Surma valley – Sylhet and Cachar."

It is quite evident that the area known as “Assam proper” will occupy much time and space in my work because both the colonizer and the colonized imaged Assam and the Assamese within this territorial configuration. Of course, there was

---

12 “The North Cachur Hills were organised into separate administrative units after their subjugation was completed by 1854. A part of the Naga Hills was annexed in 1866; the country of the Lhota Nagas in 1875; of the Angami Nagas in 1878-80; and of the Ao Nagas in 1889. The Garo Hills, long under loose political control, was made a separate district in 1869; but the Garos could not be brought under full control until 1873. The Lushais (Mizo) were brought under control during the years 1871-89, but the formation of the Lushai Hills district took place only in 1898.” Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1941, Peoples’ Publishing House, Delhi, 1977, pp.1-2.

13 Ibid., p.28.
also a lot of internal tension within these four divisions of the Assam province on religious and linguistic grounds.

**THE HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

Because of the "impossibility" of the Orient representing itself, it obviously also could not see itself historically. To the colonizer, time in the Orient was a mysterious, non-linear entity, which necessarily precluded historical knowledge. Traditional theorization on the philosophy of history in the West had always been Euro-centric where the rest of the "uncivilized" world may have been cited as examples but, were never considered important enough for careful study. Daud Ali says that European thinkers had always maintained "that historical consciousness was somehow defective in the non-European world and hence unworthy of scholarly attention." This attitude was seen in the way the colonizer framed the colonized subject as a generic being with no sense of self, and therefore, no sense of history. Macaulay in his famous "Minute" of 1835 wrote,

"All the historical information which had been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England ... when we can patronize sound philosophy and true history, we shall countenance at the public expense, medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, articulating doctrines which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school,

---

14 Daud Ali, p.2.
history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns 30,000 years long and
geography made up of seas of treacle and rivers of butter.”

The exaggerated rhetoric used in favour of the English language as the
medium of instruction to be used in higher studies, cannot hide the absurdity of the
claims made for the superiority of England as an intellectually superior nation.
The class and gender problematic within England is also quite clear; however even
the English farrier and the English boarding school girls are superior to the “stupid
natives”. Macaulay’s oft-quoted statement about Indian history citing surreal
physicality and surreal time as the markers of intellectual, and therefore, racial
inferiority, encapsulates a stereotypical colonial way of viewing the ‘native’s’
deviation from post-Enlightenment, European rationalistic discourse.

According to colonialist historians, the absence of “authentic” historical
writing pointed towards a cultural lack. Therefore in the nineteenth century, very
exuberant efforts were started to give the colonized nation an historical identity.
The colonialist historiographer was busily involved in constructing pasts for the
subject nation; and subsequently, the nationalist historian also came up with a
nationalist history, separate and distinct from the colonizer’s version. However, in
Assam, something more multi-layered and complex took place The Assamese

---


16 “Before the advent of Western education the average Indian was constitutionally incapable of appreciating the meaning of the word chronology.” Lord Ronaldshay, India: A Bird’s Eye View, Constable, London, 1924, pp.290-291
have traditionally been an historical people. The Buronjis, or historical chronicles were carefully written and preserved in the Āhōm royal families. The Āhōms maintained regular chronicles of their rule, not only till its termination, but even later. They were compiled by duly appointed officers who were allowed free access to the court and state archives. Sometimes they were also compiled by private scholars with the help of other existing chronicles. They were originally written in the Āhōm language and later on, also in Assamese.

Sir E.A. Gait was full of wonder and surprise when he beheld the buronjis and said about the Āhōms.

"They were endowed with the historical faculty in a very high degree and their priests and leading families possessed. "Buranjis" or histories, which were periodically brought up to date. They were written on oblong strips of bark, and were very carefully preserved and handed down from father to son." In an explanatory foot-note he gives the meaning of the word buronji. "The literal meaning is "a store that teaches the ignorant", bu, "ignorant persons". ran "teach" and ji, "granary". 17

Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, one of the first translators of the buronjis into English, wrote in his 1933 introduction to the Tungkhungia Buranji –

17 Gait, p.ix.
"The Buranjis are valuable studies inasmuch as they have conserved the customs, the traits, the hopes and aspirations of the people ... The universal absence of historical literature among the numerous peoples and races of India and their existence in Assam has led Sir George Abraham Grierson to write — "The Assamese are justly proud of the national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India, as a whole, is curiously deficient"."  

Interestingly, the Buranjis are seen as embodying within themselves the separateness and superiority of the Assamese people. Although written by the Āhōms on the Kingdom, they are seen not as Āhōm, but Assamese in character. The Āhōm identity is subsumed and assimilated into a larger, Hinduised Assamese identity. The Buranjis become a "national literature", "the most effective weapon in strengthening the solidarity of the Assamese people as a distinct racial and cultural entity." The very fact that Suryya Kumar Bhuyan uses Grierson's comment to intensify the difference of Assam from the rest of India is loaded with meaning. He uses colonial approval to substantiate the presence of a well developed Assamese historical instinct. The erasure of a lack, so rampant in the rest of India, becomes a signifier of the Assamese as a "distinct race" when they

---

18 Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, Tungkhungia Buranji or a History of Assam, 1681-1826 AD, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, 1990, p.xv.
19 Ibid., p.xvi.
were "uninfluenced by any exterior circumstance or surrounding, and unthreatened by the grim spectre of denationalisation."²⁰

This very unusual departure in the domain of colonial history-writing in India has very interesting reverberations in the context of the colonizer's historical representation of the colonized subject. Since the colonized has already represented himself in praiseworthy ways, what is the colonizer to do? He will translate these histories, collect them, edit them, restructure them, and use native intelligence to render them meaningful to him. Gait himself talks about the process of translation.

"To rescue from oblivion the records written in (the Ahom language) I selected an educated young Assamese, Babu Golap Chandra Barua ... and gave him a committee of five Deodhais * to teach him Ahom and to assist him in translating their manuscripts. The work was by no means easy; the deodhais themselves proved far from proficient, and it was nearly three years before all the manuscripts that could be traced were translated."²¹

The indefatigable zeal of the colonial historian knew no bounds. In a later chapter, I will look more closely at the issue of these two histories, the colonial and the local; and at which junctures they meet, contest and separate.

²⁰ Ibid., p.xvi.
* Ahom priests
²¹ Gait, p.x.
WRITING AND HEGEMONY

The process of writing and eventually the process involved in the publication of the colonizer's texts written about the colonized produced a discourse of representations and identities. The free-floating motifs and ideas about the people inhabiting the conquered space of the North-Eastern Frontier became inscribed in the language of the colonizers. The "truth" and power of the printed word became almost impossible to defy because of the wide currency it gained and the role it played in keeping the 'natives' in their 'proper place'. The colonizing gaze inferiorised, the colonized and fixed him in a world of meaning within the system of representation. The colonial, superior and invulnerable vantage point of the observer affirmed the political, economic and social order that made such positions and such texts possible. The colonizer's place within the Marxist "ruling class" made such production of "ruling ideas" possible because of the control, which the ruling class enjoys over the apparatus, used for the transmission of ideology. Marx and Engels in the German Ideology theorize about the character of the dominant ideology in a society.

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of the society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that
thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it."\textsuperscript{22}

The colonizer’s privileged position in the political and economic spaces gives him the power to control the “means of mental production”. The use of new technologies to further this structure of power is evident in the way the printing press was utilized to disseminate new and ‘false’ knowledges about the subject people. It would be useful at this juncture to look at Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as a means of leadership, which talks about control by repression coupled with control by ideological persuasion. Gramsci says,

“The methodological contention on which our own study must be based is the following: that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’.\textsuperscript{23}

Gramsci’s insistence on the importance of “intellectual and moral leadership” is very vital to this present study. The colonizer’s adamant, repetitive and self-conscious harping on this aspect of his deliberate self-representation is historically very significant. The combination of coercion and consent in the exercise of hegemony varies, but it is quite clear in Gramsci’s writings that obedience in the subservient class is not automatic and has to be produced by the class in power. Political control was achieved by the British annexation of the


Āhóm Kingdom in 1826 and the subsequent penetration and conquest of the neighbouring 'tribal' areas. The use of controlled and effective state repression gradually gave way to more subtle intellectual and moral coercion to make the colonized subject realize and interiorize his own inferiority. In A.J.M. Moffatt Mills’ *A Report on the Province of Assam* (1854) a lengthy discussion takes place on how to control the savage and aggressive Ngās. One of the main suggestions is to stop indulging in further warfare with the Ngās and instead increase the relationship of trade, which would put the Ngās at a disadvantage whenever a situation of war arose. Moffatt Mills writes, “The Government should open a shop there for the sale of agricultural implements, such as daws and koodalls, as also salt, which is indispensable to them, and cornelian beads which are greatly prized.” He goes on to quote from Captain Butler’s letter to him, which says, “by stopping the trade (we shall) have greater power in punishing them, and by tact, in time we may induce them to surrender delinquents.”24 Moffatt Mills also suggests that larger military deployments should be stationed at the Doars in order to “overawe and command (the) respect” of the Ngās.25

This example just goes to show how the Gramscian ideal of the superior class instilling obedience in a “racially inferior” group of people happens through

---

25 Ibid., p.52.
a cunning web of trade and a flaunting of the military might which would necessarily “overawe” the “ignorant and savage Nagas”.

This sub-chapter, titled “Writing and Hegemony”, is obviously going to lead towards an exegesis on the intellectual power and control over ideological apparatuses, which the colonizer had within his command. In Assam, a curious process was at work. Writing, in the nineteenth century, “modern” sense, also involved the correlated procedure of printing. The power of the printing press was however not politically utilized by the English colonizer until much later. The initiator of printing in Assam was the American Baptist Mission, which brought into Assam, the first printing-machine in 1836; the same year in which the British Government threw out the Assamese language from the courts and educational institutions and installed Bengali in its stead. Although the English Missionaries in Serampore had already translated the Bible into Assamese in 1813, making it the first Assamese book in print; not much else was done in the field of Assamese language and literature until the American Baptists came into the scene. Reverend Nathan Brown, C.T. Cutter and an Assamese convert, Nidhi Levi Farwell started the first Assamese periodical in 1844, the Dranudoi (“Sunrise”) in Sibsagar. The spread of Christianity and of education were the chief aims. Articles under headings of General Knowledge, Geography, the World of Science, History, Lives of the Christian Saints and Apostles appeared regularly in this magazine. An interesting triangular relationship was engendered with the colonizer, the
American missionaries and the Assamese recipients at the three vertices. These two, external "Western" powers endeavoured to historically frame the alien Assamese subject. Although the American Baptists were superficially "on the side of" the Assamese in trying to remove illiteracy, standardizing the Assamese language and grammar, attempting to reinstate Assamese in courts and schools instead of Bengali; the various articles on the edification of the Assamese, published in the Drunudoi tell us about their opinions regarding the people whom they were trying to convert and transform. There also went on a subtle warfare of printed words between the British and the Americans.

In a letter to Moffatt Mills on the sad state of education in Assam because of the medium of instruction being a foreign language, viz. Bengali, A.H. Danforth first makes it quite clear what he thinks of the Assamese. "To an ignorant, stupid and bigoted people like the Assamese, abstract studies are often difficult and unattractive even when communicated in the most common language, how much more so must it be when veiled in a foreign tongue."26 He then goes on to indirectly blame the government for letting such a situation continue. He calls education a "foreign plant" and says, "It is emphatically an alien language, and must continue to be such as long as Government carefully excludes the vernacular from the schools."27

26 Ibid., p.A.xxix.
27 Ibid.
On the other hand, the British anthropologists and ethnographers felt that the religious intervention of the missionaries in the lives of the large adivasi population was fast leading them on to become "reformed and hopelessly sophisticated."28 Hutton calls such people "quasi-Christians" and calls for an immediate and speedy study of such 'tribes', which "know not the seed of conversion and the sword of dissension which missionaries bring."29

While the secular and the religious forces fought it out in winning over the minds of the people; various histories, travelogues, ethnographies, monographs, gazettes, demographic reports, linguistic surveys, were published on the character and identity of the people of the North-Eastern Frontier. The insistence of the colonizing nation's notion of the colonized as the alien other, led to the belief of this space being the antithesis of civilized value. The colonizer can view the Assamese; the Assamese, however, are denied the privilege of gazing back. The power of the colonial gaze leads to the visual surveillance of the colonized people, which in turn gets published as the printed word. The need to construct, arrange, bring to order masses of material and conflicting detail about the unknown, the strange and the bizarre people that they have been forced to live with because of an historical whimsicality is what propels the colonial writer onward to establish the difference between himself and the people he writes about.

29 Ibid., p.viii.
Of course, there was the express intention of gaining political and military advantage by adding to the knowledge stores. Captain St. John Mitchell of the Intelligence Branch in the Quarter Master-General's Department, puts it in a practical and succinct manner.

"There is no part of our vast Indian frontier about which we have so little military or geographical information as the north-east; there is no portion of it so difficult to reinforce in case of certain emergencies arising, and there is no like extent of it bordering upon savage tribes, so sparsely garrisoned; yet, in this remote corner of our empire, there is more English capital invested in land than in any like extent of our Indian dominions."

While the American Baptists tried to change the 'degenerate' nature of the Assamese through the publication of such articles like "Against Adultery and Fornication", "How to Increase Civilization and commerce", "Joy of the Savage Bichuanas on First Learning to Read," etcetera in its official mouthpiece, the Drumudoi; the political rulers, had no such edifying urge. By "making statements about it (and) authorizing views of it" (Said), the English just wished to add to the already prodigious amount of writing on the alien Orient. In order to prove this hypothesis, I will look at various colonial texts; but I will also do a very intensive close reading of the Officiating Judge of the ‘Sudder Dewanny Adawlut’ on Deputation, A.J. Moffatt Mills’, Report on the Province of Assam, published in

---

1854. Although it was published as Moffatt Mills’ Report, it is actually, more or less, a collection of epistles from various important officers in the Province; collectors, commissioners, magistrates, missionaries, educational officers, medical officers, who all wrote to Moffatt Mills, giving their opinions about various matters under their supervision. In its utilitarian love for detail, the meticulous digging up of facts, the plethora of words, figures, statistics, maps, it is the quintessential colonial report. The report is strewn with references to the debased nature of the people they were forced to conquer and the possibility of change through the inculcation of greed. Unlike the missionaries’ call to the conscience, the colonizer’s call was through the temptations of government office, grants of land etcetera, as also through a complex system of taxation and imprisonment as punishments. Large portions of the report are devoted to the architecture and maintenance of sanitation in prison buildings, which tell us about the institutional importance of discipline and penitence. The wide-spread opium addiction was sought to be controlled through a very complicated system of taxation.

The report begins with a short history of how the Province of Assam came to be occupied by the British. Moffatt Mills quotes a letter from Col. Jenkins to talk about the state of affairs in 1826.

“When, therefore, we assumed the charge of Assam ... the small remnant of the people had been so harassed and oppressed by the long civil and internal wars that had followed the accession of Raja Gaurinath Sing in 1780 down to
1826, that they had almost given up cultivation, and lived on jungle roots and plants, and famine and pestilence carried off thousands. 

The abjection, poverty, misery and apathy of the people seem enough reason to conquer them and place them under a 'proper' and superior administration. The impotence of the local rulers and the strange system of public administration are also put forward as reasons for the sufferings of the people, thus paving the way for the civilized, intervention of better rulers. David Spurr, in his *Rhetoric of Empire*, talks about why the physical suffering of the people is pointed out as a condition prior to colonial occupation.

"... the physical suffering of indigenous peoples can be associated with their moral and intellectual degradation: disease, famine, superstition and barbarous custom all have their origin in the dark pre-colonial chaos. Colonial discourse requires the constant reproduction of these images in various forms ... both as a justification for European intervention and as the necessary iteration of a fundamental difference between colonizer and colonized."

After the fact of annexation, a long drawn out process was initiated to put the Assamese back on the road to prosperity. Col. Jenkins takes much pride in the material advancement of the province.

---

31 Moffatt Mills, p.3.
“Notwithstanding its greatly impoverished and depopulated state and the disadvantage of being beyond all trade, having no connexion with any other Province of the Empire, and only savages as its neighbours, Assam has greatly recovered its cultivation and much of its internal prosperity.”

This self-justificatory posturing of the colonial administrator makes it quite clear that there is a subconscious need to vindicate his presence in this alien space. The rising ‘prosperity’ of the Assamese people is seen only as a consequence of colonial intervention. The fact that the colonizer had come to this distant and savage land, not of his own volition, but only because he had been invited by the Ahom king in order to oust the Burmese, is made much of. It is almost as if he wishes to say that the Assamese should be grateful that he had come and that he also stayed behind, in spite of various hardships, for the amelioration of the condition of the Assamese. Of course, this is not really the case because the colonizer had a lot to gain from the fertile lands of the Brahmaputra valley and the rich mineral deposits of Assam. The strategy was then, to ideologically control the people by making them internalize the baseness of their nature and realize the absolute necessity of colonial administration.


William Robinson also writes in the introduction of his A Descriptive Account of Assam, “The daily increasing importance of Assam, and the conspicuous position it begins to hold as the scene of great commercial advantage to British India, render a "Descriptive Account" of the Province a great desideratum”. William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam with a Sketch of the Local Geography, and a Concise History of the Tea - Plani of Assam to which is added, A Short Account
In the following pages, I will look at how the colonizer was constructing an identity of the Assamese people, which assisted him in performing all sorts of administrative and instructional duties without being hindered by any pangs of conscience. Under several headings, I will see how the images of chaos, disorganization, and fragmentation are repeated in order to affirm the superior, unified, ordered self of the colonizer. While the colonizing power idealizes itself, it also tries to thrust an "ethical" order onto the colonized. The idea of "intellectual and moral" superiority is reinforced so as to remove any crisis of authority and the possibility of insurrection.

THE ASSAMESE ‘PEOPLE’:

Abdul R. Janmohamed points out an important aspect of colonial discourse:

"Just as imperialists "administer" the resources of the conquered country, so colonialist discourse "commodifies the native subject into a stereotyped object and uses him as a "resource" ... The European writer commodifies the native by negating his individuality, his subjectivity, so that he is now perceived as a generic being that can be exchanged for any other native."34

The loss of individuality and subjectivity of the conquered native is evident in the stylistic structure of the colonizer’s discourse. Even when issues of

---

agriculture or land reform measures are being discussed, the generic and negative character of the Assamese cultivator, as responsible for various defects, is put forward.

"It is contended that the Assamese peasant is apathetic and indolent, that he is satisfied with an easily attained competency, and that without a large increase of population, which is at present checked by the ravages of cholera and epidemic disease, by the inordinate use of opium, and the licentious habits of the people, there is no prospect of extending cultivation in any considerable degree."\(^{35}\)

The laziness, lack of industry, indifference towards the future, are all attributes in the process of homogenization. These are ideas which are repeated \textit{ad infinitum} in order to create a truth out of imitative reproduction of colonial representations. John M'Cosh had already put forward the same ideas about the Assamese people in 1837.

"In integrity of character they are estimated very low indeed; falsehood and knavery prevail to the greatest extent. They are idle and indolent in their habits, childish and timid in their manners, and perfectly indifferent about providing for

\(^{35}\) Moffatt Mills, p.5. See also Robinson who writes, "The Assamese in general, or those professing Hinduism, and more specially those in the upper classes, and those not engaged in agricultural pursuits, are for the most part a weak and puny race, extremely predisposed to diseases on the least alteration of the weather ... the Kacharis and other inhabitants of the plains, who are not addicted to the ... dissipated habits, enjoy remarkably excellent health. The diseases common to the natives may therefore be attributed more to their habits of indolence and dissipation, than to any pernicious effects of the climate." – W. Robinson, pp.21-2.
their future want. They work for a day or two at a time, and spend the next day or two in listlessness and intemperance.”

Mary Louise Pratt says, “People to be othered are homogenised into a collective ‘they’.” The Assamese man is not seen as a person in his own right. He is controlled by the givens of nature; easily satisfied with the meagre produce of his own land, it therefore becomes an uphill task for the enterprising coloniser to make him come out of his “death-like inertia.” To the hard-working and enterprising Englishman, the Assamese man is the stereotypical lazy Other. The licentious habits are related to the heavy, torpor-ridden climate of the region. The general miasma of bigotry and superstition in the land is seen as death-dealing, dangerous and detrimental to progress. The priests are seen as the main culprits in spreading dissatisfaction among the people. Captain Brodie’s letter to Moffatt Mills (dated 14th November, 1835) is quite clear about this.

“... would from any other class of men have called forth the utmost gratitude; but the reverse is the case with these grasping priests; they may truly be said to be the only disaffected subjects of Government in the plains of Assam ... They may be considered the greatest impediment we have to contend with, in enlightening the rising generation. Possessed of great power over the minds of the people, bigoted,

ignorant and avaricious, they did not in the smallest degree ... aid in the education of the people."\(^{39}\)

Religion in the province of Assam was a matter of meticulous research and fact-finding missions. The unique form of Xäktö Hinduism practiced in the region created much awe and instigated the enthusiasm of the colonial researcher. However, Assam compared unfavourably with the other parts of India because of various reasons. The laxity in the caste system in Assam was bemoaned by the colonial writer. In a gazette published in 1909, the contributors confirm that

"The higher castes are ... somewhat lax in the observance of the ceremonial details of their religion. While castes which in Bengal are of a comparatively low rank enjoy in Assam a much more respectable position."\(^{40}\)

The presence and influence of the tribal population is sometimes cited as the reason for the lack of strictness in Hinduism. The lack of a strident intolerance is seen by the colonizer, not as something positive, but as a detriment to the economic progress of the society.

"Colonel Jenkins states that there are no chamars in the Province, and that the valuable skins of animals with which the District abounds is lost to the

---

\(^{39}\) Moffatt Mills, p.25.

country; further he remarks, that though recently the use of shoes has become general, yet there is not a family of shoe-makers in the Province.\textsuperscript{41}

Ironically, there is a tacit unease about the Hindu status of the Assamese. Although, it is evident from the writings of Gait and other historical thinkers, that they were obviously followers of Hinduism, various facts, like that of negligence in the observance of caste rules, created a feeling that they were still in an unevolved or fledging state in the issue of religion. According to the colonizer’s understanding of Hinduism, the Assamese were still in a rather backward theological condition.

Much of the apathy and indolence of the people is attributed to the widespread opium-addiction in the Province of Assam. Here, I wish to make clear how this “addiction” played a significant role in the colonizer’s construction of the Assamese identity. These addicts, known as \textit{kāniā} (from the Assamese word kānī for opium) are, if the colonizer’s reports are to be believed, to be found in large numbers and in all corners of the province. The Civil Assistant Surgeon, A. McLean’s letter to Moffatt Mills, which enumerates the various health problems of the Assamese people, ends with the worst problem of all opium-addiction.

“The misery in which a large proportion of the Assamese live, the scantiness and bad quality of their food, consisting in great part of green, unripe vegetables and fish in an advanced state of decomposition when these articles are procurable, the insufficiency of their clothing, and the defective nature of their

\textsuperscript{41} Moffatt Mills, p.39.
lodging, serve to produce much of the sickness which prevails among them. But
... there is a ... universal occurrence among them, which renders it almost
impossible to ameliorate their condition, and to which may be traced ... the
greatest part of the disease and wretchedness existing among the lower classes. ...
I refer to the habit of opium-eating, which is practised by men, women and
children, and in most instances to an excessive and most injurious degree.42

Even A.J. Moffatt Mills in his introductory remarks says that the abuse of
opium should be countered by proper governmental measures,

"... Something should be done to check the immoderate use of the drug,
and rescue at least the rising generation from indulgence in a luxury which
destroys the constitution, enfeebles the mind, and paralyzes industry ..."

"Judging from my own personal observations, I am of opinion that ...
three-fourths of the population are opium-eaters and men, women, and children
alike use the drug.

"... experience has shown that to allow every man to grow the plant and
manufacture the drug unrestrictedly is most injurious to the morals of the
people."43

The misery and self-imposed physical degradation of the people is cause
for concern and reform. The uncivilized mind and the defilement connected to the
savage body are used as tropes in the colonial discourse. The problems of health

43 Ibid., pp.19-20.
and sanitation are associated with filth, indolence and sexual promiscuity. Temperance, chastity and physical decency are qualities unknown to the uncivilized Other. The Assamese, men, women and children alike, are not responsible enough to withstand the seduction of something as debilitating as opium. The rankness of the Assamese character, somehow connected to the needs imposed by a damp climate, leads to lassitude and dependence on some external stimulant. The filthiness and disgusting habits of the Assamese people are also enumerated with an eye for the minutest detail. A. McLean writes:

“A habit common to the whole native population is of going to what they designate the maidan to obey the calls of nature. This, in a large station containing more than 7,000 inhabitants, is a most intolerable nuisance; the whole of the uncultivated ground to the south being thus converted into a gigantic privy, the emanations from which taint the air in every direction ... I regret to say ... the drains, the roads, and the grounds in their immediate vicinity, frequently present sights of the most disgusting nature ... During the cold season, when the river has subsided, many of the natives resort to the sand for this purpose, and ... all ... European residents can bear me out on the assertion that the stench produced by the decomposition of the filth thus deposited is inexpressibly sickening; even at a distance from the scene of action.”

This rather stark account of the native’s lack of propriety and shame and the abuse of the clean and ‘proper’ body by the process of disrobing and defecating in
public, shows the colonizer's acute awareness of difference between his own "European" standards of civility and the native's disregard of the body's 'inner foulness'. David Spurr writes that "the obsessive debasement of the other in colonial discourse arises not simply from fear and recognition of difference but also, on another level, from ... (an) identification with the other which must be resisted." The native's body is "explicitly characterized as monstrous and inhuman," which has the capacity of turning a town into a "gigantic privy". The realization of the physical sameness of the bodies of the colonizer and the colonized opened up areas of chaos and disorientation, which had to be resisted at all costs.

The slow growth of the population is also a cause for concern. The extensive mortality due to small-pox and cholera, the fact that outsiders ("Bengallees and Hindoostanees") cannot be induced to settle in Assam and opium-addiction are cited as reasons for the very slow growth rate of the population. The population, constituted the workforce, and was necessary for economic returns for the British. There are various discussions within the colonial discourse on the possibility of increase in the growth-rate and genetically bettering the future progeny of the Assamese people. Opium-addiction is generally shown

---

45 David Spurr, pp.80-81.
46 Moffatt Mills, p.Appendix, D, p.xvii.
as the reason for the impotence of Assamese men. The Civil surgeon of Goalpara, John B. Barry says,

"The male adults, from fatuity and incapacity become drags and encumbrances, while at the same time they are rendered almost impotent in perpetuating their species, and the offspring that happen to be born to them are weak, stunted, and often decrepit, as wretched and perhaps more miserable than their fathers were."

"The province is itself rich in everything that can make a country wealthy, except in population, and without this she is impoverished and degraded to the lowest degree."\textsuperscript{47}

The emasculated character of the Assamese male was to be pitied and changed if the vital, virile colonial power was to survive. The empire could not grow without a subservient, obedient and hard-working population. The colonial medical practitioner was also of the opinion that the licentious behaviour of the people also leads to a number of death-dealing, sexually transmitted diseases. In this area, the promiscuity of the Assamese women is dealt with in much detail. In the American Baptist Mission's mouthpiece, the \textit{Orunudoi}, several articles dealt

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p.B, Appendix E, p.viii.

See for instance William Robinson, "Upon the whole, the poorer classes seem to be the greatest sufferers from dysentery. The prevalence of the disease, and the great mortality occasioned by it, may be accounted for in the deficiency of food and proper clothing, the use of putrid fish indigestible fruits and vegetables, bad water procured from the stagnant pools in the vicinity of their dwellings (and) the want of the accustomed stimulus of opium which nearly all partake of." p.23.
with the sinfulness of unrestrained sexual activity. In an article, titled, “Against Adultery and Fornication” published in the April 1848 issue, the writer states that prostitution has increased considerably in the main stations and says that

“... it is a matter of considerable dissatisfaction that the wives of the common people of this country have become very restless. The word “marriage” has disappeared from their vocabulary and they leave their men whenever they wish to!”

Women rarely ever feature in the governmental reports or statistics. They are nowhere in the scene when lists of men in government offices, lists of boys in government schools, lists of individuals holding pension lands, etcetera are drawn up for the reports. Even statistically, they seem to be totally non-existent and invisible in gainful or meaningful roles. In Moffatt Mills’ introductory remarks, they appear only as appendages to the men. He quotes Major Vetch:

“It is no uncommon thing for a man to claim a woman for his wife after she has been absent from him for two years and had children by another man.”

The women seem to have no agency of their own, no identity apart from their men; which is ironic since their frighteningly threatening promiscuous tendencies are mentioned time and again. The selling into slavery of women relatives by men is a custom, which the colonial administrator finds abhorrent and

48 Brown, Cutter, Danforth & others (ed.), brunudoi, April 1848, Journal Section, Gauhati University Library (trans. mine).
49 Moffatt Mills, p.34.
wishes to remedy with his superior, western sensitivity towards oppressed womanhood in the savage, colonized country.

"The practice of heads of families selling to the highest bidder the persons of their female relatives is unfortunately very prevalent in Assam ... (and) the effects of the custom are very demoralizing."\textsuperscript{50} Women are also seen as the instigators of fights and feuds among men. They are dangerous possessions and can lead men to indulge in all sorts of evil acts because of their total disregard for social norms.

"Heinous crimes are almost all homicides, committed in moments of irritation, and most commonly connected with women."\textsuperscript{51}

In the colonial discourse, the Assamese woman is a strange, shameless creature who flouts all rules of social and sexual conduct. She is absolutely indifferent about maintaining sexual decorum and modesty. As early as 1837, John M'Cosh had talked about the absence of "purdah" and had compared the Assamese woman to women in other parts of India.

"... the women go about in public quite divested of that artificial modesty practiced by native ladies in other parts of India. Unfortunately their morality is at a low ebb."\textsuperscript{52} Within the colonial discourse, the social position of women in this entire region seemed similar. The 1886 gazette has this to say about Manipuri

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p.34.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p.35.  
\textsuperscript{52} John M'Cosh, p.22.
women, "The women of Manipur; married or unmarried are not confined in
zenanas as they are in Bengal or Hindustan ... neither do they cover their faces
before strangers. They are very industrious ... the opposite of the men, who are
lazy and indolent ... With all their industry and usefulness, women hold a very
inferior social position, and are considered more in the light of goods and chattels
than as persons to be treated with honour and consideration. This is partly owing,
no doubt, to the laxity of their marriage customs, which are loose in the extreme,
but still more to the baneful system of domestic slavery which is the prevailing
system of the country".53

The weak, degenerate and sickly men and the unveiled, immoral women
with gigantic sexual appetites are the stereotypical, homogenized, Assamese
Other. The moral profligacy of the people forms the leitmotif of the colonizing
power's rhetoric about the colonized Assamese.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The intellectual amelioration of the Assamese was to take place through the
system of a proper infrastructure of education created by the British Government.
Moffatt Mills says, "When we took possession of the country, the education of the
people was in a most deplorable state: the individuals who could read and write
were very few. Captain Butler of Nowgong, states, that in 1838 perhaps thirty

---

53 Captain E.W. Dun, Gazetteer of Manipur (1886), Vivek Publishing House, Delhi,
1975, p.17.
educated individuals could not be found in his District; and that universal ignorance pervaded the whole community."\textsuperscript{54}

Although education seemed to have improved, there were various obstacles yet to be overcome. Moffatt Mills enumerates the reasons – the indifference of the upper classes, inefficient school-masters, want of proper class-books, defective supervision and the use of Bengali as the medium of instruction. The lack of interest among the upper classes is seen as one the major reasons behind the slow growth of education. The colonizers hint that the new system of education would overthrow the hold that the people of the upper classes had over the minds of the people of the poorer sections of the society. The upper classes too sensed this and tried to hinder progress by a continued indifference towards the educational institutions. Moffatt Mills writes –

"... the respectable classes seem to take little or no interest in the institutions ... Capt. Butler remarks: "They show no desire whatever to see the rising generation educated or made wiser than themselves; in fact I believe if the higher classes could prevent the Assamese youth being educated, they would not hesitate to do so. The supineness and indifference of the most influential men in the Districts ... can scarce be conceived"."\textsuperscript{55}

The problem of the language of instruction in the schools was also much debated upon. Bengali was seen as an alien language, which did not touch the

\textsuperscript{54} Moffatt Mills, p.26.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p.27.
hearts of the common people. Rev. A.H. Danforth in his letter states that imparting knowledge in a foreign tongue was a ridiculous idea. He writes, "We might as well think of creating a love of knowledge in the mind of a stupid English boy by attempting to teach him French before he knew anything of the rudiments of English."\footnote{Ibid., p.A, Appendix F, xxix.}

Although Moffatt Mills was sympathetic to the problems of using the Bengali language as put forward by people like Danforth and Ānondōrām Dhēkiāl Phukōn, he felt that it was too late to remedy the situation. In fact, the 1837 imposition of the Bengali language was to be legally countered only in 1873 through a process of petition and struggle which I will look at in a later chapter.

The question of employment, which was very intimately related to the new kind of education available in government schools, is very interesting. The culture of the creation of bābus started with the education and thereafter, the employment of the colonized in colonial institutions like schools, prisons, revenue offices etcetera. Rev. Danforth is of the opinion that there should be a higher motive for the spread of education than just the greed for public office. He takes strong exception to the fact that the system of education in Assam is aimed at creating only a class of young men whose diligence is stimulated by the "commodity" of government situations. He says,
"To qualify a class of young men to be public servants constitutes, as it seems to me, only a small part of the grand objects to be had in view and secured by schools; and yet I cannot avoid the conviction that the present system of education in Assam has a direct tendency to annihilate in the minds of the pupils every motive but the hope of Government preferment."\(^{57}\)

The grievance of the upper class was that the coming of the British had weaned away the young men from a satisfaction in their agricultural life. Moffatt Mills says that it is a misapprehension on their part to believe that the sole aim of education in government schools was as a ticket to government office. He says,

"The people should be disabused of the idea that the one great aim and end of giving them education is to qualify them for public employ."\(^{58}\)

Even in this matter of education and employment in the early days of British rule in Assam, we see a delineation of the Assamese character as deficient in the energy needed for any kind of active involvement in changing their ignorant and inert selves. Even a missionary like Danforth had to talk about the possibility of material prospects which new education would bring to the people of Assam.

"The self-interest of every native is a motive sufficiently strong, when the means of securing domestic comfort and wealth are laid open before him and shown to be within his reach, to awaken a spirit of enterprise and call forth his

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p.A, Appendix F, p.xxxiii.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., p.27.
activity. That education can do much toward unfolding the bright prospects of affluence is perfectly evident ... from history."

So education was not to be given to the people as a means of mere moral upliftment, but as a process through which the "bright prospects of affluence" could be enjoyed. It is therefore not surprising that the rising culture of 'babudom' could be seen in Assam too, as in other parts of India. The Macaulayan imperative of the dark skin, but the "white" soul created by the internalization of "white" values in a state-ruled educational structure, gave rise to a whole new generation of young Assamese men who formed the newly educated, elite bourgeoisie.

THE PRISONS

Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, sees disciplinary methods as producing "subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies'." The imprisonment of the deviant and the delinquent in colonized societies was part of a very utilitarian drive to resist and combat evil in a purely institutionalized way. The concern regarding the proper structure of prison-buildings; the construction of well-ventilated wards, work-places for the prisoners, the disposal of night-soil; all these find mention in the reports and gazettes of the day.

A lot of space is devoted to the changes required in the existing type of jail-house. All the Civil Surgeons of the Province write in to say that the high rate of

---

mortality within the prisons is primarily due to the badly constructed buildings. Some among them, like John B. Barry, Civil Surgeon of 'Gowalparra', bemoans the unsanitary conditions the prisoners are compelled to live in. He writes in with suggestions of his own regarding the re-modelling of the jail:

"1st - To choose a site dry, open, and above all inundation.

2nd - To have the sleeping wards built upon posts above all malarial agency

3rd - To have the rooms built capaciously …

4th - To have the facility for ventilating the wards.

5th - To have the privies judiciously placed …

6th - To have all pools, tanks, & c., in the vicinity filled and cleaned …

7th - To drain the land around the building thoroughly and efficiently."

Such statements by a civil surgeon, are of course undermined by the obvious callousness of the administrators who have the power to ignore or be indifferent towards such suggestions. And the fact that John B. Barry is an exception is proved by the letter W. Agnew, wrote to Moffatt Mills. He says that Barry's report is "a very exaggerated one. To say that the jail is too ill-ventilated is absurd … The Doctor complains of the walls being lined with mats … if it is too objectionable, as is represented, they can be easily removed … With regard to the dampness of the site, I can only say that it is not worse than what the honest portion of the community have to put up with in their houses." He goes on to

62 Ibid., p.B, Appendix E, x.
conclude that even if Barry were right, the government would have to buy land for a new jail, which will have to be bought at a great expense.

The welfare of the prisoners was not always the main issue. The segregation of the 'honest community' from the dishonest in the society was the rationale behind the growth and institutionalization of prisons in this period. The prohibition of the criminal from entering and residing within the community was supposed to create a moral penitence and transformation in him.

The question of hard, out-door labour, usually forced upon convicts, was discussed by many colonial administrators. The use of free labour, in a land where the labour-force was meagre, was objected to by surgeons like A. McLean. The fact that most prisoners were already ill, and because of their opium-eating habits, unaccustomed to much bodily exertion, was seen as reason enough to send them to hospital for a month immediately after being sentenced. He also mentions the deficient nutritional value of the food served to the convicts. Several instances have been noted where the quantity of food served was decreased arbitrarily and once Moffatt Mills casually remarks that –

"The prisoners complained to me about not getting enough to eat, but I do not see any ground for complaint; they appear healthy, and have not been less healthy since the reduction of the food."63

63 Ibid., p.13,18.
The issue of out-door labour is seen differently by the Civil Surgeon of Sibsagar, W. Johnston Long. He feels that the prisoners involved in outdoor labour are more susceptible to diseases because they work in unhealthy places and drink foul water. He is of the opinion that constant imprisonment within the doors of the jail would be a better way to change their evil tendencies.

"all kinds of labour, if carried on within the jail coupled with complete isolation from the world without, would be less popular, I believe, with most convicts than out-door labour ... The restraint of imprisonment would be felt more severely, and then an improvement in the diet table might be introduced without holding out a bait for the idle, the lazy and the man of bad character, the budmash, to resort to a prison for sake of the better fare to be obtained within its walls."64

In fact, before going on to enumerate the problems faced by prisoners, he waxes eloquent on how the "privations of full liberty" and the "change from home and friends" exercises a "depressing influence on the prisoners" which he feels is very closely connected to the "punishment due to crime." Indeed, W. Johnston Long directly refers to the inferiority of the darker-skinned races and says that disease is so prevalent among the prisoners because, "The dark races are particularly unfitted for being collected together into one building, as from the particular organization of their skins, matters are eliminated by cutaneous

64 Ibid., p.11, lxxxviii. See Administrative Report on the Jails of Assam, 1878, p.11, "The milder form of punishments such as reduced diet and solitary confinement, for the short period over which they can extend, do not appear to me to have any terrors for the native mind, and as examples to others, they are useless." – Superintendent of the Tezpur jail, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong 1879, National Archives, Delhi.
transpiration and secretion, which in white people are separated from the blood by other organs and are cast forth by other passages.  

This discussion on the construction and maintenance of the prison-building and the imprisonment of the ethically degraded body of the prisoner, was necessary to see how the colonizer’s discourse was framing a structure of moralities and immoralities. The concept of human society as imperative for the happiness of the human subject is an idea that is experimented with fully with the colonized. The body to be disciplined and punished became a trope of racial inferiority. Indeed, the Assamese convict is doubly condemnable because he does not possess the adventurous and sometimes admirable daring of pure evil.* The use of the prisoners as free labour for the making of roads, bridges, sometimes their own prisons etcetera, also suggests how the colonized body could be used as a tool for consolidating colonial administration. The conditions of the prisoners are related primarily through medical reports during this period. David Arnold states,

---

*Ibid., p. 11, lxxxvi.

* See W. Johnston Long, “I believe I am correct in saying that there are fewer of the men of that class (hardened villains) amongst the convicts of Assam ... The Assamese being a timid race and entirely wanting in that pluck necessary to make the hardened desperado.” Ibid.p.11,lxxxviii.
“One of the few areas where the colonial state had relatively unobstructed access to the body of its subjects, the prison occupied a critical place in the development of Western medical knowledge and practice in India.”

The exceptionally high rate of mortality and death inside the prisons was thoroughly studied and investigated. Health and sanitation alone were the markers of a good and proper prison system. Prisons supplied information about diseases like cholera, malaria and dysentery, which commonly broke out in epidemic forms inside prison walls.

The colonial prison also replicated the social organization outside the prison. The prison easily distinguished between caste, class and, also, gender and treated its inmates in much the same way that the world outside treated them socially. For instance Moffatt Mills talks of a Brahmin, Ḋeṭhārāṁ, who was convicted of theft and sentenced to three years’ imprisonment. However, the Commissioner of Sibsagar directed his release, “on the ground that he is a Brahmin and a person of respectability.” Moffatt Mills vehemently denounces such an example for remission of punishment because “it is calculated to do mischief; the law is no respecter of persons, and certainly should not respect a felon because he is of the better class.”

---


67 Moffatt Mills, 11, p.16.
Although Moffatt Mills criticizes such privileging of caste, it is quite clear that it existed within the prisons. Arnold remarks,

"In this sense ... the prison stands as an archetypal colonial institution, not only reflecting and institutionalizing colonial ideas about essential social categories, but also constituting one of the key sites on which the ground rules of colonial engagement with Indian society were laid down."

In relation to disease, diet, caste-identities and labour, the prison was seen as a kind of cultural signifier of the body of the colonized. The writings on prisons and prisoner behaviour during this period form a very definitive discursive area around the very intimate relationship the colonizer was forced to forge with the colonized. The need to reform, nurse, feed and clothe the native was possible only within the confines of the prison walls. The extensive experimentation with the bodies of the colonized, who were not always "docile," who were full of grievances and complaints led to a lot of writing on the essential identity of the Assamese.

THE "TRIBES"

As mentioned earlier, the various adivasis in and around the Province of Assam, were the subjects of much anthropological enquiry. They were, very early on in British rule, demarcated as culturally and racially different from the Assamese. Recent scholarship on Anthropology has shown how the subject was

---

68 David Arnold, p.158.
constituted and strengthened within colonization as a science of the legitimization of the West's domination of racial others. Bernard McGrane posits that Anthropology has been "an extremely subtle and spiritual kind of cognitive imperialism, a power-based monologue, a monologue about alien cultures."  

The "alienness" of the adivasis in the North Eastern Frontier was something that British anthropologists, ethnologists, travellers, intelligence-officers tried their best to understand and represent to themselves and to the reading public in the world outside. Ethnography, an area of work, so crucial to the interpretation of an alien culture, was a crucial genre of writing, a "monologue" which interpreted the world of the 'tribes'. Ethnography, in short "treats of the foreign, the strange, the unfamiliar, the exotic, the unknown – that ... which challenges belief."  

The need to study 'savage' societies in the nineteenth century, arose because (an idea which persistently recurs in the writings of this period) a knowledge of these societies afforded a unique opportunity to know more about the West's own, primitive, undocumented past. L.A. Waddell in 1837 states the urgent necessity for recording all available information about the 'tribes'. He writes,


"Unfortunately for science, however, no steps are being taken to record the rare vestiges of prehistoric society which still survive here; but which are now being rapidly swept away by our advancing civilization ... The little that is known is just sufficient to show that many of them are in a much more primitive condition than the wildest tribes of India; and that here, almost at our very doors is a unique mine of explored material for yielding that very kind of unrecorded information which Professor Tylor and others have shown the urgent necessity for fixing without delay in order to solve many important problems respecting the origins of our civilization."

The urgency with which such endeavours were undertaken can only be gauged by the passion with which the work was done. The one cry among ethnologists was to investigate the indigenous culture of these 'tribes' before the changes brought about by Western civilization created complete havoc upon the material for research. The fear of absolute "corruption" which Western contact could work upon them can best be summed up by Waddell's comment.

"... these tribes which have hitherto been isolated from the outside world are fast losing their primitive customs. It is said to be no uncommon sight to see a Naga who only two or three years ago was a naked head-hunting savage of the

---

most pronounced type, now clad in a tweed coat and carrying a Manchester umbrella, taking his ticket at a railway station!"\(^{72}\)

This kind of change, which transformed the essential 'savage' nature of the 'tribe' to be scrutinized, was condemned as having been brought about as a result of the apathy of the Government. Waddell makes it quite clear in his introduction that the Government has a duty 'to science and to posterity', and since it is the 'agent' of these changes, it ought to do something fast before the opportunity to garner knowledge is irretrievably lost.

It is interesting to note that many of these ethnologists were enthusiastic amateurs who can be seen as falling within the domain of "anti-conquest", a term used by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes*, by which she refers "to the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony ... The main protagonist of the anti-conquest is a figure ... (called) the 'seeing-man', a ... label for the European male subject ... he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess."\(^{73}\)

So in many of the ethnographies that I read, the *adivasis* were sought to be impaled and made immobile in a fixed moment of changelessness. Sometimes the ethnologists go so far as to decry their own cultural penetration into the spaces of these 'uncivilized' peoples and see people of their own kind as the perpetrators of

\(^{72}\) Ibid., p.2.

\(^{73}\) M.L. Pratt, p.7.
this evil metamorphosis while they themselves remain guiltless and free from blame. So Major Gurdon while talking about the Khāsis has to describe their dress under two headings: ancient and modern. “The up-to-date Khasi male wears knicker-bockers made by a tailor, stockings, and boots; also a tailor-made coat and waist coat, a collar without a tie, and a cloth peaked cap. The young lady of fashion dons a chemise, also often a short coat of cloth or velvet, stockings and smart shoes. Of course she wears the Jainsem and cloak, but occasionally she may be seen without the latter when the weather is warm.”74 In fact people like Sir James Johnstone go so far as to say, “Our system of free trade has done much to injure useful trades in India ... Among an ignorant people the incentives of cheapness and outward appearance are so great, that the sudden importation of cheap and inferior foreign goods may kill out an ancient art.”75

This is an idea also seen very early on in Waddell’s report while talking about the Mikirs. “They are adopting the style of Assamese dress, and bazaar-made clothes and of late Manchester and Bombay made cheap cotton goods are displacing the native.”76

Sometimes the ethnologist’s powerful gaze is destroyed in the wake of the repercussions of cultural contact. In the foreword to J.H. Hutton’s Sema Ñagas,

74 P.R.T. Gurdon, The Khasis (1907), Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1975, p.20.
76 Waddell, p.31.
written by Henry Balfour, we sense unease about how the Semā Nagās, fighting in France in World War I would see their rulers.

“One wonders what impressions remain with them from their sudden contact with higher civilizations at war. Possibly, they are reflecting that, after what they have seen, the White Man’s condemnation of the relatively innocuous head-hunting of the Nagas savours of hypocrisy.”

This awareness of the 'tribal' gaze is something quite unique in ethnographies which is missing in the more prosaic gazettes or reports. The almost literary nature of the writing of ethnographies seems to give more space to the discussion on how the Other could also perceive the ruler. L.A. Waddell in his notes on the Abor tribe talks about his friend Mr. Needham who “was besieged day and night by a mob of these people, men and women who made him undress, and pinched him and pulled him about to see what his body felt like.”

Even Sir John Johnstone mentions how his wife and his children, being the first full-bred Europeans in Manipur were excessively stared at wherever they went. Sometimes the relationship of gazing and being gazed at became reciprocal in the ethnographic text. The space of the subject race gazing at the ethnologist is however, very marginalized because it is rarely articulated in the colonizer’s text. The locus of bodily difference which framed the foundation of the study of

77 Hutton, Semā Nagas (1921), Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1968, p.xvi.
78 Waddell, p.15.
inferior races, could also sometimes turn topsy-turvy as Mr. Needham’s experience of being made to undress and being touched and pinched by the 'tribe' he was investigating proves. In fact this example goes to show how the privilege and the prestige of the body could be undermined by the power of the gaze.

The religion and ritual practices of the *adivasis* were studied with intense energy. Surprisingly, those *adivasis*, which professed Hinduism, were seen with much disfavour. The argument usually was that a 'Hindu tribe' was a misnomer and they were actually, usually converts who still did not understand the codes of Hindu behaviour. Waddell quotes a Mr. S.C. Baker who talks about the *Mikirs* who used to eat anything that he killed. However after conversion, they refuse to eat any of the “bovine tribe” and

“... last year I met a number who refused to eat a bear I had killed, whilst they were under the eye of my Kachari interpreter, who considers himself a *Brahman*, and took upon himself the duty of demonstrating the uncleanliness of bear’s flesh and the Mikirs closed their clasp knives and went to their rest empty and unhappy.” However they surreptitiously carved, cooked and feasted on the bear during the night and “The next morning, a close observer might have noticed a look of repletion about the Mikirs, and a remarkable desire to avoid all conversation with the Kachari official and the place where lay the remnants of what had once been a bear.”

79 Ibid., p.35.
The amusement of Mr. S.C. Baker at such evidence of the Mikirs' 'tribal' roots just goes to show how endemic was the feeling that 'tribes' could not really be Hindu. In E.W. Dun's *Gazetteer of Manipur* we see proof of the same prejudice. He gives the example of a custom prevalent in Manipur by which a man of a low caste marrying a woman of a higher caste, becomes a member of her caste. This is seen as a leftover of some matriarchal social system as it is opposed to all ideas of orthodox Hinduism. He writes—

"The religion of the country is ostensibly Hinduism, and this is apparently of comparatively recent introduction, or according to pundits and authorities, a revival. The proof of this revival is ... meagre, and statements in support of the idea that the Hindu religion existed in the country at a very ancient period are ... contradictory and unsatisfactory."

Several writers point towards the possibility of conversion for the various adivasis. If they are open to proselytizing, then the argument is raised for the feasibility of converting them to Christianity. Sometimes even in the face of governmental indifference, or opposition, the ethnographers kept harping on the need for converting the "finer" 'tribes' to Christianity – the Āngāmi Nōgās being a case in point. Hutton says that the cranial capacity of the Āngāmi Nōgā is just a little less than that of the average European. "He has mental outlooks and mental processes far more consonant with those of the European than has the ordinary

---

80 E.W. Dun, pp.15, 16.
native of India, whose thought for generations has been stunted by the cumbrous wrappings of caste and Hinduism.\textsuperscript{81}

Sir John Johnstone clearly states the political necessity for converting the Āṅgāmī Nāgās who will, he believes, be a “valuable counterpoise” in times of trouble. He also believes that it is better to give them Christianity than to allow them to become “debased Hindoos or Mussulmans.” He writes—

“A fine, interesting race like the Angamis, might, as a Christian tribe, occupy a most useful position in our Eastern Frontier, and I feel strongly that we are not justified in allowing them to be corrupted and gradually ‘converted’ by the miserable, bigoted, caste-observing Mussulman of Bengal.

... Properly taught and judiciously handled, the Angamis would have made a fine manly set of Christians, of a type superior to most Indian native converts, and probably devoted to our rule.”\textsuperscript{82}

Ironically, even though the colonial ethnographer saw the ādīvāsīs as being culturally on a lower plane than the Assamese, there are various instances of approval and admiration being heaped upon certain 'tribes'. The lazy, opium-loving, lascivious, filthy Assamese 'native' never came in for much praise, whereas the industry and stoical energy of many an ādīvāsī tribesman drew compliments from the colonizer. Even the aggressive, independence-loving nature of many a

\textsuperscript{81} Hutton, \textit{The Angami Nagas (1921)}, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1969, p.38.
\textsuperscript{82} Sir John Johnstone, p.44.
'tribe' was applauded while the servility and lack of pride in the Assamese 'Baboo' was condemned. In their fierce sense of freedom, the colonial writer became aware of a masculine arrogance, which had an intimate affinity with his own self-representation. A respect for someone “who boldly struck you” not someone “who cringed at your feet.”

The study of the tribes in the North-East Frontier by the colonizer was also informed by the invention of new equipment to be used for the validation of his statements. Ethnography, which had always used visuals to make the unbelievable convincing, could now use the camera for photographs, which could make the unreal, seem real. The unfamiliar, the exotic, the strange, could now be captured for the gaze of the outside world, without the possibility of the compromise of verisimilitude in drawings and sketches of the kind which were found in early ethnographies.

The nineteenth century predilection for subjects like Phrenology also went into the interpretations of the character of the tribes. The collection of Anthropometric data was considered a very significant area of Ethnology. The selection and use of these new equipments was to be done with much care and precision. Waddell in his chapter on Anthropometric Data writes –

“The measurements were all taken by me with a set of instruments made by Collin of Paris. Scrupulous care was ever exercised to secure precision in these

83 Ibid., p.255.
anatomical records, and also to exclude from the series every individual suspected to be in any wise impure in type.

The data thus laboriously obtained are therefore necessarily more trustworthy than those published in regard to a few tribes on the Bengal border by Mr. Risley, whose measurements recorded in his *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* were made by a Bengali Hospital assistant, who wandered about measuring individuals under nobody's immediate supervision."\(^{84}\)

The above passage tells us that only "pure" individuals could be studied with any profit. The extraordinary vehemence of Waddell's statements regarding the authenticity of his measurements rises out of the awareness that no common Bengali assistant could ever really understand the complexities of something like cranial measurement. The post-Darwinian phase also led to the spread of ideas of social Darwinism and eugenics. Several "scientific" essays written on the evolution of Man further strengthened the belief regarding the lowly nature of these *adivasis* The fact that the Caucasoids were upper most in the rung of the races gave extra impetus to the drive to become the absolute rulers, to colonize every virgin bit of land.

The correlation between power and the ability to represent the lives of subject races has been seen in the way the colonizer with superior means at his disposal, (the printing press for example) could participate in the discursive

---

\(^{84}\) Waddell, p.78.
universe which created an existence and an identity for the colonized people of the North Eastern Province. The colonial state created and propagated myths about the character and the capabilities of the colonized, which soon the colonized began to accept as verifiable truths. One significant aspect of the colonial writer’s imagination was the predilection for classification of the ‘native’ and his various identities. The quantification of all the available knowledge about the subject race had a statistical logic of its own: The creation of a sense of local reality, which is controllable through the enumeration of innumerable numbers and lists. The divisions according to religions, castes, races, tribes, communities, was very much a part of the identity-making process of the colonial writer.