

Aspects of Historiography of North East India

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North East India has a peculiar dilemma. To attract the attention of the Centre to its burning problem and avoid being seen as a marginal part Eastern India the seven states of the region presented itself as a cohesive unit called 'north east India'. It did succeed in emerging as a separate unit but in the process was seen as 'different' from the rest of India and a classic periphery. It was seen on the one hand as a mystic land¹ about which and its people rest of India had false ideas and on the other a land where anti-India activity in the form of secessionism and insurgency thrived.²

At the same time north east India not just face political, economic and cultural marginalisation but even historiographical marginalisation. It has been said that secessionism thrived in the areas which were annexed by the British late in its Indian empire but even in this list of late-coming states none of the states of north east India is mentioned even though it fits the argument. If this historian is forgiven for his European nationality and the consequent ignorance our so called national historiography also excluded north east in narrating certain crucial phases of Indian history like the State Peoples' Movement in Manipur or Mizo people movement to merge with India in opposition to a section of its leaders.⁴ As for the studies on secessionism they follow a pattern which is typical to north east India. It is the historiographical pedigree that has set the pattern and is unquestioningly followed. Worse, this historiography, which was shaped by the colonial school, has only reinforced the arguments of the insurgents themselves. While the rest of India has moved ahead to reach the concept and ideology of peoples history, north east India historiography is still chained to its colonial framework set by Edward Gait's History of Assam (1905).

The secessionists justify their movement saying that the Naga hills, Mizo hill, Manipur or even Assam were never a part of India

till the British conquered them. The students of the history of north east India are taught that it was an independent political unit in the pre-colonial period. It had maintained its 'splendid isolation'.⁵ It was never discussed what was splendid about this isolation, nor was it explained that the independence of Assam in the pre-colonial times was not an isolated phenomenon. The entire medieval world, including India was characterised by such regionalism where autonomous units thrived. Nation, and nation-states are only a modern phenomenon. Multiplicity of regional kingdoms and feudal chiefdoms, fragmentation of empire, appearance and disappearance of regional powers, regionalism and insularity in vision and political action are characteristic of the medieval time. It is a significant failure of the regional historiography to highlight that Assam could not have been an exception to these medieval characteristics. Similarly tribals and subalterns are treated equally shabbily by some of the 'doyens' of this historiography. For example, a three volume work on the Anglo-Tribal relationship in north east India has been titled "Problems of Hill tribes : North East Frontier"⁶. The laborously collected data from India and abroad are pieced together to depict the tribals as problem which justified their conquest by the British. There was no attempt to appreciate the heroic resistance that the small tribal groups like the Nagas or Lushais made against a modern military power like the British. Instead the emphasis was on how the tribes created problems for the British by committing raids, plunders and kidnapping in the British territory. The clutch of colonial historiography was so evident in this work that instead of presenting the tribal side of the picture, projection was on the British policy, the course of which was divided into phases of peacemission-punitive expedition, phase of non-intervention, period of indecision, forward policy and so on. No attempt was made to use folk history, oral historiography in the absence of documentary evidence to construct the tribal side of the picture. A comparison of these early works with the original official imperial documents of Alexander Mackenzie,⁷ Pemberton⁸. Butler, Mills.⁹ Woodthrope,¹⁰ Needham¹¹ or Robert Reid¹² will perhaps show very little differences. Such was the stronghold of colonial historiography of north-east. What is noticeable is also the non-loosening of this grip. For example, since the time S.K.Bhuyan wrote his "Anglo-Assamese Relations" there has been an unmitigated

interest in studying British relationship with various tribes of the north east. Following S.K. Bhuyan,¹³ H.K. Barpujari studied Anglo-Tribal relationships, S.K. Barpujari studied Anglo-Naga relationships.¹⁴ J.B. Bhattacharjee worked on Anglo-Garo relationships¹⁵. S.Chatterjee on Anglo-Lushai relationship.¹⁶ Helen Giri¹⁷ and Hamlet Bareh wrote on Anglo-Khasi relationship,¹⁸ Laxmi Devi wrote on Ahom-tribal relationship.¹⁹ Milton Sangma worked an Anglo-Garo²⁰ relationship and so on. Even as late as 1989, research works on north east maintained the stance that north eastern tribals lived in complete political isolation. A critic discovered a strange insularity in the historiography of north east India in the sense that it never tried to view its history against the background of developments in India as a whole.²¹ He also found that there is a discernible lack of interest or information about north east India outside north east.²² So much so that an Indian History Congress volume categorised a paper on north east as 'non-Indian.'²³ It is also pointed out that the British had no intention of conquering these tribes as it would not gain much economically by such a conquest²⁴ as these hills were "not a land of flowing milk and honey. no glittering outcrops to raise thoughts of mineral wealth, no telling indications of reservoirs of endless oil".²⁵ It is overlooked that imperialism is its own justification. There need not always be an 'economic' motive for a conquest. A representative example can be cited from a history written in imperialist tradition.

"At last in 1866, it was resolved to take possession of the Angami country and reclaim its inhabitants from savagery ... The object in view was to protect the low land from the incursions of the Nagas. It was not desired to extend British rule into the interior, but when a footing in the hills had once been obtained, further territorial expansion became almost inevitable."²⁶

There was a more direct version too, "It should be first premised that for the annexation of their territory, the Nagas themselves are responsible. The cost of administration of the district is out of all proportion to the revenue that is obtained, and we only occupied the hills after a bitter experience, extending over many years, which clearly showed that annexation was the only way of preventing raids upon

our villages ... it was impossible for any civilized power to acquiesce in the perpetual harring of its border folk."²⁷.

The naivette of the regional historiography of north east India is reflected in the contention that the annexation of the Naga or Mizo hills was a historical accident. It only carries forward the argument of colonialism itself that the British had no intentions of conquering these hills which were not only devoid of any natural resources but proved to be a liability to the British; it is only the 'barbarism' of the tribes which forced their conquest. Colonialism had not only conquered India. It had conquered Indian mind too. While the mainstream historiography had been able to by and large decolonise itself, the regional counterpart could not yet do so. The absence of motives, pre-plans, strategies, benefits in the conquest of Naga-Mizo hills was seen as a legitimisation of the colonial arguments. It not only refuses to acknowledge the reality of 'conquests' itself but undermines the nature and strength of imperialism itself. The story of the conquest of the Naga/Mizo tribes lasting about a century, which imperialism describes as "one long sickening story of open insults and defiance, bold outrages and cold blooded murders on the one side and long-suffering forbearance, forgiveness, concession and unlooked favours on the other",²⁸ goes a long way to prove this.

In fact an appropriate phrase to describe this historiographical situation could be "missing the woods for the trees." The fact that the hills were occupied and devastated was overlooked and the emphasis was on whether the British had any motive for the conquest or not. Did the British ever publicise or profess its intention of conquests at any stage of their conquering spree in India? Similarly the imperialist concept like non-intervention, non-interference and non-regularisations were uncritically accepted without inquiring into their epistemological background or imperial legitimisation.²⁹ It is said that the Inner-line Regulation was a device to safeguard the identity of the tribals whereas tribal identity was never discussed in the Inner Line Regulation document.³⁰ The primary motive, as shown later, was to restrict the European planters from occupying tribal lands for the purpose of tea-plantation and secondly stop Indian merchants from encroaching on the trades that were the monopoly of the tribals like collection of rubber,

ivory, tribal salt and other forest products.³¹ These studies themselves have revealed that despite the claims of non-interference, the British did interfere with the life and times of the tribals. It is also said that the roots of the insurgency movements in north east India lied in the fact that these tribes never articulated in the nationalist movement and were isolated from the mainstream of Indian life. By doing so, this historiography only succeeded in reinforcing the ideas that colonial administrators had drilled into the minds of the tribals instead of examining it or countering it.

There was this false propagation by the colonialists that to be considered a part of India one had to be either Hindu or Muslim or at least influenced by them. It was never pointed out that the spread of Hindu culture in South East Asia did not make them part of India. At the same time the advent of Islam had not only turned a large chunk of Indian population into Muslims but also rejuvenated Indian culture and civilization. So was the case with Christianity which arrived in India as early as 52 AD, much before it did in some of the Christian states themselves and enriched Indian heritage. It is not true that Christianity came only with colonialism. In fact if the Nagas or Lushais had escaped these influences, it only proves the diversity and strength of Indian civilization. What is also to be remembered is that Hinduism spread in most far-flung areas of India not only because the monarchs of these regional kingdoms embraced it personally but adopted it as the state religion to legitimise their rule. Assam, Manipur and Tripura are classic examples. The tribals under discussion were yet to develop any such kingship which could facilitate such Hinduisation.

What is also a striking failure of the regional historiography was to point out that British rhetoric about the tribals of north east India being non-Indian's was a phenomenon of 1940's only except for the two Memoranda submitted to the Simon Commission in 1928 again by British Officials themselves. After the declaration of British withdrawal in the face of growing hostility from Indians, there was an increasing apprehension in the minds of the tribals about their future amidst people who, they were told were aliens. With the Plan Balkan on, the British perhaps wanted to retain as much of Indian as possible under their suzerainty as colonies. The 'tamed' tribals were an easy

target. Picking up on the legitimate fears of the tribals, some of these imperialist administrators mooted a plan of creating a Crown-Colony Protectorate or a Trust Territory comprising of the tribal areas which would be a British colony. Robert Reid, the Assam Governor (1937-1942), L. S. Amery the Secretary of State for Indian and Burma and Reginald Coupland, the Oxford Professor were some of those involved in this conspiracy. They were inspired by the thesis of J. H. Hutton, N. E. Parry and A. G. McCall in this pursuit. It can be seen that it is in the connection of this 'Crown-Colony' that the British talked about these tribes being different from other Indians and hence were non-Indian although so far they themselves had ruled them as part of India. But the Labour Government of Britain which inherited an economy devastated by the war, did not entertain the proposals of a Crown-Colony and wanted to be rid of India as early as possible. So not only the Crown-Colony plan fizzled out, even the declared date of British withdrawal (June, 1948) was advanced to August, 1947. If the 'secessionists' today appropriate the rhetoric of the imperialists and put forward the same arguments, it is not because they are historical facts, but because they were not countered by nationalist historiography thus providing it a kind of facticity and reinforcement. The nationalists directed their attention elsewhere thereby imposing another historiographical false consciousness on the people. Nehru, for example, popularised the idea that the anti-Indianness of the tribals was owing to the fact that "they (the tribals) never experienced the sensation of being in a country called India and they were hardly influenced by the struggle for freedom or other movements in India. Their chief experience of outsiders was that of British officers and Christian missionaries who generally tried to make them anti-Indian."³²

The refusal to accord the Naga and Mizo anti-colonial movements, a bloody war which lasted little less than a century, the status of part of the Indian Freedom Struggle was not only reflective of the elitist bias of Indian nationalist historiography but also alienating as far as the tribals were concerned. It is high time that the understanding of Indian freedom struggle underwent some changes in north-east Indian historiography. Indian freedom struggle does not include only the Gandhian movements. The Khasi war against the British (1829-33), the Jaintia rebellion (1860-62) or the Naga-Lushai (1832-1898)

fighters against the British conquerors were as anti-colonial as the Gandhian movements. In fact when the elites of the country were organising the first session of the Indian National Congress the Nagas and Lushais were still fighting a life and death war against the mighty British empire.

Regional history has a specialised role in raising the consciousness of people. But in the process it should not become 'regionalist'. K.M. Panikkar's caution is most appropriate for regional historians in this context

"I would make one appeal to Indian Historians and that is, not lend themselves to the heresy of elevating regional glories as a result of their specialisation with certain period or certain areas. Every region of India has contributed to the evolution of the Indian people, every group added to our common heritage. Every part of India has its heroic period and forgetting this the historians have contributed to the false pride resulting from the glorified self-image of our different areas. This is the most dangerous development which one has especially to guard against."³³

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