

Research Article

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Once there was a ‘morung’

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Abstract: In Nagaland, a state in India’s North-East region, the morung is a tribal institution that serves as an educational portal through which all young men passed as the means of learning their living heritage. Described by anthropological accounts, for a century until the 1950s, as a ‘dormitory’ for boys and young men, it is in fact much more. It is a school, both vocational and law, a premises in which tribal elders dispense wisdom, a crafts centre, a barracks, and embodies other functions too. Moreover, it is one of the most important, if not the most important, social institution that maintains instruction about what may be called a pre-materialist worldview, one that was widespread when indigenous societies were free from a science hegemony that defined what counts as knowledge.

From the 1990s, a combination of factors caused the decline of the institution, and as tribal youth have moved into the ‘mainstream’, the morung and all that it stands for is close to being extinguished. Yet it is irreplaceable. For Naga adolescents and youth, the morung was physically where part of an unique worldview became manifest, one which valued cooperation far above competition. While there, the youth learned within sight of all that was dear to them, a learning immersion complete in many respects. Their learning used the medium of material mastery and intimacy with material laws to transport the youth, so that their awareness of nature abundant became awareness of its invisible forces both subtle and great.

Keywords: indigenous; traditional knowledge; education; post-material

1 Introduction

From within the city of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) the world of North-Eastern India seemed, in the 1990s, to occupy a different kind of time and space. Mumbai was where I had done most of my growing up, then struggled through the awkward transition to finding for myself in India’s urbs primus. My interest in what we today commonly know as traditional knowledge did have much to do with the very proximate rural regions that lay outside the great sprawl of the mega-metropolis: the hills of western India and the coastal communities to the north and south. But the high ranges of the easternmost Himalayan spurs, and the tribes that dwelt therein, seemed unutterably remote, reachable only through the sepia pages of journals kept in the library of the Asiatic Society and a handful of other city libraries. When the opportunity came to visit the region, I took it gladly.

At the time I was writing for a newspaper, and the visit was meant to give city journalists an introduction, in situ, to what everyday life was like in those easternmost parts of the country that were beset both by insurgency and separatist militant movements, and the state’s militarised attempts to squash those movements. It was a grim framing of a very difficult subject indeed. But I was to find there beams from a light familiar, and yet unlike anything I had known until then.

An unremarkable higher education in the arts, and not anthropology or sociology, was far from ideal training for pursuing an interest in traditional knowledge systems. But thanks to a family house in the rural hills, and a liking for the tales and winding anecdotes that my grandparents’ generation entertained each other with, I was favoured with a glimmer of the ways of seeing nature, and man’s place in it, which had already begun to fade (although they had seemed so unshakeable, unchangeable, in my youthful imagination). And that was perhaps why in the restive North-East India of the 1990s, when somehow interwoven with the spine-chilling accounts by survivors of one or another deadly skirmish, of laments by parents fearing for sons lost to the rebel cause or daughters violated by armed combatants, flashes of tribal life and legend shone through, I seized upon them.

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It was during subsequent visits, having been able to travel into villages, that what I had gleaned from hurried, incomplete subsidiary conversations found their form. I found the landscapes magical. Rice terraces cradled in steep valleys whose slopes were densely wooded, rising up to cloud forests that riotously clad hill ranges, and these ruggedly run eastwards to touch the floodplains of Burmese rivers, and northwards up into the mountain fastnesses of southern Tibet, villages that were clusters of cunningly woven roof-thatch and mosaics of kitchen gardens.

Those visits helped me form friendships and earn trust. That in turn led to the assignment (described later in the text) for which, during 2004 and 2005, I found myself having to spend a fortnight at a time living in a village in the state of Nagaland. It is then that I learnt of the *morung*. As I explain in the opening section of the text, it tended to be described in the most ordinary and banal terms. It is by itself anything but, and is, as part of the weft and warp of tribal society, the portal through which all must pass so as to begin the accumulation of a learning in tune with their living heritage.

None of this becomes apparent quickly or easily. The *morung* may be presented as a vocational school, a law school, a boarding house, a premises in which tribal elders dispense their learning and wisdom – in stages – to those fit enough to receive it: a crafts centre, a mustering barracks, a labour bureau, a matrimonial agency. I found it quite difficult in fact to make out what it is not. Nor are there watertight divisions between the *morung*'s work and that of other village institutions. They seemed to flow into one another, apparently arbitrarily to my city-bred eyes and mind for in the city we are made accustomed to seeing and treating the manifest world as made up of edges and boundaries, compartments and tiers.

When, leaving aside the puzzle of the *morung* and regarding carefully instead those who passed through it, I found there was indeed a stamp of it that could be discerned. Its better students (to use a conventional term) displayed a competence in many fields that was to my mind superior to the abilities and faculties of those who had bypassed the *morung* (most usually, these were youth sent to a nearby city, or even farther away, for their education). They could describe the cascade of rice fields better, could judge the health of a patch of forest at a glance, could weave a cane basket to the required number of bindings per running inch, read the stone wall of the village fortress to determine whether the fit of its stones had shifted – even imperceptibly to other eyes – after a particularly heavy spell of rainfall.

Nor was this, I only very slowly learnt, a matter of material mastery. The secret of the *morung* (I call it a 'secret' in the way that what are described as the mysteries of antiquity, such as the Eleusinian, are also secrets, because they cannot be described to the non-participant, and the participant cannot emerge from without the indigenous milieu) seemed to be that it used the medium of material mastery and intimacy with material laws to transport the well-tempered youth into the region beyond, where the awareness of nature abundant became awareness of its invisible forces both subtle and great.

But even at that time, which is now nearly twenty years behind us, the *morung* was considered by Naga youth as outdated, a relic of tribal organisation that retarded advancement into the modern, whose ways of teaching and learning were even faintly embarrassing when compared with the modern pedagogies (advertised as being more 'practical', with 'jobs assured') that had begun to be offered even in the urban centres of north-eastern India, let alone those that could be had in the large metropolises of India.

Looking back at what I had the extraordinarily good fortune to witness, first hand, at the time, is the worth of the *morung* and its system (which stubbornly eludes definition) and which can be seen in the absence, among those who did not pass through it – and who today greatly outnumber those who did – of a kind of spirituality that comes with the consideration of the intangible dimensions of human life. It is this worth that I hope to convey through this paper and so arrest in a small way the diminishing of spirit that is such an affliction upon our youth.

The *morung* curated and nourished the enlarging of the spirit. In the way it led the youth to know themselves, then to know others, then to know nature, and then to see and come to know the forces that shaped each stage of their learning, it presented each their own journey of cultural understanding. When the fires in *morung* hearths began to go out, so did the light of the humanities in the distant hills.

In the *morung* and its setting, the tribal Naga village, I saw, more clearly than I had elsewhere in India the values and practices that we can now identify as postmaterialist. These were of course to be espied in the hamlets of central India, the former domains of the Gond rajas, and in the hills of southern India (where the Irula live) and in the coastal belt to the north of Mumbai where the Warli had once reigned. From these places I had gained a small insight into their views of the world, which had considerably influenced how I formed my own.

The most important of the elements in these views are the proper siting of man and his works amid Nature

and her works; a philosophy of the material – given separate voice by each group – in which it supplies our needs both mundane and sacred, and which through its handling points the way to a refinement of spirit; teaching and learning within sight of, and with a constant tactile connection to, Nature’s manifestations and rhythms; the arrangement of a social structure such that the transmission of such teaching is accorded the value it deserves. For Naga adolescents and youth, the *morung* was physically where part of such a worldview became manifest, and because the *morung* existed and served, the rest of such a worldview was fulfilled. It was the college and the laboratory, it set the ‘examinations’ but there were no failures, for the worldview valued cooperation far above competition. While there, the youth learned within sight of all that was dear to them, a learning immersion as close to complete as could be found.

During the 1990s and 2000s, a sizeable portion of the parents of teenagers, in the tribal communities, undertook great efforts to send their children away from the tribe, the state and the north-east region with the intention that their children would first gain and complete an education in a university, and then find employment in a large city, and thus – so the reasoning went – escape the very real risks of militancy and escape also an economic backwater. At the same time, tribal elders were concerned that such a movement of the youth away from their homelands would weaken the transmission of knowledge, and cause the pool of available recipients of their knowledge to shrink inexorably.

This sadly has become more true with every passing year since then. The youth of the north-eastern states are today to be found in any number of urban professions: as flight attendants, working in hotels and resorts, in ‘call centres’, in gourmet restaurants. Today Naga youth, like youth from other parts of the north-east region who are in India’s major metropolises, rarely maintain even a token of their cultural identities. Their flight from ‘backwardness’ has become a race towards affluence, into which the very large majority of India’s youth are pushed and in which they are expected to excel. As participants in this race, they too must collect the mass-produced trappings of ‘success’ and so conform to the material template of ‘progress’ set in the 1950s by the western industrialised world. The educational pathway the youth of the Naga tribes were led to follow could prepare them only for where they find themselves now, far from home and far from the learning that had made their ancestors so uniquely Naga.

2 Life for Naga men

It had proven difficult for the young Naga men to describe. “It’s like a club”. “It is a meeting place”. “It is where we learn”. “This is where we prepare for life”. What had been attempted to be given a description was the *morung*, a social institution of some Naga tribes to which is given, in English, the term ‘dormitory’ for young males. The young men’s halting descriptions in English fell very far short of the fuller meanings, tantalising but elusive. Nor could the term ‘dormitory’, which came into vogue during the early 20th century because it was employed by anthropologists, even partly convey what the *morung* stood for.

As a physical presence within the Naga village, the *morung* is typically distinguished from other village houses by its size, and the space reserved for meeting, or gathering. Its temporal attributes are very different from the typical house, and that is perhaps why the ersatz term ‘dormitory’ was found suitable (or least unsuitable), for it is indeed a place where young males are housed. But there is a complex relationship between the young Naga who is in a *morung*, his family and household, and his clan. This relationship is impossible to describe using the term ‘dormitory’ or any other equivalent. The key lies in unpeeling, layer by layer, the mundane description that it is a place of learning and preparation for life ahead.

The first *morung* that I saw in the village of Khonoma, in the Angami tribal territory of Nagaland, North-East India, was a structure larger than the typical house and certainly brimming with more life. But naturally so, because of the vivacity and cheer of the troop of young men who were in residence, when they were not streaming in and out at all times, and also because of the variety of actions being pursued there: repairs to the structure itself (roof, stone paving, hearths, and other infrastructure), the manufacture or repair of implements used in the fields or cleared plots amid the hill slopes, and of course the discussion. It is the talking, debating, questioning and lecturing that is so very central to the *morung*, the transmission of learning, about the whys and wherefores that must govern the adult Naga’s decisions and considerations.

The discourses and lessons are most usually delivered by an elder. During the mid-1990s, when I visited several of the North-East Indian states, clan elders of the Angami Naga imparted their learning, and the lessons they had distilled from their experiences. Elders cut impressive figures, wiry and still muscular, their heavy shawls with their distinctive patterns draped over one shoulder, symbols of their status in the form of figurines and motifs worn on a necklace, a bamboo mug from which to sip the

'*zutho*', the rice beer, gripped in one fist, and their speech, slow and resonant.

The Angami *morung* – the terms used for it by the Angami are *thehu*, which is meeting place, and *kichuki*, the structure in which the braves sleep, for these are terms of function and of place – has its sleeping areas as an arrangement of huge single planks, well worn by generations of warriors, upon which the young men of the *khel* sleep¹. Outside the *thehu* are elaborate stone-lined circular areas called *khwehou* where members assemble for formal discussion.

These circles are places of power, and when the stone stools arrayed around the edge of the circle are all occupied, the scene brings to life a line from an epic of long ago and far away, "... and the elders were sitting upon polished stones in the sacred circle"². Typically, there is a fort nearby, its massing of hewn stone dominating a good part of one or the other valley that lies to either side of a village hill crest. The Angami are stonemasons of uncommon skill, and the Angami hill village is an exhibition site of the ways in which stone can be worked for use as a level public surface, as stairways down and up slopes, as retaining walls, as fortifications large and small, as gateways and more generally as material whose placement and method of lodging transforms the hill crest and hill slope for use by man. They traditionally used no mortar (soil is precious in the hills and binding clays may be either scarce or too difficult to transport to the village) and expertly faced stone so that edges and surfaces fit neatly.

From the *morung*, the vistas are those that are near, and those farther away and distant. Both include the range of nature's elements that the Naga employs and cares for: bamboo, cane, wood and thatch in the homes; stone as the underlying surface for public spaces and the village's byways; the rice fields in the valleys to either side of the village hill crest; the water channels from sources in the higher hill ranges which are conveyed both to the village and to the fields farther below; the '*jhum*' fields (for swidden cultivation) in the upper and higher forest slopes; the small gardens and animal pens that adjoin most village houses; the forest with its dense canopy from which wild relatives of tubers and medicinal plants are collected, and in which animals are hunted.

There is another kind of vista to be espied from the *morung*, but this one is for the Naga alone. In this picture, there is a web of concepts and terms that are assigned to the individual objects and places of the physical vista, and the values and meaning that apply to each. This web is governed by the relationships the viewer has with family, with clan members, with clan and family elders, with members of other clans. It is also governed by the

occurrence of festivals during the course of the year, the observations of '*genna*' (prohibitions or taboos observed as days when routine activity ceases)), by the obligations to carry out or fulfil acts of merit that lift the status of the family or clan, and by individual acts of bravery or valour (which already in the early 20th century were considered, in the accounts of the British-era administrators of the North-East Indian hill tracts, to be slipping into a bygone age).

When during my visits to the Indian North-East region I had posed questions – which arose as if impelled by the radiant viriditas of the hill ranges – to Nagas, the replies, at times formal and at other times in the form of epic anecdotes, became written notes and these in turn became text for one or another kind of account, whether a formal report or a newspaper feature or a book chapter. From toddler to adolescent and to youth, the Naga had much to learn; where did this take place and how? Was there any place given at all in the primary education curricula for the North-East hills to tribal culture and its pedagogies? Did older Nagas see a difference between what they had learnt, orally and through practice, and what was called 'education' today with tribal children in classrooms, and how do they describe this difference? How far beyond what is considered 'handicrafts' by the non-tribal must the learning and education of the Naga child, adolescent, teenager and youth reach? To whom and how must the songs, the stories of Naga ages past, the tales of creation and of the spirit forces, now go for safekeeping?

The one word that featured most often in the replies was *morung*. When described by a Naga, the institution that is the *morung* takes on a cast markedly different from that given it by anthropological and ethnographic accounts. "It is here that the Angamis prepared their young men for life," wrote Charles Chasie. "All the clan history, the folklores and legends, the songs, traditional practices etc are taught here. Any question can be raised here and answered, including intimate man-woman relationships, in the privacy of this fraternal environment. All the disciplining too is done here. From the *Thehu* would emerge the 'pride' of the clan, fully prepared for life and to play their roles in society."³

I had been fortunate to have Chasie (who is best known for his work as a journalist and writer) give me an introduction to the Nagas and the Angami in particular during 1997-98, and then as authoritative guide for a documentation project I was engaged with during 2004-05 on the traditions and knowledge systems of an Angami Naga village⁴. He together with a younger group of Angami men had patiently recounted their memories of their *morung*

years and the significance of what they had learned during that time.

From them too I was led to see and understand “the most remarkable aspect of village social life” which I had described as the “apparent harmony between traditional and non-traditional institutions. They function together to maintain social coherence and stability within the demands of a developing community, yet without losing historical and cultural identity. Every individual, young and old alike, finds their place to express and develop as individuals within such a framework. Although the village council remains the apex administrative body in Khonoma, it has not displaced the importance of the *khel*.”⁵

Receiving such introductions and explanations from Nagas before having read the ethnographic record (which goes back to the mid-19th century) was both fortuitous and valuable. As I was later to find, the accounts of the Naga – and likewise the tribes of North-East India, central India and southern India – by the very well-known anthropologists of the 20th century (especially Verrier Elwin and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf) were detailed, comprehensive, replete with observational minutiae, ornamented with a store of insights and personal encounters that can only be gathered during long years of field excursions. Yet, for all the fascination their works commanded, they were not Naga voices.

Earlier generations of recordists were J P Mills, J H Hutton and Alexander Mackenzie, all members of the Indian Civil Service during the era of the British raj, who had administered regions within what had been called the North-East Frontier Agency of British India, and who were also sociologists and historians of considerable professional stature. For their times, they had been described as scholar-administrators. Their powers of observation and inference were excellent, the ability they possessed to describe peoples and cultures so different to their own, admirable. Yet, they were administrators first and their academic pursuits were ever only subordinate to the interests of the colonial state.

“One must however remember the ethnographer is no ordinary Englishman, he is an enlightened one! He is a person who has consciously overcome his racial prejudices, according to the intellectual atmosphere of his times,” wrote Subhadra Mitra 30 years ago⁶. “He believes in the psychic unity of mankind. He is belaboured with universalistic concerns, the unified character of human society. But does he overcome all the unconscious levels of superiority and inequality steeped into his colonial upbringing?”

This is a question that has perhaps not been asked often enough, by India’s anthropologists and ethnographers, whose training has largely followed the methods of cultural anthropology that came into vogue with Bronislaw Malinowski and E E Evans-Pritchard. More seldom still have critical voices from the tribal communities of North-Eastern or Central India – which have posed this question more forcefully – come to the fore. It had been one chilly morning while walking to the ‘*jhum*’ slopes that lay above and beyond the village of Khonoma, in south Nagaland, when my guides, very fit and alert young Angami men, told me with much chortling, “We have been over-studied and under-understood.”

The origins of misunderstanding as the Nagas see it has as much to do with the description, ‘north-east’, as any other cause. North-east of what? That is simple enough to determine, and the encyclopaedic account of the region prepared by Alexander Mackenzie immediately, and very practically, begins with the exposition: “The north-east frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense it embraces the whole of the hill ranges north, east and south of the Assam Valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges⁷.” At the outset, Mackenzie proposed to trace in his account “the political relations of the Indian Government with the tribes inhabiting these hills.”

And it is because of the political nature of his work, which caused him to adopt a political vision of the region’s inhabitants, that Mackenzie observed, “.. we found the Assam Valley surrounded north, east and south by numerous 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. Many of them advanced claims to rights more or less definite over lands lying in the plains; others claimed tributary payments from the villages below their hills ..” and “It mattered of course little to us whether these claims had their basis in primeval rights from which the Shan invaders had partially ousted the hillmen, or whether they were merely the definite expression of a barbarian cupidity.”

Some 30 years after Mackenzie, Hutton’s works on the Nagas already displayed temperance of a kind towards the tribes that would have been unthinkable to an earlier generation of British administrator. Such temperance was maintained and strengthened in the 1930s by Mills and by the early 1950s, when Ursula Graham Bower photographed and cine-recorded the Nagas (and described with lambent prose her expeditions in ‘Naga Path’), the tribes

of the Indian north-east -for the name had stuck if not, thankfully, the uncharitable descriptions of the 1880s - were being considered in a very different light indeed.

Even so, the new illumination did only so much. On certain subjects treated as conceptual baskets, into which evidence and observation were deposited rather than sifted, a century's worth of accounts appeared to have progressed little beyond descriptions, however engrossing, of the mechanical. One such subject was head hunting, another was hill agriculture for it was at once simple and complex, a third was the tribal cosmologies, and yet one more was the *morung*, to whose enigmatic structures so much appeared to be tied, yet the ties and their meanings eluded attempts to decipher them.

Reading through the available anthropological accounts in an attempt to find explanations about the *morung* of weightier substance – and from a period untainted by modern trends – which might support what the Angami Naga adults had told my colleagues and I, during 2004 and 2005, I found description aplenty, but scarce reference to insight from within the tribes. Here is what Haimendorf had said in his celebrated monograph on youth dormitories.

“There is, first of all, the men's house of the Nagas and other Assam tribes. The alternative term ‘bachelors' hall’ is not commendable for it implies incorrectly that the *morung* is principally a house for the unmarried males. But although the *morung* serves as a dormitory for young boys and bachelors it is above all a men's club, the centre of all the most important male activities. It is the focal point of the ritual virtue of the village or village-quarter and usually harbours the valuable head-trophies” and “The Naga *morung* is the rallying point of all men, old and young, and *morung* officials play an important role in village affairs. Notwithstanding its function as a ‘school’ for boys, it is primarily a community house and men's club, and only incidentally also a boys' dormitory.”⁸

Nor did the description of the same institution in the villages and lives of the tribes of central India differ greatly. “In the *darbar* the men assemble for every important event in their corporate life,” Elwin wrote. “Here they settle the distribution of clearings for their axe-cultivation ‘so that the gods overhear everything we do’. Here the priest's axe, with which the first tree is felled, is stored. From the *darbar* fire is taken to kindle the brushwood in the clearings. Before every festival the men meet to decide what is to be done. Here the grain, which is to be taken to the treasury for the payment of taxes, is collected.”⁹

Elsewhere in peninsular India, but southwards and westwards, what youth dormitories were and what they stood for were questions that returned no readily compre-

hensible answers. The hill tribes of the former kingdom of Travancore (the present day central region of Kerala state) were well known but about their dormitories, which they maintained, very little was. The Kani or Kanikkar tribe of the Kaniyakumari (the southernmost tip of India) region, built and maintained bachelors' halls “which serve as dormitories for unmarried young men, as rest-houses for visitors and as village council halls. These houses may not be entered by women, and there are separate dormitories for girls” L A Krishna Iyer had observed¹⁰. Of other tribes of the south Indian hill ranges, such as the Jen Kurumba and Irali of the Wynad and the Kotas of the Nilgiris, Haimendorf noted with evident frustration that “apart from their bare existence nothing was on record regarding these youth dormitories and their social significance”.

That was where matters remained until the 1980s when, in North-East India particularly, insurgency movements in several of its states, and counter-insurgency action by Indian armed forces, led to a continuing circle of armed conflict. In the rest of India where tribal populations still (with the exception of those in the central Indian forest tracts that spanned eastern Maharashtra state, reached across Chhattisgarh state and into Odisha state, which suffered a similar degree of conflict and violence because of left-wing and Maoist movements) practised their ways of life, the threat to their customs took a different form.

It came to be called “mainstreaming”, a sinister social engineering term invented by the Indian state. Under such a view, India's many tribal communities and groups were determined to be “backward” – ironically in a country the entirety of which was considered “under-developed” by the West – and therefore had to be served with roads and rail, schools, a “modern” education system, public health centres (in which indigenous medicinal systems were prohibited), jobs and food staples from the country's public food distribution system.

A decade thereafter, when I first travelled in the North-East region, the effects of both threats were more than visible. My colleagues and I, from the very outset and after having been saddled with a grandiloquent project title – “eco-tourism development, natural resource management and social capital for the village communities” – had also been urged to do our best to draw Naga youth away from the path of insurgency and separatism, and perhaps induce them to think more critically about – if not turn them away from – the underground organisations which were mounting the insurgency. We had faintly agreed to do our best. But there was a third threat and this one was older than the other two.

That threat was the clutch of church denominations which had first come to the North-East region in the nineteenth century. They included the Catholic, Presbyterian and Baptist missions whose strenuous efforts had, by the close of the British colonial period in India, turned large swathes of the North-Eastern tribal tracts Christian. In the 1990s, revivalist churches were there too: Born Again, Pentecostals and Seventh Day Adventists¹¹. What the churches' instructions meant to the tribal soul is described poignantly in a few lines by the Naga poetess Temsula Ao: "Declaring that our Trees and Mountains, Rocks and Rivers were no Gods, And that our songs and stories, Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense".

I was to find however that the "nonsense" had not been banished from the Naga hills. The Angami young men who attended to every detail of the fieldwork my colleagues and I conducted during 2004 and 2005 while documenting as many of the streams of traditional knowledge still extant, described a more accommodative arrangement. All attended the village church and participated in its events, yet had relinquished none of their obligatory ties and roles as Angami Naga men, neither to the tribe, nor to their age-group, nor to their *khel*, nor to the *morung*. The impression I formed of this arrangement was that of a veneer of Christianity affixed to a great bole of tribal vitality.

Elsewhere in the Naga hills, and in the tribal homelands of neighbouring states, the hold of the churches old and new varied. In some villages community life revolved around the church, and activities that especially had to do with education and socialisation had been transferred to the church from erstwhile tribal institutions, and amongst those institutions was the *morung*. Where this had happened, the *morung* fell into disuse, as had been reported about the Sumi¹². Graham Bower too had remarked¹³ on the appropriation of institutional activities: "The Zemi villages were small and disappointing. The people had lost some of their Naga character. They were dull and poor, dependent largely on work in Haflong bazaar¹⁴; the settlements were often split into Pagan and Christian, a house divided against itself; their *morungs* were decaying, always a bad sign."

It had seemed to me, in the later 2000s when distilling my notes and material from the Naga hills into newspaper articles and longer essays, that the fading of Naga tribal institutions and customs had accelerated greatly from a half century earlier. The 'mainstreaming' programme of the state had lured away many youth from the North-Eastern tribes who in the 1990s had made their way to New Delhi, the capital, to attend college and university. They also found their way, not long after, to Pune and Banga-

lore, cities whose urban cultures they found more to their liking¹⁵.

It was an irony that undoubtedly would many a time have been mulled over by tribal elders during the last 40 years, that some of the reasons advanced by the youth to explain their choice to stay and find livelihoods in the 'mainland' (for that is how the rest of India was named in the North-Eastern hills) were, as principles, the very basis of tribal social organisation. "The only leadership is that of character; the whole principle of the *ghotul* . . . is that everyone is equal, rich or poor, the son of priest, headman or landlord, all are one in this fellowship which knows no wealth-distinction or privilege of inherited rank". In this way Verrier Elwin had described the underlying premise of equality that contributed to form the democratic bedrock inherent to tribal societies of Central India and which applied in just the same way to those of the North-East region¹⁶.

During the periods of relative stability in the North-East region, from the 1980s until the late 2000s, accounts that were anthropological, ethnographic, about the handicrafts and weaving arts of the North-East, about the region's biodiversity and its wilder hill ranges, lent contemporary colour to the older corpus of work. But the core descriptions had scarcely changed. The *morung* was distinguished from other structures in the village by its architecture and size, the carvings its beams and pillars bore. It had been described in profuse detail as being the centre of the male social and economic life of the village. Described too were its roles as a crafts and arts school, as the organisation for young men – and young women – wherein they learned the values of cooperation, teamwork, discipline and responsibilities¹⁷.

Profuse too had been, for a century's worth of accounts until the 1950s, descriptions of the sexual mores and liberties associated with life in the *morung*. These had fascinated western anthropologists (because of the luggage of Victorian prudery they bore, as had been caustically suggested by a later generation of anthropologists) who had devoted much text to the relatively unrestricted sexual freedoms young men and women had as a matter of course while lodging in the dormitories.

The evidence of dormitories and the dormitory-culture elsewhere in South-East Asia (which according to the modern conception of what is 'South-East Asia' begins in fact in the eastern portion of the Naga homelands, the 'Nagalim', which is the region between the present-day India-Myanmar border and the Chindwin river) is also well represented. They are found among the Khamti and the Karen of Myanmar, and further east among the Moi tribes of what was once French Indo-China. K G Izikowitz had

left behind a compendiously detailed study of the institution among the Lamet in the hills east of the Mekong River¹⁸ in which he drew detailed parallels between the men's house of this Mon-Khmer speaking tribe and the Naga *morung*. Community-houses likewise were found to still flourish in Sumatra, the Celebes, the Philippines and New Guinea.

The picture that has been caused to appear of this, perhaps most enigmatic of all tribal institutions, is one that has been pieced together as if a mosaic, through numerous descriptions written down (and later filmed or audio recorded) over five or six generations by those interested enough to do so. An accretion of impressions, each coloured by its own time and bias. The picture serves to tell us well what the *morung* is (and for far too many tribes, alas, what the *morung* was), who it is for, how it is made, what takes place within and without, and the general complement of values and ideas that its graduates are equipped with when they formally quit its embrace. What we still perhaps lack is an original representation of the manner in which learning and the transmission of knowledge are imparted, how its pedagogies came to be formed and given value, its roles in placing tribal youth somewhere in between a nature at once abundant and fragile, and the rules that transform the minutely textured material tribal world-surface¹⁹ into lessons for living.

Chasie had written of some of those lessons: "Discipline, respect for one's peers, honourable social conduct and putting into practice whatever has been learnt in the clan *Thehu* are an integral part of this place. It is a place of loyalty, of pride and prestige, and gives purpose to social existence which sometimes proves crucial in maintaining the very fabric of village society."²⁰ Haimendorf had in 'Youth Dormitories' remarked how, from an early age, children are taught to be useful and law-abiding members of a community, and learn to put the interest of the community before self-interest. The list of qualities that may be instilled in the Naga (or tribal) youth is compelling, yet we had (I came to conclude after poring through my notes and literature about the tribes of the North-East and India) only a description of a young adult newly minted from the *morung* or the dormitory. We knew very little indeed about the progression, from season to season, of the child to the servitor to the apprentice to the journeyman.

The clearest clue is the young man's and young woman's complete immersion in the dense thicket of material objects which is the *morung* and the Naga (or

tribal central Indian, or tribal South-East Asian) village together with its environs. Every object within reach, whether large and ritual or small and mundane, is made by and shaped by hand, by one's own hand or another's or by many hands together. As a medium of education, handiwork is supreme. Through its every action, the forms and structures of the natural world are encountered. Handiwork practised in the closest proximity to – in fact at the very source of – its material origin makes the recognition of nature's powers that much more intuitive. For the young Naga who begins to develop the skills to work nature's materials as he finds them, or collects them, or cultivates them, it is a journey which under the auspices of the *morung* brings him into communion with nature's finer forces, the postmaterialist.

In this way, the qualities found admirable by some six generations of observers of tribal cultures and communities may be considered to have their root in some mastery of the material. And for that mastery, or at the very least intimate familiarity, to have been accompanied at every step of progression with instruction about value and symbol. The dormitory house or *morung* could use, effortlessly, its locale within the village to immediately show proofs to the youth of why the value and symbol they had received instruction in, found currency in the village, within clan, or *khel* or exogamous circles.

In comparison the typical technical school, or arts school, or vocational training centre, or industrial training centre of the modern era is divorced both from the origins of its range of material substances, from the immediate universe of users of objects produced therein, and especially from the intangible skein of values and the assigning of worth (or merit) that is readily found in an enveloping community. The Naga youth I came to know during 1997 to 2005 had either made or were completing their journeys from material mastery to exponents of the lofty symbolism that in fact pervades, like an aura, all tribal skills and arts. Its teaching – if at all such a term can be used in the precinct of a *morung* – has very much to do with lore and myth, tale and cosmology. We may nowadays very seldom hear recounted the wonder of an education in the *morung*, for twentieth century modernity and the twenty-first century's obsession with the digital has robbed tribal communities of their youth (and all but silenced their teachers). But there was such a place, and it made men and women.

Endnotes

- 1 The Naga village is divided into two or more residential segments called thino, commonly known as khel. The khel however is more than just residential divisions. Each khel consists of various exogamous kin groups normally termed as pfütsano or clans. The number of clans in a particular khel varies.
- 2 Book 18 of the Iliad, line 480.
- 3 'The Naga Imbroglia, A Personal Perspective', Charles Chasie, United Publishers (Guwahati India), 2000
- 4 The project had been called 'Environmental Impact Assessment Report, with reference to eco-tourism development, natural resource management and social capital for the village communities of Khonoma, Nagaland', a title that had very little indeed to do with the work and intention of the authors (of which I was one) but which was chosen to satisfy an administrative demand. The project and its resulting report (dated 2004) was in fact a richly annotated and commented catalogue of traditional knowledge and socio-cultural practices.
- 5 'Socio-economic realities in Nagaland: the case of Khonoma', Rahul Goswami, in 'The Peripheral Centre: Voices From India's North-East', ed. Preeti Gill, Zubaan Books, 2010, New Delhi. Looking with hindsight at this description, I find it was already falling short of portraying the true relation between traditional and non-traditional. Tribal social institutions all over India were already being hollowed out and weakened.
- 6 Subhadra Mitra, 'The Classical Ethnographies', page 18 of 'Nagaland: A Contemporary Ethnography' (eds. Bhandari and Mitra), 1992. Cosmo, New Delhi
- 7 From 'the introduction to chapter 1, part 1, of 'The North-East Frontier of India', Alexander Mackenzie, 1884 (and reprinted in various Indian editions).
- 8 'Youth-Dormitories and Community Houses in India. A Restatement and a Review', Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, in *Anthropos*, Bd. 45, H. 1./3. (Jan.-Jun., 1950), pages 119-144
- 9 'The Muria and Their Ghotul', Verrier Elwin, Oxford University Press, 1947. The term 'darbar' corresponds to the Naga 'morung'.
- 10 'The Travancore Tribes and Castes', L A Krishna Iyer, Government Press, Trivandrum, 1937
- 11 'Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of the Missionary Movement in North East India with particular reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947', Lai Dena, Vendrame Institute Publications, Shillong, 1988
- 12 'Constructing the Divine: Religion and World View of a Naga Tribe in North-East India', G Kanato Choppy, Routledge, 2019, page 77.
- 13 'Naga Path', Ursula Graham Bower, John Murray, 1950
- 14 Halflong is a town in the adjacent North Cachar Hills region of the state of Assam.
- 15 Ten years later, an incident occurred which proved the daunting peril to the living heritage of the North-Eastern tribes. When checking out of a new hotel in the western Indian city of Pune, the clerk at the desk wished me a safe journey. The young woman was Naga, a Rengma, and when I light-heartedly remarked to her how much I would have appreciated a meal of Job's Tears (a cereal grass cultivated in the Naga hills) porridge, I was met with a look of incomprehension. She knew about neither Job's Tears nor the few other Naga foods I mentioned, as she had been raised in the city.
- 16 'The Muria and Their Ghotul', Verrier Elwin, Oxford University Press, 1947, page 364.
- 17 Youth dormitories have also, as part of the greater anthropological record of the North-East, been described for the Abor, Mikir, Garo, Lalung, Lyncngam, Kuki and Lushei tribes of North-East India.
- 18 K G Izikowitz, 'The community house of the Lamet', 1943, *Ethnos*, 8, 19-60.
- 19 A descriptive passage by Izikowitz illustrates the profusion of material culture: "They work on baskets, arrows -and crossbow, musical instruments, details for traps, and all the implements needed in daily life. These may not be made in the dwellings. Within the cong the material for making these implements is also kept. Heaps of material for braiding baskets lie there and dry on the racks over the hearths, and half-made and finished objects in all stages of development are laid up on the beams in the roof, as well as many other things that are used on more special occasions in connection with religious ceremonies. Among these are large mats, lances, hunting implements, and many old objects used once upon a time but long laid by. In fact there is to be found a whole ethnographical museum, and is a delightful place for an ethnographer to poke about in." (The cong is the dormitory.)
- 20 'The Naga Imbroglia, A Personal Perspective', Charles Chasie, United Publishers (Guwahati India), 2000, pages 115-116