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UNDERSTANDING ANTHROPOLOGICAL PROJECTS AS IDEAS OF DEVELOPMENT FROM COLONIAL ARCHIVES IN HIGHLAND SOUTH ASIA

While conducting fieldwork in Nagaland, North-East India, I stumbled upon a bundle of files that revealed how colonial ethnographers conducted their research and framed their attempts at disciplining local people. I followed up on these records at the British Library in September 2009, and, as expected, I was fascinated to discover the wealth of details colonial archives provided about the inner world of anthropological work in the colonies. These sets of documents relate to the Naga Burma-Assam frontier administration and they talk about 'Anthropology and Reconstruction' in the post World War period. This was also the beginning of decolonisation. Two seminal articles published by R.N.L Stevenson (1944) and J.H. Hutton (1945), colonial administrators and anthropologists in British Indo-Burma, set the new task for anthropologists and their institutions, in and beyond this region.

Stevenson's paper, published in the influential anthropological journal *Man*, was widely circulated in Britain's anthropological quarters and called for immediate action. Stevenson claimed that the Japanese invasion of highland Burma and the Naga Hills in 1944 had led to tribal² unrest and alienation among the hill people. The Second World War had disrupted the patrimony and muddled the threads of patronage that tied local chiefs with the British frontier administration. In this context, he called for a fresh engagement of anthropologists towards development and reconstruction. Stevenson's appeal caught the imagination of the metropolitan anthropological association, the RAI (Royal Anthropological Institute) in Great Britain. The RAI had set up collegiums of experts to engage anthropologists for practical research, which would help the colonial administration rebuilding the social and administrative infrastructure in the Empire's highland and frontier tribal areas of Burma, in the

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² 'Tribal' is in the Indian context a legal category. Along with a Schedule of Castes, the constitution lists a total of 645 Schedule Tribes, counting over 83 million people (2001 Census). *Adivasis*, 'original inhabitants', is a term alternatively used for self-definition by some of these populations.

aftermath of Japanese withdrawal at the end of the war. Stevenson suggested that in order to understand the situation in the Burmese frontier, an anthropological institute should be set up within the University of Rangoon, where Burmese Frontier officials could be given training in anthropology before embarking on their administrative jobs among so-called 'frontier tribals'. Unlike in Assam, the Burmese frontier administration was not well equipped with the anthropological knowledge of highland tribes. This recommendation was finally implemented in 1948, with the establishment of a Tribal Training Centre within the University of Rangoon. Stevenson also suggested the employment of foreign (i.e. British) anthropologists as research consultants and to train local Burmese officials to produce anthropometric data that could aid administration in this 'no-mans land' of the British Empire. Calculations were made in the Burma office on the economic viability of hiring a consultant for tribal affairs. Edmund Leach, whose visit to highland Burma was interrupted at the outbreak of the Second World War, was seen as the most appropriate candidate for the colonial project. Stevenson proposed an applied research project for a socio-economic survey of the Kachin tribes, who were to be affected by the development of a railway track in the Myitkyina division. The project was so challenging and central for his academic career that Leach could not refuse it, despite the financial constraints and hazards involved. He applied for research funding through RAI's prestigious Emslie Horniman Fund. For the Burma colonial administration it was more cost-effective to hire a consultant than to create a permanent position of an anthropologist in their service (Anonymous 1942).

Leach was eventually unable to undertake the research Stevenson had pleaded for, due to the insufficiency of his research grant and a Burmese official declaration that his experience of the area during the Second World War would affect his work. Frantic calls to attract American institutional grants like the McCarthy and Carnegie Foundation were rejected on the grounds of the politically sensitive situation in frontier Burma. The British Commonwealth feared that by involving American funds, they would undermine the credentials of a British ethnographic tradition. The tension played out in RAI debates. Nonetheless, Edmund Leach's piecemeal fieldwork in Burma for his PhD was sufficient to produce a seminal monograph on social and political relations in Highland Burma in 1954 that still attracts anthropologists' attention in any discussion of this area (Leach 1956).

In the context of nation building, the role of anthropologist was further extended to the one of development planners and bureaucratic facilitators. In India's north eastern frontier, where I conducted my fieldwork, the philanthropic anthropologist Verrier Elwin, was appointed by Jawaharlal Nehru as an 'anthropological consultant' and later Advisor for Tribal Affairs in the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), where he undertook several tours in North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA). In 1956, Elwin presented his 'New Deal' for tribal areas that reflected his vision for 'tribal development through protectionism' (1961). These policies were guided by Nehruvian ideals of nation building, within the framework of 'Unity in Diversity'. Furer-Haimendorf, who entered the Naga Hills of Assam at the same time as Leach entered Burma (around 1837-1938) embarked on a practical piece of research in NEFA among the Apatanis (present day Arunachal Pradesh bordering Burma) in 1942, under the request of the British Indian Government (Furer-Haimendorf 1956). J.P. Mill, in his last days as professor in the department of Anthropology, Oxford University, also wrote mostly on tribal development and post war reconstruction in Naga areas of Assam.

In central India similar initiatives were carried out in peace time, just after India's Independence, as anthropology found a new role in state programmes for tribal development under the Five Year Plans. The Furer-Haimendorf archives in SOAS give a glimpse of his work among the Reddis and Raj Gonds of Adilabad district in the Nizam state (present day Andhra Pradesh). Furer-Haimendorf was requested by the Nizam to carry on research that would look at the rehabilitation and resettlement of Raj Gonds and Reddis through a new land settlement policy. These tribal communities were under a perpetual threat of being alienated from their land by non-tribal moneylenders who had settled along the tribal belt as de facto controllers of land. Furer-Haimendorf was also given the task to carry out a social evaluation of the projects designed by the ICRICET, an Arid Zone Agricultural research institute of the Government of India (Furer-Haimendorf 1952). While delivering the 1977 Presidential Address of the RAI, Furer-Haimendorf stressed the Indian state's benevolent intervention in the tribal world and the positive role of anthropologist as policy advisers and experts on tribal affairs:

The role of the aboriginal tribes as distinct elements within the population of India has been recognised by successive governments from the days of British Rule to the present day.

Extensive legislation relating to the 'Schedule Tribes', the establishment of Tribal Research Institutes in many parts of Indian states, the working of Tribal Welfare Departments and a growing literature on tribal societies ranging from articles in popular magazines to the scholarly work of Indian Anthropologist all indicate the importance attached to the problems of tribal population. Though anthropologists have by no means a monopoly on the study of tribal communities they alone have both the motivation and expertise to undertake a prolonged investigation of the special circumstances which set the tribesmen aside from other population (Furer-Haimendorf 1977:2).

Colonial ethnographers like Furer-Haimendorf were making a case for tribal development while negating the very practices and effects of colonialism in the underdevelopment and marginalization of people classified as 'tribals'. In a recently published paper on oral history among the Apatanis Stuart Blackburn talks of how Furer- Haimendorf, who worked among the Apatanis in 1940s, remained silent of the raids organised by the colonial government and of its role as a go-between in local clan disputes; how these eventually led to Apatani feuds with government forces in the 1940s, resulting in massacre and mass deprivation. It is through oral history, life testimonies and biographies of respondents that Blackburn reconstructs these voices, and places colonial violence within Apatani's life world (Blackburn 2003: 335-365). It was only towards the last years of his academic career that Furer-Haimendorf became critical of the Indian government's tribal welfare schemes, including many of the programmes he had himself participated in. He started questioning the very effectiveness of these policies and whether they guaranteed what they were planned for (Morris personal com. 2009):

Scholars like Talal Asad provocatively argued that anthropology was the 'handmaiden of the colonial empire' (Asad 1973) – and so was the role of anthropologists in defining the status of tribal people in India and Burma. In the context of nation building, as we have seen, the role of anthropologist as collaborators of the Empire was extended to the one of development and bureaucratic facilitators. Anthropologists' new found trust with development, however, begun much before the MacCarthy era and the Truman Doctrine in 1945,

as the war efforts made colonial intervention more critical. What made anthropologists' meteoric shift in policy perspective, from 'pure study of man' to 'tribal welfare' in Indo-Burma was their losing ground as 'knowledge makers' for the British Empire. Scientific and clinical 'racial' classifications produced difference, legitimised hierarchies and justified political control (Guha 1999:1; VanSchendel 1992: 95; Scott 2009). In the post world war scenario reconstruction matched with decolonisation. Decolonisation was accompanied by processes of internal colonialism, supported by welfare measures that aimed at incorporating diverse ethno-political tribal communities seeking self-determination within a nationalist frame. In this context, development replaced the 'white man's burden' and newly decolonised nation-states called for the help of expert anthropologist to implement their social policy programmes. Anthropologists were now entrusted with the new task of integrating of tribal areas in the mainstream tradition. Anthropology had become more of a government (Moore 1999: 1-23).

Colonial archives provide an invaluable account of the life of the colonial government and its officials. Through letters, memoirs, tour diaries and correspondences they offer insights beyond the ethnographies of the time, which generally fail to engage with their own historical and political contexts. As anthropological research has heavily invested in reflexivity it is important to deconstruct the historical legacy of colonialism. Drawing from archival documents in the British Library and local archives in Nagaland, I have here provided some reflections on how anthropology as a discipline changed its emphasis from the study of 'other culture' to the study of 'underdeveloped societies'. Both in the context of colonial 'administration' and post colonial 'development through reconstruction', anthropological representations constituted the most important intellectual backgrounds for the re-imagination of tribal space as 'backward' and 'underdeveloped'. Today anthropologists have begun working in development organizations on a global scale, including intelligence bureaus. They have become career 'consultants' and 'experts' for governments and transnational corporations, and community leaders in NGOs and donor firms. As the development industry expands, anthropologists will find more work to act as experts of 'traditional' and 'tribal knowledge'. While Asad and his fan followers have reflected on the production of anthropological knowledge as an imperial project of domination of 'others culture', it is also important to reflect on how development came to be the new project for anthropology.

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