

GAUHATI UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF NORTH-EAST INDIA STUDIES (GUINEIS)
The 4th Colloquium Lecture

Delivered by
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Venue: H.K. Barpujari Bhawan, GU.

Chaired by Prof. Mini Bhattacharyya Thakur, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, and attended by about 50 participants from various institutions in and around the city, the colloquium started with a welcome note and a brief profile of GUINEIS (by Debasis Bezbaruah), and a soft introduction to the invited speaker Dr. Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh by Sanjay Kumar Dutta, the Deputy Director of GUINEIS.



The deliberation by Dr. Ruscheweyh is based on her recent work ***Dancing to the state: Ethnic Compulsions of the Tangsa in Assam*** (Oxford University Press), an ethnography that looks at ethnic marginality and the compulsions imposed on minority communities, especially on *Tangsa*, by the dominant community (particularly the Nepali & Assamese speakers), state policies and political borders. It centers on the *Tangsa* people, an indigenous tribe in *Tirap* area in the eastern corner of Assam and bordered with Arunachal Pradesh. In her work Dr. Ruscheweyh centres around the questions on the possibility of small indigenous communities surviving as distinct cultural entities in the north-east India, and on the choices they have and the ways the minority groups take up for resisting further marginalization.



Beginning with an introduction to the geographical location of the *Tirap* area, Dr. Ruscheweyh went on from presenting a community-wise population profile (based on 2001 census) – broadly classifying into *Tribal* and *Non-Tribal* groups - to justification of her (analytical-purpose) classification of the communities into three distinct groups – **Older Tribal Groups** (that comprises of *Tangsa, Singpho, Tai Phake, Sema Naga, Khampti*), **the Hindus** (mostly Nepali and Assamese speakers), and **The Depressed Settler Group** (Adivasi, Hajong and Mising). She pointed out that the older tribal groups, who consider themselves as indigenous and have trans-border linkages, have been alarmingly reduced to a numerically weak category, constituting less than 10% of the total population there; in particular, the *Khampti* tribe, who showed up in the earlier censuses, did not do again in 2001, thus manifesting a negative population growth of this tribe in the study area. On the other hand, the Hindu groups who came there in the post-1950s - either as refugees, ex-army or as government school teachers - constitute more than 60% of the population, making them the dominant group over the others. This group, Dr. Ruscheweyh says, has proved to be much better off than the remaining others in terms of education, land ownership, economic conditions as well as in political decision makings. The speaker keeps on arguing that the ‘older tribal groups’, despite of being under the same homogenizing or centripetal factors (*such as* life in the plains, same livelihood options and lifestyles, same political/civil administration, sankskritisation, insurgency etc.), are particularly confronted with serious issues - including shrinking of their landholdings, land displacement to non-indigenous

groups, competition with stronger groups for jobs, government subsidies etc., language issues in education, excessive dependence on agriculture, opium and alcohol addiction and so on. At this point, Dr. Ruscheweyh says that the Tirap area has witnessed outflow of indigenous tribal people to the neighboring Arunachal Pradesh in search of better education opportunities (in English or Hindi medium



instead of Assamese medium), secure land rights, and more (per head) governance.

As for the roles and policies of the state, Dr. Ruscheweyh with great disappointment says that the state is just playing a strategy of appeasement to 'keep everyone happy', not equipped with long term vision but only short-term measures to tide over the temporary crises. The state also proves itself powerless against coal mafias, rich businessmen and tea planters. It is also keeping the status of 'Tribal Belt' only on paper, and making the 'older tribal groups' subjected to the 'arithmetic of votes' of the

politicians. However, though not successful, recent ages have witnessed marginalized tribal groups coming together for greater political representation – the phenomenon being termed as the 'principle of negative solidarity'. It has also witnessed movements – with almost the same strategies by these ethnic groups - for reviving their ethnic identity, language, (reviving/creating of) scripts, religion, and holding of ethnic festivals etc.. However, Dr. Ruscheweyh continues, these ethnic assertions have led to rigidification of inter-group boundaries and a growing fissure in 'minority politics' between *Tribal* and *Non-Tribal* groups. Given these situations that the Tirap area is faced with, Dr. Ruscheweyh points out four survival (or probably self annihilation) strategies available to the marginalized indigenous 'older tribal groups'. They are – (1) **Assimilate** into the Assamese mainstream (*the strategy of loss and erasure*), (2) **'Act like the Romans in Rome'** (*resulting in partial survival*), (3) **Retreat** into Arunachal Pradesh (*surrender, meaning a defeat*) and (4) **Resort** to armed resistance (*defiance*).

Apart from ethnicity, Dr. Ruscheweyh also points out to more issues that the Tirap area is faced with, including questions on land rights (whose land? What rights?), inflow of more new settlers, a horizontal cutting elite class and economic inequalities, trans-border problems of drugs, illegal weapons and insurgency, and the emerging race for ST status by communities. She also points to the deficit on the part of the state in terms of implementation of the existing laws, in providing access to state supports, and continues to assert that mere pumping of money is not enough to solve these issues; there is rather a need for more inclusive developmental projects. At the heart of many unresolved issues, Dr. Ruscheweyh continues, there lie questions of attitudes of the dominant groups, including – the attitude of *indifference* (who cares?), the attitude of *dismissiveness* (small numbers don't matter), and the *patronizing* attitude (we, the dominant group, know everything better). Added to it, the intergroup 'trust-deficit' and mainstream group's patronizing 'respect-deficit' enhance the problems of people's mutual co-existence there. These facts led Dr. Ruscheweyh to conclude that the question of survival of small marginalized groups in Assam is more than just a function of their own agency, and of affirmative state policies [on land, migration, etc.] and their impartial and rigorous implementation; it also depends on *mutual respect* and *trust* within and between the groups living in the area, and between them and the (Assamese) dominant mainstream of the state. Drawing reference to Richard Jenkin's (1994) saying on the role of the mainstream Chilean people on the living experience of indigenous *Mapuche* population, Dr. Ruscheweyh translates her feelings as “..... **just as the Chileans contribute to the construction of the Mapuche 'self', the Assamese (and the significant 'others') determine, in part, what it means to be a Tangsa or a Singpho in Assam today**”. Therefore, Dr. Ruscheweyh argues that the answer to the question ‘*Can small marginalized groups survive in today's Assam?*’ depends on the answers to the questions “*Do 'we' (the dominant groups) want 'them' to survive?*” and “*if so, what are 'we' doing about it?*”

[While Dr. Ruscheweyh admits that she herself belongs to the dominant groups, emotion had been an integral part of her deliberation]

The deliberation was followed by a question-answer session. This session was enriched with about 6-8 in-depth questions from the participants, covering the aspects of *Lingua-franca* in the area (with Dr. Ruscheweyh answering it to be *Nepali*

generally spoken on the streets or markets, as every second person there is a Nepali), the role of the government, the transformation of the agriculture based livelihoods (from traditional paddy to plantations such as Rubber, Tea etc.). In this session, Dr. Ruscheweyh, in her complements to a Gauhati University based Economics Professor Archana Sharma, says that such kinds of ethnic marginalization replicates in many similar areas of the state.

The colloquium ended with a Vote of Thanks from the institute.

The colloquium was followed by light refreshments.
