

CHAPTER TWO

ASSAM THROUGH THE EYES OF ADMINISTRATORS: MASQUES OF CONQUEST

The cartographic practice of representing the unknown as a blank does not simply or innocently reflect gaps in European knowledge but actively erases (and legitimizes the erasure of) existing social and geo-cultural formations in preparation for the projection and subsequent emplacement of a new order. (Simon Ryan, "Inscribing The Emptiness," in Tiffin and Lawson, *De-scribing Empire* 115-116)

External to the cultural and physical landscape through which the European traveled, this scientific and scenic gaze was itself an ordering, even disciplining mechanism that edited as well as elicited information and actively meddled in the construction of the knowledge it sought to shepherd and cajole into meaningful shapes and approved scientific forms. (David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze* 31)

The exercise of colonialist authority requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations. (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 111)

The aim of this chapter is to examine the projection of Assam and its people in the texts written by colonial administrators. The officials coming into Assam during the colonial period were the representatives of the British government with an obvious colonialist agenda. In their accounts and reports on Assam, whether personal or official, their commitment to this agenda is evident in their representation of the people, places, customs and things of the province. While the colonial administrators varied in their projection of the 'natives'—some were mild and gentle while dealing with the native subject whereas some of them were shrewd in their treatment of the 'other'—their modes of gazing were common. The texts show either a defence of colonialism in the region or the need for colonial intervention.

The administrators are caught up in the imperial gaze involving a condition where the 'other' determines the 'self.' Mary Louise Pratt analyses this Euro-imperialism and the relation between the colonizer and the colonized in *Imperial Eyes*. She calls it the 'contact zone' which becomes the conditional space where the imperialists explore and document the 'other.' Pratt suggests that it is possible for the co-presence of "subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures" and for their interest to intersect (7).

The chapter examines the ways in which colonial administrators engage with the people in India, especially North East, and how they project them as requiring and benefiting from colonial intervention. The texts taken for discussion in the chapter are all written by people who served as British administrators namely, John Butler's *A Sketch of Assam* (1847) and *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam* (1855), Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal* (1884), T. T. Cooper's *The Mishmee Hills: An Account of a Journey Made in an Attempt to Penetrate Thibet from Assam to Open New Routes for Commerce* (1873) and Bampfylde Fuller's *Some Personal Experiences* (1930).

The hypotheses for this chapter are as follows:

- i. That a colonial agenda is always present in the administrators' narratives;
- ii. That they try to justify colonial occupation by presenting pictures of misrule during native rule which needs British intervention;
- iii. That the administrators' prime concern is to highlight the primitive lifestyles of the natives, in dire need of the West's enlightenment project.

Welsh and the Beginnings of Colonisation in Assam

The first official entry of the British as a team into Assam was with the arrival of Captain Welsh's troops in 1792 who were sent as per the British government's positive response to the then Ahom King Gaurinath Singha's appeal for help in subduing the rebellion of a religious sect called the Moamoria. Although Lord Cornwallis, the then Governor General of British India, wanted to act on the policy of non-intervention he inquired about the resources in the country and asked Captain Welsh to submit a report on that. Welsh's report is significant in this regard. The then circumstances and political happenings in the region had made Welsh interfere in the personal affairs of the Kings and he took a few decisions on their internal matters too. However, Lord Cornwallis had to leave India and his successor, Sir John Shore became less interested in Assam. He asked Welsh a few questions on the government and the economic condition of Assam to which Welsh wrote a detailed report. It is important to note that Welsh was asked to give information in detail on resource production and trade in Assam. Shore also asked if it would be beneficial for the British government to continue trade and commerce in Assam.

In his answers to Shore's questions Welsh had tried to give a description of the contemporary social and political condition of Assam along with a portrayal of the Assamese society. He described that the region was under the control of what looked like a combination of monarchy and aristocracy. Welsh observed that the situation appeared to be chaotic and tried to explain the probable causes of such anarchy. He felt that the cruelty coupled with inefficiency on the part of the rulers was the reason for the lack of governance:

This debauched minority, the execrable ignorance, imbecility, caprice, cruelty, and oppression of Government, whose ministers and low favourites were the dread, detestation, and shame of the great, the scourge, and execration of the people involved the whole kingdom in confusion. ("Welsh" 45)

Further, Welsh also looks at the internal conflict between the monarch and his aristocrats. On the question on the obedience of other forces, groups and subjects to the Ahom king, Welsh says that the latter act on their own which shows that there was lack of obedience on the part of the native subject towards the king. Although Welsh thinks that the king and ministers of Assam lacked morality in the extreme, considering the fact that the scenario was chaotic, he suggested to the British government that it should support the Assam government. Welsh requested for the Company's interference in the internal affairs of the region. He writes:

I am clearly of opinion that to establish obedience to the Rajah's authority, it is only necessary that the mediating power should more decidedly interfere, and declare its determination to support the Government of Assam in all its constituent parts. (48)

On the whole, the region suffered through capricious and cruel rulers, incapable of addressing the needs of the people. It was almost crying out for colonial intervention. The British government wanted to know explicitly about the commercial regulations and the probability of its improvement in the future. He was asked to give emphasis particularly on the production and trade in the region. Welsh accordingly, describes the different articles produced in Assam. An important point to note is that Welsh drew the government's attention to the prospect of opium trade in the region and the interesting fact is that it came to be a large source of revenue for the colonial government during its rule in Assam a few decades later.

Welsh himself had not been very sure about the prospect of commerce in the region as he observes:

Commerce could never have been very considerable in Assam, under the discouraging restraints imposed by a government particularly jealous of strangers... it would be unreasonable to doubt, that it might in time, under the influence of the British government be rendered extremely beneficial to both states. (58)

Welsh seems hopeful about good and profitable trade between the British and the Assamese in near future but his reply in this regard was not satisfactory to the government. He wanted the government to continue its occupation in the region and so that the government does not withdraw he tries to infuse it that they could influence and create a good field for business in Assam.

Welsh repeatedly tried to draw the British government's attention towards the political scenario of the region and strongly called for intervention: "The British Government should continue its mediating and controlling influence, as the means of preserving order and tranquility" (60). But it was the days of the Company which was interested basically in doing business and that may be a reason for the government's decision to withdraw its troops from Assam. Lord Cornwallis showed much more interest in the internal affairs of the region and assured British assistance to the native king but his successor, Sir John Shore seemed to be more interested in the commercial aspect. Although Welsh had thrown light on the prospects of trade, the burgeoning internal conflicts discouraged the Company from carrying on any further business in Assam. Since Welsh's information on the prospect of trade between the British and the Assamese was not satisfactory to Shore, he decided to implement the non-intervention policy and Welsh had to withdraw his troops from Assam. Despite Welsh's repeated confirmation that his troops' withdrawal would reinstate the civil strife in the country, he was directed to withdraw from involvement in any kind of affairs in Assam resulting in his departure from the region.

The above incidents show that in the early stages of colonization, by groups other than government forces, as in the case of the East India Company in India, easy commerce took precedence over any kind of control mechanism in the area. However, the lack of coordination between the indigenous rulers and the Company's interests convinced later

officials like Robert Clive that administrative intervention on the part of the Company was absolutely necessary to facilitate the collection of natural resources from the area.

After Welsh, there was no such record of official expeditions sent to the country in the next few decades. It was in the early part of the nineteenth century that the Colonial people entered the region officially again, but this time also on invitation. During this time the internal clashes and tensions in the Ahom royal families reached their extreme point and the whole region had been suffering from Burmese atrocities for a few years. The British came to the region to ‘rescue’ the people and their land from that mayhem. In the year 1826, the Yandaboo treaty was signed which marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Assam and North East India. However, the discovery of tea in the country by Robert Bruce in 1823 created a great deal of interest in the Colonial government although it remained to be explored through proper survey. Initially, Assam and the entire North East region was just a part of the North East frontier of Bengal and it is only in 1874 that the region became a separate administrative zone. The government agents and administrative officers were the first bunch of people that set foot on this soil after it came under British rule and therefore their reports and written accounts on this region have much significance. This chapter deals with narratives by government agents and administrators. The presence of colonial discourse is obvious in the administrators’ narratives but the main concern of this study will be to analyse the ways in which the authors represent the ‘other’ and the differing attitudes in their subjective positions.

John Butler: Power and Prejudice

John Butler’s *A Sketch of Assam* and *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam* are two very important colonial narratives since both the texts provide information of firsthand experience of an administrator going into the interiors of Assam.

In the Preface to *A Sketch of Assam*, Butler writes,

The chief object of the following pages is to make Assam better known, to remove some prejudices which exist against it, and preserve the memory of many remarkable things. (*Sketch* v-vi)

Butler definitely refers to the colonial prejudices against Assam which he believes to be there in the British people’s mind and he intends to remove that by speaking the truth about the place and its people. He further holds that he will express unbiased opinions on

many interesting subjects about Assam and those are based on his personal experiences during his stay in the region. In some of his descriptions of the native region Butler seems to be unbiased indeed. There are many things that the colonial people complained about Assam and the way of life its people led but Butler seems to be a bit different while depicting the picture.

A very common unpleasant thing about the region, as discussed in many colonial travel narratives, is its climate and Butler too observes it. He clearly contends that the rainy season along with its heat can be proved a depressing one to the Europeans and confirms that the appearance of the snakes is indeed very common in the region. However, Butler does not seem to complain altogether but tries to console and comfort his readers by speaking about the positive sides of the coin. When many of his fellow Europeans criticize the simple way of living of the 'native' people Butler sees it from a different angle. For instance, the mat-huts of the common people in the region were considered a dreary residence by many colonial travellers but Butler has something different to offer:

The reader will suppose an Assam mat-hut to be a dreary kind of residence; but I can assure him, the logwood fire on a hearth one foot high, in the centre of the room, with a small window cut high in the wall for the escape of the smoke, is by no means devoid of cheerfulness. (14)

Rather than criticizing the indigenous people, Butler is seen to improvise in a poor country. He describes the discomforts in the country; the climate which has excessive moisture; the dangers that one may have to face during the rainy season but not with utter annoyance. Butler simply informs his readers what he learnt about the region rather than condemning or passing sarcastic comments on the matters.

He criticizes the Assamese people for their attachment to the backward systems in agriculture as he sees indifference and dispirit in them to adopt new and enterprising systems. Butler hopes for improvement in everything in the region as it has come in contact with the Europeans. He remarks,

Assam has now been subjected to British rule for a period of nearly twenty years, and the people have enjoyed the fruits of their labours in peace and security: a condition of things to which they were strangers under their own chieftains. (25)

The writer obviously feels that the condition of Assam and its people has improved under the colonial government. Everything pertaining to the indigenous rulers is seen as unruly and bad. The patronizing colonialist attitude of the author is revealed which is, in fact, a common feature in many such narratives. It is obvious that the colonial writers bolstered colonization and their position is apparent in their narratives. But the point of concern is the way they represent the colonized region and its inhabitants. They adopt a strategy that Mary Louise Pratt calls 'anti-conquest' in order to justify their conduct. By "anti-conquest," 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" (*Imperial* 7).

In *A Sketch of Assam*, although Butler declares that he will be unbiased which he tries to be in the first few pages, when it comes to the topic of colonizing the region he does not seem to be unbiased anymore. The way he depicts the 'native' people only reveals the biased colonialist 'self' of the author. In fact, he is seen to be promoting colonialism as he too adopts the compare and contrast policy which many colonial authors do while describing the 'native' people. About the indigenous people's character, Butler writes:

Their morals are exceedingly depraved, and their manners servile and contemptible. Nor are the women one whit superior to the men; and although they are far from possessing attractive persons, they are utter slaves to the worst licentiousness. (*Sketch* 135)

He further defines them as 'slender, effeminate and indolent' (134). Butler's portrayal of the people only typecasts the image of the oriental created by the occident. The whole idea of his being 'unbiased' seems only a strategy so as to justify his comments on the region and to defend the colonial policy.

He describes many communities from the North East region and gives information on the history of those people as well. What strikes a reader expecting to find an unbiased account is that the author comments not only on the manners and habits of the people but on the physical features too. His observations on the Naga people are significant: "They are a very uncivilized race, with dark complexions, athletic sinewy frames, hideously wild and ugly visages" (149). He also discusses the disturbances created by the Naga people which actually compelled the American Baptist missionaries to leave their station in Jeypore. An appalling picture of the community is drawn but interestingly, Butler

found that the Naga government was 'democratical' (153). He then describes them as simple and honest and that they were not familiar with the vice of lying.

Butler fears that with the coming of 'civilization' or by coming in contact with their corrupt neighbours, that is, the Assamese, these virtues would be lost from the Naga society. In fact, what he writes about the Naga people is quite significant:

The Nagas are remarkable for simplicity, candour and integrity; even the comparatively small vice of lying, to which the natives of British India are so seriously and universally addicted, is unknown among them, and will probably continue so until they have been corrupted by their more enlightened neighbours, the Assamese, or by the advance of civilization, refined arts, and manners. (171)

Despite their 'hideous' looks and 'wild' customs, Butler notes the simplicity of the Nagas in contrast to the Assamese or the rest of 'the natives of British India.' Even as they appear uncivilized, Butler realizes that enlightenment would expose them to undesirable values, thereby making him ponder over the advisability of Western mediation and control.

Important to note is that many colonial writers had the opinion that with the coming of civilization the honesty and simplicity of the people would be gone. It is also bewildering that a community which practices democracy, whose people are honest and simple by nature can at the same time also be barbaric and wild. There are several instances in the political history of Assam where the Nagas and the Assamese had disputes and violent encounters during Ahom rule. Similar clashes continued with the colonial government too which sometimes resulted in tragic deaths of British officers along with the 'natives.' Butler himself was an example of such a tragedy as he too was killed by the natives in an ambush.

He encountered many threatening experiences as he visited those people to persuade them to come for negotiations. The Nagas were indeed ferocious at times and were one of those people whom the British government was not able to bring under the colonial rule entirely. However, the government did not leave hope and went on sending agents to those remote places in the hills where the Nagas lived and thus the tragic incidents too continued to take place. One definitely can surmise the kind of relation the two had with each other or even the impressions they had of each other. Needless to say that the

colonial travel writers always highlight the ferocity not only of the Nagas but of all other hill tribes with whom they had difficulty while dealing.

In the missionary writing also, the 'natives', who were conquered and converted are shown as the 'good' ones whereas the rest are described as uncivilized and depraved. Butler's *A Sketch of Assam* is no exception to that as the author comments upon each hill tribe's manners and defines them as untrustworthy and cunning. In fact, Butler draws a condemnable picture of the indigenous people's affairs which actually reveals the idea of a pedestal on which Butler places himself along with his entire colonial community while portraying the 'other.' This reveals the imperialist gaze which is trying to establish the superiority of the master determined by the inferiority of its subject.

Butler gives a horrible picture of the region where the innocents were suffering the atrocities of the dominating in the society whether it was the aggressive hill tribes or the cruel administrators. Butler discusses the cruelties and the discriminations shown by the native administrators prior to the British government and declares with relief that the bad days are gone with the coming of colonialism. He says,

Such was the condition of the inhabitants of the *Dooars* till 1838, hundreds annually retreated to the *Pergunnahs* of Assam under British rule, to enjoy the fruit of their labours in peace and safety. (142)

Butler presents the British government as the protector of the Assamese people and offers an image of peace and prosperity in the region under colonialism. Butler's narrative appears to be a promotion of colonial hegemony.

He gives a picture where one can see the people of Assam suffering unbearable torment under the indigenous ruler's cruel administration and therefore they too wanted the British to come and rule. He describes the cruelties of the Ahom kings, the barbarous punishments given to the offenders and comes to the conclusive remark that the British rule was in fact a 'grace' to the province. Butler expresses his gratitude to Major Jenkins as he writes:

The British government has relieved Assam from the barbarous mutilations, cruel impalements, and other outrages against humanity which its inhabitants were subject to under their ancient rulers. (36)

Butler gives the impression that the natives were grateful to the British government. The British took on the mantle of saviours against the inhuman outrages of the Ahom kings.

It is true that the British did not come to Assam in their own interest but on the request of the Assamese people themselves as the latter needed a stronger force to conquer the Burmese. In this sense, the British along with their superior military equipment came to Assam as rescuers and that always gives the colonial authors the point to speak for their role in helping the whole country get rid of the Burmese atrocities. The colonial authors focus on the rescuer image of their government and endeavour to establish an idea that the whole region came to safety under British rule. In *A Sketch of Assam*, Butler is seen to be doing this through his representation of the 'other' and the 'self.' He highlights the fact that the government abolished many evil practices in the indigenous society. He finds that the people of Assam are extremely simple in their domestic habits and analyses that poverty and ignorance are limiting their desires within a narrow range. Butler criticizes the system of slavery which still existed in Assam and hoped that the colonial government, which according to him was the protector of the whole region, would abolish this horrible system from the country.

However, it is alleged by some missionaries like Marston and Swanson that it was the colonial people who in the coming years created a kind of neo-slavery system in the colonized region. The migrant garden workers were no better than slaves to the planters who had to do hard work under unhealthy and unhygienic condition. Many colonial writers admit this fact that the law had been unfair to the tea garden labourers in Assam. There are several American missionary writers who found similarity between the conditions of the tea garden workers in Assam with that of the black slaves in the American south. This shows the hollow nature of the 'protector' and unveils the colonial government's exploitative method.

A similar attitude is seen in the British policy on opium consumption. The consumption of opium was doing a great damage to the 'native' people of Assam. Butler believes that the rampant use of opium was to a great extent the reason for the degeneracy and lack of industrious spirit in the Assamese people. He saw that the government was not considering the issue with earnestness and he therefore offers suggestions to the government on this grave matter. Butler suggests that great amount of tax should be levied on opium so that it could go beyond the reach of the common people. In fact, that

was a suggestion offered to the government by many conscious people, both Assamese and European during that time. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Padmanath Gohain Baruah were among the notable Assamese intelligentsia who supported this idea. The government, however, took some steps; the number of licensed shops was reduced and the tax on the object was hiked but the interesting thing was that it only increased the revenue that the government was collecting by selling opium. Gohain Baruah proposed that there should be made a list of registered opium consumers so that the government could take steps systematically to solve the issue but it was not given any serious thought. Butler observes the fact and therefore tries to draw attention of the government to this issue as it was not yet addressed by the latter. Butler perceives that the development of Assam and the North East region could mean a healthy future for the colonial government. He brings to the fore the importance of the different resources in the region which could be beneficial to the government and discusses the important marketable products like coal, gold and silk. Butler's position is very clear in *A Sketch of Assam* where he stands for the colonization of the whole region. What was beneficial to the government was good and if otherwise, bad. He wants to bring all the different tribes under British rule and where needed, with the help of armed forces.

Butler's other book, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam*, published eight years after *A Sketch of Assam*, is more or less similar to the first book in its tone and texture. It is in fact a continuation of the author's first book which he wrote with an intention to complete his own project of writing on the different communities of the North East frontier. In *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam*, Butler tries to write about the remaining communities which he could not discuss in *A Sketch of Assam*. In the Preface, the author states that he would write about some of the hill tribes of Assam. He also states that he would illustrate the British officer's life in Assam and that he would give an account of the revenue as well as the physical and moral condition of the people in the district of Nowgong. Butler, however, assures his readers of the authenticity of the account as the information he gathered was taken from official correspondence. He writes:

As the Indian Government has been pleased to allow the author to derive his information from official correspondence, its authenticity may be relied on, and he entertains a hope that his labours will not be deemed uninteresting or valueless. (*Travels* v)

However, this may also indicate that the author's bias matches that of the colonial government.

Butler visited many places and he narrates his experiences during his journeys from one place to another. He tries to show the discomfiture and hardship that he had been through rather than speaking about it. He, therefore, takes help of plain illustrations than expressing discontent. He tries to throw light on the arduous job that the British military officer had to do in Assam. Butler illustrates the bad experiences that he had had in the country.

In 1847, Butler undertook a journey to the Angami Naga hills and that was the sixth British expedition into those hills. In *Travels and Adventures*, Butler describes his experiences during the military expeditions to the Angami Naga country which was undertaken in order to come to a negotiation with the chief of the Angami tribe. He records that

The object of the expedition was to meet the Angahamee Naga Chiefs, and by a conciliatory intercourse, to prepare them to co-operate with me in repressing their annual murderous and marauding incursions against our more peaceable subjects. (12)

He visited different parts of the Naga Hills, met the people, spent risky nights and days at dangerous spots and had interactions with the chiefs of some villages. As Butler informs, he and his team were treated with civility and gentility by the hill people except by the Angami Nagas who were yet to come to any conciliation with the British government.

How he describes the Angami people is noteworthy:

Their complexions are brown, mouths large, nose flat, high cheek bones, sharp small eyes, and a cunning, arch, severe, expression of countenance when excited, that truly denotes their traits of character, cruel, treacherous, and vindictive. (144)

Butler gives details of the kind of life the Angami people led, their social systems, the people's beliefs, faiths, superstitions and their revengeful minds. Butler had been in charge of many expeditions to the Naga Hills and he had to face bloody fights during those journeys. However, in March 1851, the last expedition to the Angami hills was

terminated as the British government failed to conquer the Nagas and it was suggested that they should be left to themselves amidst their internal fights.

He describes the people's lives and their manners which are not acceptable to Western society but in doing so, Butler seems to analyze the things. He observes the people and their social customs and then gives an analysis and even explanations of why the things are so. Butler tries to show his impartial stance but somehow cannot avoid projecting them as the unpleasant 'other.' Throughout his narrative Butler gives a picture of the hill tribes but with the help of 'anti-conquest.' It seems that he explains what is odd in the native keeping the focus on the oddity and not on justification of that. In his description of the people's habits and customs, he observes:

The inside of the houses is exceedingly filthy, and some of the old men and women were so dirty in their persons that I should say they had not washed themselves for years, and this perhaps, is not much to be wondered at, for this morning the thermometer at seven A.M. stood at thirty six degrees, and the night was exceedingly cold. (42)

He describes them as dirty and then suggests that it was because the temperature was cold up there. He describes the women as coarse and plain but observes that the latter had to do all kinds of hard work at home as well as out on the fields or in the bush. Butler's analysis and justifications merely seem to be part of the travel writer's attempt to look into the ethnographical curiosities of the region but the end result is an enduring picture of the 'horrible other.'

Butler also shows how untrustworthy the indigenous people were in their behaviour and how unethical they were in keeping words. According to him, all the hill tribes including the Nagas are wild and savage and he tries to establish that in the details of his narrative. To prove his point right, Butler quotes from other colonial officials and military officers who had been in charge of similar expeditions in the past. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that Butler found that the Naga people had a systematic administration and he mentions it in both the accounts. He writes,

Every Angahmee village has a polity of its own. Their government is decidedly democratic; for, although each village community has a nominal head or chief, it is evident their chiefs have no absolute power over the people. (145-46)

This definitely gives another image of the Nagas which is difficult to accept in a 'savage' people. He describes the Singfos as 'a lawless disunited people' (45). However, these people were very good at trade and Butler observes that the former practiced petty tricks while bartering. Contrary to the Nagas, Butler describes the Kooki people as very honest, simple and organized with a united social community. He describes the life of the Kookies in detail. Although they have common traits with other hill tribes like filthiness, Butler explains it as a result of the lack of nearby water sources and the cold climate. However, he notes that "The climate, indeed, at this time, was very fine; a strong, bracing wind and hoar frosts every night seemed more like England than actual residence in the East" (42). It can be said that Butler apparently tries to depict a decent group of people who are in want of colonial guidance and who would benefit from Western culture and governance.

Butler describes the people of Beereh-mah in the following way:

They are totally devoid of a spark of generosity, and will not give the most trifling articles without receiving remuneration. They are great traders in brass ornaments, conch shells, and beads; and it is said that, till very lately, it was the great mart on these hills for the sale of slaves. (58)

Even as he gives an ethnographic description of the various tribes scattered about the hills of the North East, he mentions as if in passing, that there was a slave trade in these parts. This obviously is not information provided innocently by the travel writer. Rather, it is a conscious attempt to denigrate something that can only be seen in terms of the 'other.'

The Nagas are described as having no caste and no prejudices of creed. He then comes to the conclusion that it would be therefore easier for them to persuade these 'natives' to convert into Christianity so that there could be no difficulty in the rule of the colonial government. Butler writes:

Who shall say that the Bible will not be the means of changing the habits and ideas of those wild savages? The experiment is worthy of trial; they have no caste or prejudices of creed to deter them from adopting Christianity. (67)

It was in fact a part of the whole plan of the Assam Mission to focus on the hill tribes rather than trying to persuade the Hindu and Muslim inhabitants. Since it was believed

that the hill people's religion had no rigid and firm beliefs like other established religions it was the colonial plan to convince the former to lure and then convert them to Christianity.

This met with government approval as it directed the Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionaries to focus on the hill tribes. Butler observes:

If such a people could receive a moral education, how soon would their habits of rapine and murder be changed, and their fertile, well-watered soil, be converted into one of the most beautiful tracts on which mortals could reside. (70)

This shows the government's maneuvering of a people according to its own convenience and benefit. The striking point is that like the missionaries Butler too is promoting Christian education rather than simply education for the improvement of the 'savage' natives. His interest seems to be in the land which is a fertile one and therefore, it was important to convert the inhabitants into a particular category so that they too could be acceptable to the colonial society.

In the third part of his narrative, Butler gives an outline of the Assam valley and the Assamese society. His focus in this section is on his work place, the district of Nowgong. Butler describes Assam as an excellent place for hunting as a sport. He considers Assam adventurous and dangerous at times but very exciting. He gives an idea of Assamese society; the people's beliefs, their superstitions, social customs of marriage, fights, honours and disgracing factors as well. He also gives some musical notes of a boat song and other folk songs.

Butler describes the division of class in the society, the privileges of the men of rank and the discrimination of the downtrodden. He points out the brutality of the Ahom kings and the exploitation of the lower class people during their rule. Butler depicts the Assamese as a community driven by utter jealousy and opines that the people are envious of each other. He observes that there was difficulty in the spreading of education among the people and there were two basic reasons: one was the indifference of the people towards knowledge and the other was the influence of the priesthood on them. In fact, Butler contends that the priests were the greatest impediment that the British people had to face in their mission of enlightening the indigenous people:

Another great obstacle to the spread of knowledge throughout Assam, is the influence of the priesthood, who employ most oppressive modes of keeping the people in subjection to themselves, through gross ignorance and superstition. (240)

Butler criticizes the priests for adopting an oppressive way to subjugate the people but the irony is that the British government's policy of educating the native and spreading knowledge was not a selfless project either. The colonial government aimed at spreading Christian education so that they could create a people who could be subdued easily. They felt bound to question the religious hegemony of the indigenous priests and other religious leaders. The Hindu and Islamic people subscribed to strong religious faiths and principles which did not allow any scope for the Christian government and the missionaries to convert them to any other faith.

Almost all the colonial writers are seen saying things against the indigenous religions, especially, Hinduism and Islam. Contrary to them, the colonizers found the hill people a bit easier as they had succeeded in persuading the hill tribes to convert into their religion. It was indeed a colonial policy to focus on the hill tribes rather than trying to persuade the Hindu and Islamic people in vain. The enlightenment that the British people speak of is actually the enlightening of the native in accordance with the colonialist design and when Butler refers to the 'rising generation,' he definitely means the Christian generation of the natives which he had imagined to see in Assam in the coming days. Butler expresses his hope:

If American Baptist Missionaries should hereafter succeed in raising up a Christian community, we cannot doubt but that the result would be most beneficial. (250-51)

Butler acknowledges the role of the American Baptist Missionaries in this project of Christianization and hopes that all of them could be taken on board.

Butler seems to be very hopeful about the future prospect for the colonial government in the district of Nowgong and Assam as a whole. He draws the attention of his readers to the resources of the country: the rich soil, valuable timber, coal mines and limestone etc. Despite the land being rich and fertile, the inhabitants were not willing to tap the resources of the region. He depicts the indigenous people as licentious and degraded and

degenerating rapidly. Added to these was the evil of opium which was affecting their lives to a great extent. Butler remarks: “The utter want of an industrious enterprising spirit, and the general degeneracy of the Assamese people, are greatly promoted by the prevalent use of opium” (34). In *A Sketch of Assam*, Butler discusses this issue with much importance and he continues the same in *Travels and Adventures*. He writes: “Government have established no regulations against growth of opium in Assam” (34). Like many of his contemporaries, Butler observes that a high tax should be levied on the purchase of opium in order to gradually decrease the consumption of that evil drug amongst the common people.

In *Travels and Adventures*, Butler repeats what he said about the ‘native’ rulers in the previous book. He not only mentions the cruelties of the Ahom administrators but also gives instances of the barbarous practices of the Burmese in Assam. It is however a fact that the Assamese people remember the horrifying Burmese atrocities with awe and Butler seems to grab this very opportunity to remind the people that the British government came to their rescue. He also highlights the developments brought about by the colonial government, the material improvements and expresses his optimism about the Assamese people’s future under the British rule. He hopes that with the help of the Baptist Missionaries the colonial government would be successful in converting the whole region into a Christian colonized society. Butler observes that

When they attain the years of discretion, we may look forward to the formation of a Christian village of cultivators; and from this class we may eventually, with the blessing of Providence, anticipate the spread of the gospel throughout the province. (251)

One can rarely find a colonial person who is as open as Butler about the colonial policy of religion in the country. However, this policy did not prove very fruitful due to various reasons which ended with a breach between the government and the Mission instead.

Thus, in both texts, Butler exposes a colonialist propaganda although with an ostensible impartial opening at the start. Under the pretence of an honest traveller and analytical observer, Butler actually posits himself as the colonialist administrator who sees the good in the land and finds the evil in its inhabitants. The common issues addressed in both texts are the immoral nature of the ‘native,’ their British protectors, and the development brought about by the new government. Butler tries to draw attention of the

government to issues which could be beneficial to it and offers his suggestion to enhance it. However, he believes in his government and continues his faith in its colonial project and confirms his hopefulness regarding the future of Assam and the Assamese people under the British rule.

T. T. Cooper and the Oriental Stereotypes

T. T. Cooper's *The Mishmee Hills* deals with the writer's experience in the region during his unsuccessful attempt to reach Tibet via Assam. During his journey Cooper came into contact with many indigenous communities which he narrates in his book. His experience in India was manifold and before going on his expedition Cooper describes a few things about his impressions of the country.

Cooper admits that he had a different opinion about the colonial subject and that he himself believed in the stereotyped image of the oriental people. His changing definition of the term 'nigger' into "the man representative of the millions who collectively compose a great, industrious and peaceable people" (*Mishmee* 13) tells a lot about the changing nature of the author's thoughts and opinions. Cooper explains that his intercourse with Oriental people like the Burmese, Malays, Chinese and Japanese had helped him develop his thoughts and that he learned to appreciate the 'Oriental character.' However, Cooper observes both negative and positive traits in the eastern people:

Everywhere superstitions, more or less ignorant, and extremely sensitive to the slightest wrong; when roused by real or fancied injustice, or an insult to their religious prejudices, turbulent and cruel in the extreme; but where governed with justice and properly protected, always peace-loving, industrious, law-abiding, and contended. Nowhere in the East will this opinion receive stronger confirmation than in British India. (14)

This clearly shows Cooper's emphasis on the importance of justice and protection while governing the people of the North East. His experience with Oriental people from different countries helped the government agent discover things to appreciate in the people but that did not obviously change his colonialist mindset. The positive aspect was that Cooper came to accept the view that the Indian subject is not to be altogether dismissed as impossible people as they could be manageable through good governance.

Cooper's experience in Assam was delightful as he was impressed by the hospitality of the people in Guwahati. In fact, Cooper apparently presents a positive attitude towards everything, the places, their natural beauty as well as the artifacts. He depicts the two contrasting phases of the Assamese society: they are indolent in the present which is a sharp contrast to their glorious past when they used to be active and hardworking. About the people of Sibsagar Cooper says:

Several large tanks, in a state of fair preservation, with two fine old Hindoo temples still remain to testify to the energy and civilization formerly characteristic of the Assamese, which form a striking contrast to the lethargic existence of the present scanty population. (65)

The tanks and temples testify to Sibsagar's architectural enterprise during Ahom rule. Cooper also writes a few things about the Ahom dynasty, the troubles faced by the rulers, factors that contributed to its destruction and finally the appearance of the British government as the rescuer.

Keeping this image of the British government, Cooper further observes that the government should have listened to Captain Welsh in 1792; it should not have implemented the non-interference policy as it could have saved a whole population from the atrocities of the Burmese. He writes:

Had we but maintained the protectorate from 1792, when Captain Welsh was first sent into the country to restore order, a whole population might have been saved, and the country would have been at this moment, instead of a dense jungle with the scanty remains of an energetic population sunk in apathy and vice, a happy and prosperous land of plenty. (74)

He appears to believe wholeheartedly in the project of British colonialism. Not only does he approve of the activities of the British government, he wishes that it had intervened long ago to protect the land and its people.

Cooper is happy to see the establishment of the tea industry in Assam. Owing to shortage of native labour he found it justifiable to have migrant workers from other parts of India. He says,

The Assamese population, to whom the early planters might reasonably have looked for labour, proved utterly useless. Sunk in idleness and vice, and surrounded by an almost virgin soil, yielding an abundant return to their lazy efforts at cultivation, they will not labour more than just sufficient to provide themselves with the necessaries of life. (74-75)

He not only supports the migration of the workers but also defends the planters against harsh criticism. Cooper thought that it was unjust to call the tea planters cruel to their 'coolies' and holds that the law was unfair to the planters instead. He was a guest at a planter's house for a few days and had the opportunity to observe the tea making process. According to him, the tea making task was too difficult to make the planters cruel to their labourers as the former has to depend upon the honesty and willingness of the latter. He elaborates his point with his personal experiences.

While in Dibrugarh, Cooper came to learn things about the Assamese people which he discusses in *The Mishmee Hills*. He observes:

They are of gentle and pleasing manners, but exceedingly indolent, caring for little beyond the supply of their daily wants, which requires little labour on their part, and their vegetable diet has probably much to do with their effeminate appearance. (100)

He noticed that there were differences not only between the Assamese people and other Indians but also within the society itself. It is interesting therefore that unlike many colonial authors Cooper calls all the different tribes 'Assamese' and then he differentiates the "real Assamese" from them. It was very common that many colonial travellers meant the Ahom community by the term Assamese and excluded all other tribes from that identity. Although it is not clear what Cooper meant by "real Assamese" it can be assumed that he means the Ahom people.

He observes that although Hinduism was the dominant religion in the province, the Hindus of Assam were different from those in other parts of India; the religious rites and casteism were not so strictly followed in Assam as those followed by the Indian people in other parts of India. He writes:

In religion, the Assamese affect Hinduism, but they are lax in the observance of religious rites, and their ceremonies are often very different from those practiced

by the Hindoos of India. Traces of caste exist, but the distinctions are not so broad as in India. (101)

Cooper's words are interesting. He feels that the Assamese affect a religion, do not believe in it with their whole being. Moreover, the Hinduism of the Assamese, he observes, is a diluted version of the main thing. He appears to separate the Assamese from the rest of India as if it was not just the natural distance but a world away in culture and attitude.

Cooper observed that there was a laxity of morals in the Assamese people and opium consumption in the people was responsible for the lack of progress in the country. Cooper defends the government for monopolizing the trade and remarks that the latter is blameless for introducing this vice amongst the indigenous people. According to him, the people were already addicted to this harmful drug before their arrival and the British administration had no role in encouraging opium addiction amongst them. Moreover, his logic for not supporting the abolition of the trade with China was that the Chinese people were so addicted to that drug that the lack of opium supply would bring death to a host of people in the society.

Some of Cooper's views, thus, counter those of his contemporaries but there are some other subjects where we find him echoing his fellow writers. Unlike many of his contemporary authors Cooper seems a bit mild while describing the affairs of the people of Assam. When he criticizes the indigenous people, Cooper is not that scathing. But when it comes to some of the hill tribes he seconds other writers who were rude towards them. Not only does he portray a predatory image of tribes like the Mishmi, Miri and Abor but at the same time, attributes them with all those stereotypical negative traits associated with the Orient. He depicts the hill tribes as savage, filthy and more significantly, troublemakers. In fact, he does not like the place Sadiya just because it was surrounded by those tribes and the thought that they might attack the garrison worried him a lot. Cooper writes:

For the knowledge that the place is surrounded by some of the most savage and treacherous tribes on our Indian frontiers, and the romance attached to the idea that some red-handed warriors might, at any time, make an attack on the devoted heads of the garrison, Sudiya would be unbearable as a place of residence. (125)

Such fear in the colonialists' was not unusual as they represent an unknown quality. Moreover, the idea of being surrounded by such people bred a sense of claustrophobia in him and other like-minded people.

Cooper is positive about the Khamti people whose hospitality left a remarkable impression on him. Initially, he was not sure about how the people would treat him and Cooper expresses fear:

Though I knew that there was nothing to fear, the want of hospitality shown by the Khamtees quite disconcerted me. The withholding of hospitality among the tribes of Asia always signifies enmity, and I feared that I might have to return unsuccessful to Sudiya. (140)

To his sheer amazement Cooper ended up being a great admirer of the Khamti people. Cooper writes: "The interiors of the houses occupied by well-to-do people are very clean and tidy, forming a pleasing contrast to those of other frontier tribes in Assam" (147). As he saw it, the way of living of the Khamtis was not only superior to the other tribes from Assam but there were things where they could even beat the Europeans. He praises their morality and thinks that the beauty of a Khamti woman 'after a fresh bath and elaborate toilet' would even shame their European counterparts. About the society Cooper says that 'from some of their social laws even civilised nations might take a lesson' (145). The affability of the Khamti people gets illustrated in the author's narrative itself; the Khamti chief was Cooper's companion cum guide in his journey through the Mishmi hills. It was a very risky venture not only for Cooper but also for the Khamti chief which the latter agreed to undertake on the author's request. The chief along with his team had performed his duty with excellence and helped Cooper tremendously at their own lives' risk for which Cooper could not thank them enough. He defines them as a gentle people who were men of their words.

Contrary to that, his portrayal of the Mishmi people is quite noticeable. Copper writes: "The interiors of the Mishmee houses more resemble cowsheds than human habitations, while from the outside they might be mistaken for fowl-houses" (189). Cooper depicts the Mishmis as a wild and filthy people who live in a dirty environment which is indeed a sharp contrast to the Khamti way of living. He discovers that the Mishmi people were polytheistic and concludes that their society could be a good field for the Christian missionaries. Like Butler, Cooper too believes that the Mishmis could be converted

easily into Christianity and offers his suggestion that the missionaries should come and work with these people instead of wasting their efforts on the more educated societies of India, China and Burma. This is an important point to note as such revelations about the hills tribal communities encouraged the Baptist missionaries to come and work in the hills where they were quite successful in their mission.

Like Butler, Cooper's focus is on the protector image of the British government. Very tactfully he shows a certain empathy towards the Oriental communities which is in fact Cooper's rhetoric of 'anti-conquest' in *The Mishmee Hills*. His appreciating the Orient makes one feel that the author will present an unbiased, objective account of his experience with the people of Assam which proves to be wrong when his colonialist 'self' is revealed. He found the places rather dull and thought that the presence of Europeans had made them a bit less dreary. The most striking part of the account is where the author praises the Khamti people to such an extent that they could be ideal to the 'superior' Europeans. This owes to the immense help Cooper got from the Khamti chief and his people. They not only helped him but put their own lives at stake for their European guest whom they had vowed to protect.

Cooper is seen to be grateful to the Khamtis and they are the only people he praises in his text. This shows merely the colonialist 'self' of the writer who was impressed by the great service that he received from his subject. The people who proved to be beneficial were appreciated whereas the others were criticized with the sharpest words possible. His words in support of the tea planters and defending the government policies for opium trade confirm Cooper's position as a colonialist and a true representative of the British government.

Alexander Mackenzie: For a Civilizing Mission

Alexander Mackenzie's *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal* was the book form of his Memorandum on the North East Frontier of Bengal prepared in 1869 at the request of the then Lieutenant Government Sir William Gray. He supplemented and expanded the memorandum at the repeated and pressing demand of the Foreign Officer which he published in the year 1884. It was reprinted in India in 1979 under a more precise title, *The North-East Frontier of India*. The memorandum was written for official purpose only and the author declares it in the Preface: "It is meant to be useful to government and its officers, nothing

more” (*North-East* iii). Since it was from a colonial administrator’s standpoint its main focus lays on two points: North East as a territorial unit and the relation of the administration with the hill tribes. It is a common aspect in the colonial writings to focus on the civilizing mission of the colonial government which is also evident in Mackenzie’s account.

Mackenzie begins by giving an outline of the political history of Assam and the coming of the British to this land. He portrays a time when the Ahom dynasty was about to face its downfall and Mackenzie blames the Assamese princes for that who according to him, were ‘worthless debauches.’ It was a horrible time for the Assamese society which was crippled by the atrocities of the Burmese and Mackenzie’s description of the country’s physical appearance confirms that very fact:

Nothing could have been more wretched than the state of Assam when the valley was first occupied by our troops. Thirty thousand Assamese had been carried off as slaves by the Burmese. Many thousands had lost their lives and large tracts of country been laid desolate by wars, famines and pestilences which for nearly half a century had afflicted the province. The remnant of the people had almost given up cultivation, supporting themselves on jungle roots and plants....Such was Assam as we found it. (7)

British intervention was thus a kind of bail-out package to a desperate and destitute people. The province was under constant attack by the Burmese and there was also internal conflict amongst the bordering tribes. In fact, the land had been laid waste through negligence and apathy, not to say fear of further invasions by marauders.

Mackenzie goes on to comment on the topography of Assam and its bordering areas:

We found the Assam Valley surrounded north, east, and south by savage and warlike tribes whom the decaying authority of the Assam dynasty had failed of late years to control, and whom the disturbed condition of the province had incited to encroachment. (7)

The threat of attacks from the hills tribes on three sides had put the Assam Valley in a vulnerable position. There were also all kinds of taxes levied on the plains people by some of these bordering regions, making for a complex revenue system as Mackenzie points out.

Moreover, as Mackenzie reports, the King and the people were tied to each other through a structured revenue and service system, where land, human beings and the revenue to be collected or paid were pledged to each other. (6) As per this system, individuals from a particular group or *paik* were pledged to the state or the king. This person, who was in service of the king, was allowed some land for cultivation which was attended by the rest of the members. This allotment was known as ‘goamutti’ or ‘body land’ (6).

Further,

The *paik* also received a piece of land for garden and homestead (*bari*) free of assessment; in acknowledgement of which he paid one rupee annually either as house tax or poll tax or hearth tax, as the custom of the district might determine. If a *paik* cultivated any rice land in excess of his two *poorahs*, he paid the state one rupee annually for each *poorah* so tilled. Artizans and other non cultivating classes paid a higher rate of poll-tax. The aboriginals and other wild tribes occupying the low jungly hills within the province paid hoe-tax on their cotton cultivation. The salaries of all government officers... and the maintenance of the numerous religious institutions of Assam, were provided for by the assignments of pikes along with their *goamutti* lands to the persons to be benefitted. The estates of the native gentry were universally formed in this way, and were supplemented by *khels* or lands which they had themselves reclaimed from waste by slave labor, and which were held by them rent-free and as hereditary in their families. (6)

Mackenzie describes this system in detail because with the intervention of the British, it came to an end:

The British government commuted all the pike service for an annual cash payment to the State for Rs. 3 per man and released the slaves—measures which, however wise and proper in the abstract, had the effect of reducing the Native gentry to poverty, and left no class, either in effect or theory, intermediate between the cultivator of the soil and the supreme authority. (6)

What is presented as slavery was in fact a kind of feudal understanding between the common people and the ruling class where service was pledged in lieu of land and an income of sorts. The people (*paiks*) had been given land for both residence and cultivation which eludes the imperial gaze of the writer. As he observes, the abolition of

this system of revenue and service reduced income sources for the gentry. Moreover, the annual payment to the State for this so-called liberation must have been an ominous burden to the people. This strategy in presentation may be said to fall in line with what Pratt calls a part of the 'anti-conquest' whereby, "European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European Hegemony" (*Imperial* 7). Even as the British liberated the so called bonded labour force or 'slaves,' they levied a heavy tax on them and deprived the indigenous ruling class of its income.

According to Mackenzie, the Government had to implement some policies against its will. He describes many tribes that the government had encountered and the relationship between the two. It is apparent that the administrators always view the indigenous people as the 'other' whom they have been controlling, governing and ruling. Any occurrence or activities on the part of the people which are not favourable to the government are considered disturbances and the particular tribes engaged in such activity are branded as troublemakers. About their expedition into the Abor territory, Mackenzie describes the people as 'insolent and rude beyond all other tribes of this frontier' (*North-East* 45). While the general summing up of the tribals or other indigenous groups is inclusive of the imperial gaze, there are instances where the writer describes personal man to man contacts or encounters without overt hostility.

Mackenzie mentions the success of Captain Vetch, the Political Agent, in his interactions with "the Pashi, Meybo, and other Podams, who to please him voluntarily released all the captives they had taken" (36). In the depiction of many tribes, Mackenzie takes help from other colonial authors by referring to their accounts. He extracts from authors like R. B. Pemberton, S. F. Hannay, John Butler, J. S. Mill and B. C. Allen. He simply follows Hannay's description of the Singphos of Sadiya, Butler's report on the Nagas and reproduces Pemberton's report on the Khasi and Jayantia hills. It is a general observation that the colonial writers were not free from prejudices and preconceptions about the indigenous people. They focus on the lack of ethics in these people or on their general degeneration. Although they sometimes see positive traits in the natives and appreciate that at times, they end up giving generalized opinions about the people as the 'other.' They tend to pile all kinds of negative attributes on them and end up contradicting their own previous illustrations of the people's honesty or some other positive traits. Thus, the colonial narratives reflect baffling opinions and assessments.

Mackenzie's narrative too suffers from this bafflement. Basically, what the author is trying to show is how savage the tribes were and how difficult it was to handle them.

Mackenzie discusses different policies for suppressing the 'other.' The government appointed local people in different security positions. It was indeed a colonial policy to have local confidants appointed in government posts taken up by many British administrators. There were also tricks which were offered by different administrators. The suggested policy to subdue the Singpho people is pertinent to note in this regard:

It was almost impossible to deal with them as a whole, though it was by no means difficult to attach temporarily to our interests individual Chief who thought he saw some advantage to be gained therefrom. They seem to have had serious fears lest the British should proceed to expel them as they had driven out the Burmese. (63)

The Chiefs were in a dilemma as they felt they required protection at a time when they were themselves claiming to protect the people. Further, they had to ingratiate themselves with the British to retain the property under their control:

Considerable tracts of land had been occupied by them and were cultivated by slave labour. These they were anxious to retain. They also hoped... that by being on good terms with the British they could be protected from the Burmese.... (63)

It follows that if the British found it convenient to patronize the indigenous chiefs, the favour was returned by the latter. It was convenient to both parties.

Mackenzie describes several expeditions which were undertaken with the motive to subdue different tribes. Many of those expeditions had revengeful motives too. The 1855 expedition to the Mishmi hill was one such instance. In 1854, two French missionaries were murdered by a Mezho chief named Ka-ii-sha. The very next year a small party of Assam Light Infantry with other native helpers marched from Sadiya and killed Ka-ii-sha. Mackenzie comments with satisfaction: "The murdered Frenchmen to the full avenged" (49). Another such incident was the death of Bhogchand, the in-charge appointed by John Butler, who was killed by the Nagas.

According to Mackenzie, Bhogchand himself was not clear-handed in his dealings with the indigenous people but just to prove the strength of the colonial force, the government sent troops to take revenge. He writes,

The Governor General's Agent now reported to Government that if we wished to recover our influence in the hills, we must systematically burn granaries and crops to enforce our demands for the surrender of those concerned in Bhogchand's murder. (110)

It was followed by a dispatch of an expedition to avenge Bhogchand's death. Such instances reveal that the colonial policies were not always peaceful but included violence on the government's part. It was not always the savage 'natives' who were creating trouble by plundering and attacking innocent British subjects or that the government was only defending people. The situation was the other way around at times when wrongs were initiated from the government's side too. Their avenging operations debunk the idea of a jealous 'native' with a vengeful mind; instead, it exposes the vindictive nature of the British government and its suppressive mode while handling the 'other' with the help of violence. Such acts again put a question mark over Mackenzie's claim that the government policies were fair and equitable. They also point to the colonial practice of sublimation through armed conflict.

In his general review of policy on the sub-Himalayan border, Mackenzie asserts that there was no such policy of extermination and repression; he even denies the allegation that the government has been unfair and unkind in their dealings with the natives. Mackenzie extracts from the Government's policy of 1865:

I have said enough to show that on this frontier the policy has been from the beginning not a policy of coercion and "contemptuous devastation," as it has sometimes been erroneously described, but a firm and kindly policy of defence and conciliation. (55)

The government's policy of so-called defence did not eschew armed combat with the frontier tribes or in the rest of the region. However, Mackenzie chooses to present it as 'conciliation.' This is one instance when facts are couched in the rhetoric of colonial discourse.

The policies of the government depended on the character of different administrators as they were not alike in their views. Some officers were interested in the internal affairs of the natives whereas some other preferred to keep a non-interfering attitude. For instance, John Butler wanted a strong authority while Cecil Beadon had a different idea of administration. The internal conflicts between different clans were also causing troubles for which some administrators wanted the government to go into those internal affairs of the tribes so as to restore tranquility. Captain Brodie, Principal Assistant to the Governor General's Agent from 1840-1844 offered a policy of direct and active control. Brodie suggested that he should be allowed to interact with the tribes and bring them under a formal agreement. He also proposed that a small annual sum be extracted from the tribes as a token of submission. Mackenzie finds it interesting that Reverend Miles Bronson also supported Brodie's idea:

It was interesting to note that Mr. Bronson, who knew these Nagas better than any European before or since, was all in favour of Brodie's plans of direct and active control. (92)

This again shows the relation between the government and the missionaries and their involvement in the same colonialist scheme. Although Brodie's suggestions were accepted by the government, the policy of direct control did not work smoothly. Mackenzie gives examples of native attacks and troubles from time to time which Brodie had to subdue with force. He reports that from 1854 to 1865 there had been nineteen Angami raids, in which two thirty two British subjects had been killed, injured or kidnapped. Even John Butler, who succeeded in influencing the native tribes to a great extent met with the same fate. As mentioned earlier, Butler was ambushed and killed at a Lhota Naga village while he was leading a survey party through the hills.

There were also occasions where the government made mistakes because of misunderstanding. John Butler's report on the Patkai Naga people reveals such misunderstandings on the part of the administration. The government ordered sharp and severe retaliation on the whole village when they discovered some hostile activities by the Naga people. Then Butler explains the whole situation:

But it was shortly afterwards discovered that these Nagas were themselves most peaceably inclined, and that if any of our villagers had been attacked by them, it

was only in mistaken retaliation for wrongs done to the Naga tribes by Singphos either of Assam or Burma. (88)

However, aggressions and counter aggressions continued to occur between the hill tribes and the colonial government.

According to Mackenzie, the colonial policy was fair and when there was violence against some of the indigenous tribes, he justifies it by saying that the hostile nature of the latter demanded such aggression on the government's part. Like the Nagas, most of the other tribes too are depicted as troublemakers. The Karbis and Kookies of North Kachar are defined as unpredictable, cunning people. Manipur was an independent state till then and the British government had yet to interact with them but Mackenzie gives a barbarous history of the state. He also discusses the inter community dislikes and how the dominant Assamese communities were thwarting other minor tribes in the state. He also describes the tribes of Assam as wild and savage but then Mackenzie admits that the government too had not been doing anything for civilizing them. In 1877, he writes,

It was admitted that up to date the objects kept in view had merely been the peace of our own border. No attempt had been made to civilize the Nagas, or maintain order among them, save so far as our own immediate interests were concerned. (130)

But at the same time, he also admits that with civilization came other negative elements which were corrupting the simple minds of the hill people. However, he emphasizes the positive sides which according to him not only improved the material condition of the native people but also brought development and order to the society. But life was not as smooth as it was expected to be as there were rebellions against the revenue system introduced by the British government. Mackenzie mentions the Khasi people's rebellion against heavy taxes and discusses the policy of direct management of the people. This is apparent that although Mackenzie asserts that the colonial policy was equitable and that it was meant for the welfare of the natives, the policies were definitely of coercion. His portrayal of the 'savage' tribes helps him to justify the attitude of the British government towards them and underlines the necessity for colonial interventions leading to assumption of administrative control over them as far as possible.

Mackenzie's account or memorandum was entirely an official report which was written not for the public to read but for the government officials. This very aspect distinguishes the narrative from the other colonial representations of Assam. Therefore, the narrative is very clear about the author's position as well as the policies of the government for the people of Assam. The colonialist agenda in the policies is openly mentioned including the ones that engaged force. The rescuer image of the British government, though not overtly stressed, appears to be ordained. While the mistakes and misunderstandings on the part of the colonial administration are discussed, the writer appears to blame them for the conciliatory approach of the British. The countless pockets of resistance amongst the hills tribes attest to the thankless job undertaken by the colonial administrators. Mackenzie finally concludes that had a more firm and aggressive position been taken up earlier *vis a vis* tribal anarchy, the lives of countless British subjects that were lost could have been avoided:

Those of us who long ago contented that in no other way could permanent security be won, may rest content with the eventual triumph of their views; but we may perhaps be pardoned a passing expression of regret that so many lives should have been lost and so many valuable years been wasted, while the vain endeavour was made to shirk the full burden of responsibility imposed on us by local circumstances and the high necessities of our paramount position. (372)

It was as if the British forces had been avoiding the responsibility of governance by not taking on the tribals of North East India earlier. Only through innate self-effacement had the British government thought that governance in these parts should be left to the whims of local chiefs. After a lot of trials and tribulations, the British had come to accept responsibility of such unruly people.

There appears to be an element of smugness in Mackenzie's comment:

We have secured and strongly occupied the navel of the hills; ...and we have, it may be hoped, effectively protected the tea planters and the cultivators of the plains from outrage and plunder. For the rest we can afford to wait, until consolidation of our rule.... (373)

The note of triumph is couched in regret that it had not been considered earlier and acted upon. The whole project is shown as a rescue operation with casualties on both sides. In

the Preface, Mackenzie expresses his regret that he could not compile “a work, which, while treating exhaustively of all the frontier tribes in that quarter, in respect of their relations to the Government, their manners, customs and ethnological affinities, would at the same time serve as a permanent handbook for the Government and its local officers” (I). The reasons he cites are extreme pressure of work during famine in the region and the strain on his eyesight. He also acknowledges the inputs from the work of those surveyors “for whom no peak is inaccessible, no jungle impenetrable, and no tribe too rude to be faced” from whom he had “gathered material which cannot now be used. I had, indeed, hoped at one time to have had the aid of some of them in putting the wild story of this frontier into complete and fitting dress. As it is, any frontier officer who cares to undertake the task is welcome to undertake anything in the following pages that may suit his purpose” (IV). Mackenzie’s comments indicate his interest in ethnography, given the host of detail that he had accumulated. What he does not realize is that his book already contains sufficient ethnographic material replete with comments, mainly his own.

Bampfylde Fuller: Friendly Recollections

Some Personal Experiences by Bampfylde Fuller can be distinguished from other colonial narratives discussed in this chapter as the author expresses his personal impressions rather than presenting government positions and policies in it. It can be therefore called Fuller’s personal notes on his experience of Assam.

Like many other narratives authored by colonial administrators, Fuller’s account too begins with a positive note. He visited many places of India before coming to Assam as the Chief Commissioner in 1902. He shows a positive attitude towards the country and takes pride in his claim that he could speak ‘Hindustani’ as if it was his mother tongue. He says it was a fashion to discuss the annoying things which represent the stereotyped image of the country and its people as “The land of Regrets.” As per most accounts, “In its heat, its insects, and its malaria, it is certainly uncomfortable, and there is a lack of the cultured amenities of home life” (Fuller, 4). Fuller agrees that there are discomforts but that is not the only thing that characterizes India.

He claims that he understands Indian sentiment; he likes and admires the villages in the country.

But its spells of cold weather are glorious—all the more enjoyable because of their contrast with the summer heats. Much of its scenery, especially in the central parts, is exceedingly picturesque; it offers to the poor man opportunities for sport that in England are only enjoyed by the rich; and its people are a most interesting and sympathetic study to those who are not convinced that European civilization... is the last word in human progress. (4-5)

As in any other colonial travel account, Fuller notes the picturesque in various parts of the country. Because of the size of the land and its huge rivers there was little scope for anyone to stake a claim onto the natural resources or assets. That being so he felt that there was enough opportunity for the rich as well as the poor to look for entertainment. He takes on his countrymen or even his fellow Europeans for their narrowness of vision, which only allows them to look at things from a Western perspective. Fuller believed that the Indian people were interesting, if one was prepared to look at them in the context of their own culture.

Fuller discusses some of the negative aspects and ills in Indian society: the jealousy of the Hindus and Muslims of each other, rivalries amongst villages, infanticide of girl child, unreasonable beliefs and superstitious minds of the people etc. but interestingly, he also observes the presence of such evils in the Europeans and gives instances of the personal resentments amongst the European officers. In fact, he very openly discloses the professional rivalries among some of the British administrators. When he came to Assam it was like a new side of the Indian life and revealing his openness he again speaks about the unfair treatment of the region by his own people and government. Fuller discovered the fact that the people of Assam were hardly given any importance officially in their own country which according to him was very unfair as well as discouraging. He writes:

The Assamese were of little official importance in their own country. This was both unfair and discouraging, and I gave great satisfaction by ordering that, so long as candidates possessed the required educational qualifications, preference was to be given to the Assamese. (109)

Fuller is not the only one who speaks for the native of Assam as his predecessor, Henry Cotton too reveals many discriminations towards the Assamese people in his autobiography. Cotton calls it stepmotherly treatment of the British government. While reading Fuller and Cotton one must keep in mind that their texts were personal accounts

and not written for the government. Another important thing is that both Fuller and Cotton were popular administrators in Assam.

Expressing his liking for the Assamese people Fuller mentions his own popularity among the natives:

They are an intelligent, kindly people, very picturesque in their drappings of tussore silk. To all appearances, I won their hearts in return. To all appearances I won their hearts in return. I was known throughout the country as “Assamar Raja.” (110)

From his personal experience Fuller gives several instances where he shows his pleasant interaction with the Assamese as well as some of the Indian people. He was treated like a prince by the Assamese people and greeted with ‘triumphal arches’ wherever he went (110).

Fuller observes similarity between the Assamese and the Bengali in their manners and customs. He even thinks that the Assamese language was but a dialect of Bengali. This is, however, a misconception which most of the administrators had about the Assamese language for which the government made Bengali the official language of Assam from 1837 to 1873. This was opposed by the educated section of the society which was supported by the American Baptist missionaries. Nevertheless, Fuller stands with the Assamese people’s right and thinks that the ‘natives’ should be given preference in all the fields.

Like other visitors to the region, Fuller too takes stock of the tribals scattered around the hills of Assam:

Its hill peoples give Assam a feature of its own, and it was indeed, the exigencies of their control that led to the separation of Assam from Bengal. They are commonly known as “wild tribes,” and some of them are certainly in a very early stage of culture, addicted to head-hunting and constantly at war with their neighbours. (111)

He goes on to clarify that there are some who benefit from exposure to European values: “Others... offer very convincing illustrations of Asiatic progress under European influences” (111). This shows that Fuller, despite his knowledge of the ‘wild’ tribes, is of

the opinion that there is scope for them to benefit from European knowledge systems. Moreover, he observes, in the context of the Nagas, that “these people are surprisingly intelligent” (112). About the Khasis, he has similar observations to make: “The Khasis are exceedingly intelligent, and showed their vivacity in developing a number of more or less heretical tenets” (113). It is interesting that his general opinion of the tribes notwithstanding, Fuller is willing to learn from experience and sets aside his presumptions to praise some of them.

Fuller’s observations and statements on the tea garden workers are important so far as the representation of those workers in other colonial travel narratives is concerned. Like many colonial authors Fuller thinks that the tea garden labourers were in a better condition than in their homelands but he affirms that that does not deny the exploitation of the latter by the planters. He found the laws and systems made for the workers were unfair which actually gave the managers exceptional rights over the ‘coolies.’ He observes,

On some gardens the coolies were virtually prisoners, being, in fact, under guard all night. I came across notices posted at river ferries and railway stations describing runaway coolies, and offering rewards for their apprehension, that reminded one of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Runaways who were legally arrested were seldom, if ever, made over to the police as the law required. (118)

Fuller believed that the tea garden workers suffered a lot under their brutal planters. He remembers of witnessing the flogging of labourers which only confirms that slavery scenes were prevalent in the gardens. He gives two such instances where the workers were exploited; in one of the cases, the punished man died of flogging. Fuller was against such brutality seen on the plantations and therefore he opposes the planter’s right to arrest the ‘coolie’ without warrant. It is obviously not that Fuller was sympathetic towards the tea garden worker and therefore he showed his concern for them. What he does is just pointing out the laws that were in favour of the planters. Similar picture of the tea garden life is to be found in Henry Cotton’s autobiography too. In fact, both these administrators held similar opinions regarding the negligence of the British government towards Assam. It is intriguing that at a time when most of the colonial administrators praise the British government for different schemes implemented for the development of this poor country, people like Fuller and Cotton offer opposing views. They talk about

the disinterestedness of the British administration in Assam and give instances to show how unaware the officials were about the problems and difficulties faced by the 'natives.'

Fuller states his own views regarding some of the government policies and does not hesitate to criticize those if they were unfair in his opinion. For example, he expresses his dissatisfaction in Lord Curzon's political move of Bengal's partition in 1905. According to Fuller, it was a wrong step which would create many problems in future and he objected to it. An interesting point to note is that both Fuller and Cotton had issues with the British government. Cotton felt betrayed by the government whereas Fuller too was unsatisfied and resigned his job later. They were definitely different from the other administrators discussed in this chapter and therefore their accounts unfold things that are not of concern to those authors. In fact, *Some Personal Experiences* is more about Fuller's personal feelings and opinions on the people's relation with their administrators. He tries to give a nice picture of the indigenous people and discusses the different fields where they suffered discrimination in their own country. At the same time, he presents a good administrator image of himself who not only loved his subjects but was loved by the latter too. Fuller's affinity with the indigenous people can be assessed in terms of Leela Gandhi's "Affective Communities," where, despite their colonial divide two opposite parties manage to achieve a level of empathy without the relationship being termed the politics of friendship.

All the colonial administrators are one in their opinion that the natives needed their governance which determines the relationship between the two. The texts written in the nineteenth century were mere promotions of the colonialism whereas the texts that appeared in the early part of the twentieth century highlight the negative aspects of the government too. Moreover, personal accounts differed in terms of content and tone from those written under government instruction. A general tendency seen in them is that they begin their books by stating their purpose of providing an unbiased account of the native region. There is always a reference to an allegation of being prejudiced that the colonial authors had been charged with and the authors therefore give their readers assurance of being genuine and presenting an objective view. But the interesting as well as remarkable point is that most of them end up being just like their fellow colleagues. Some of the administrators have tried to be honest about the existence of loopholes in the

colonial system itself and therefore they go on criticizing their government for being negligent. They cannot come out of the discourse of colonialism.

This opens another door to the whole world of the colonial administration as it leads the readers to see the internal conflicts and politics going on inside the British government. For instance, Mackenzie's agreeing with the fact that the government was not doing anything in the name of the 'civilizing mission,' Fuller's highlighting the discriminations and exploitation of the indigenous people and Henry Cotton's allegation of a step-motherly attitude towards the North Eastern part of India are noteworthy.

As contented earlier, these narratives are characterized by an apparent colonialist agenda although depending on the moods and experiences of the authors their representations of the 'other' vary. Most of them put faith in their administration and try to establish the government as the protector. However, it again varies depending upon the purpose of the writing. For instance, in Mackenzie this tendency is not so prominent since his focus was not on celebrating colonialism before the world but to help other British officials to understand the 'other.' Similarly, Fuller's notes attest to his personal achievements as a colonial administrator despite his comments on the manners and customs of the indigenous people. Although they are not harsh towards their subject, and even at times, appreciate them, the administrators seem to reach out to the 'other' within the framework of a 'superior self,' that is, the imperial government. Despite their fruitful and interesting interaction, not to say negotiations with the colonized subjects or with those who remain outside the periphery, these writers cannot isolate themselves from their identities as British subjects and in different ways manage to either defend or endorse the British control of India and Assam within which the indigenous people are still seen as the 'other.'

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