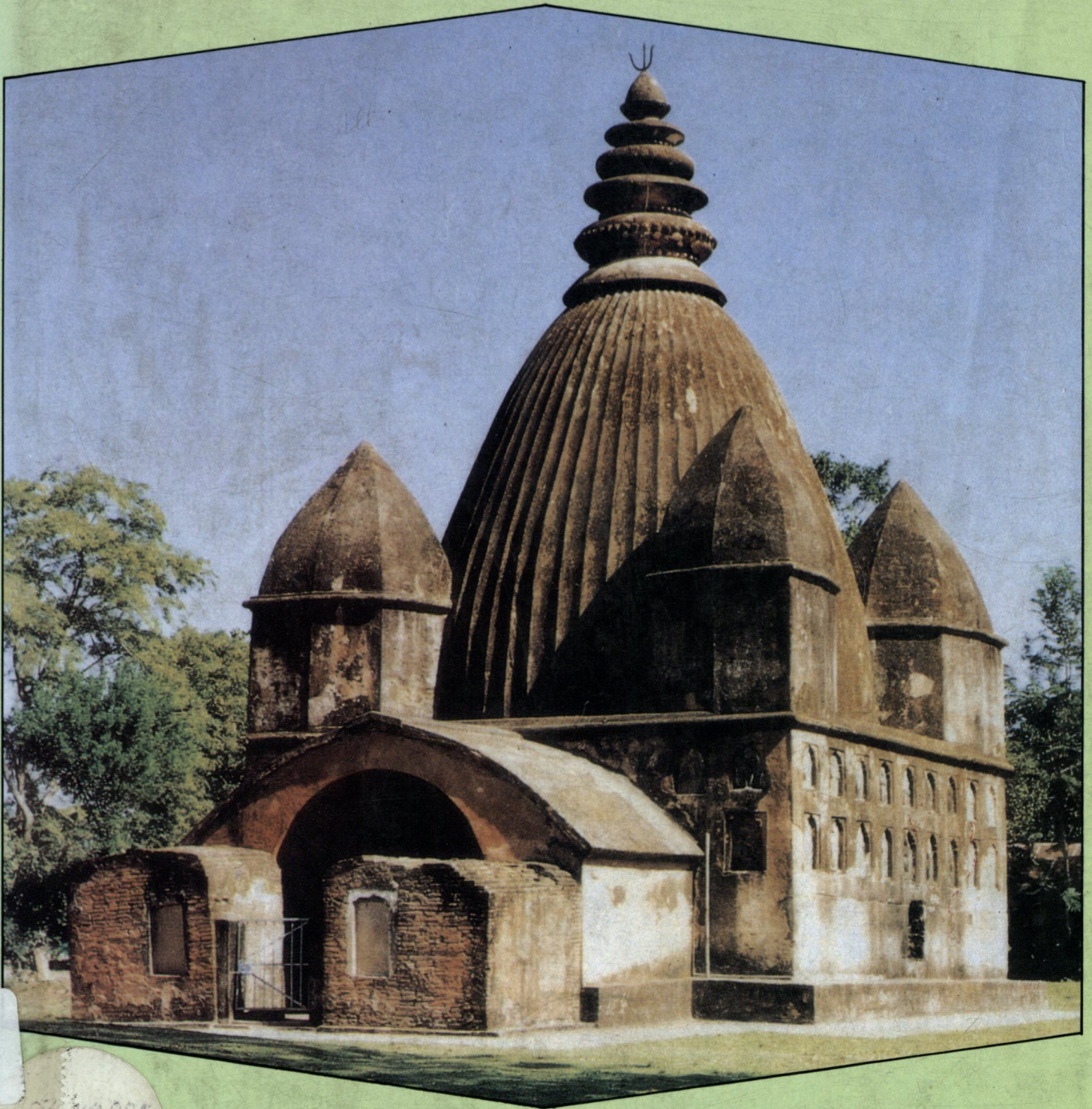


# NORTH EAST INDIA IN TRANSITION



By : Dr. Majid Husain  
& Dr. Rangadhar Sahu

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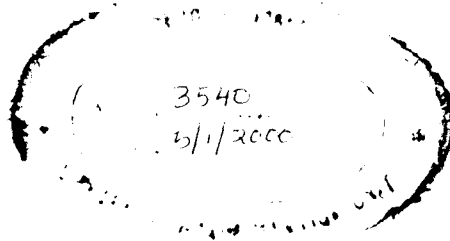
# **NORTH-EAST INDIA IN TRANSITION**



Edited by  
*Majid Husain*  
&  
*Rangadhar Sahu*

**RIMA PUBLISHING HOUSE**

EG-124, INDERPURI, NEW DELHI-110012 (INDIA)



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I.S.B.N. 81-7415-031-5

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First Edition: 1998

Price : Rs. 1,500/-

*Published by:*

Surinder Singh Sethi

**Rima Publishing House**

EG-124, Inderpuri, New Delhi-110012 (INDIA)

Phone: 5734855, 5733809

Fax: 011-5733809

*Layout & Graphics Setting by :*

Macrocom, 70 Vasant Apts., Vasant Vihar, New Delhi-110057 Ph.: 6149947

*Printed at :*

Hindustan Offset Press, A-26, Naraina Industrial Area Phase-II, New Delhi-110028

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**ransition is a change from one condition or set of circumstances to another. It denotes any departure from traditional practices in favour of modern ones. The change, may be sudden or slow is a universal phenomenon. The social processes in North East India are not an exception to this law of nature.

North East India comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura stretches over an area of about 255,083 sq km and has a population of 31,386,911 (1991). It is a multilingual, multiethnic, multi-religious region, characterised with tribal dominance in the hilly and mountainous areas and high concentration of Assamese and Bengalis in the Brahmaputra Valley. There is great diversity in its terrain, topography, drainage, climate (temperature, rainfall etc.), soils, mineral-wealth, fauna, flora, and natural endowment. Being the homeland of different races of men : (Austic, Mongolian, Dravidian and Aryan) that came to dwell in North East India at different times since remote antiquity, it has developed a composite culture of variegated colour.

Perhaps no other part of India has a compelling environmental setting than North Eastern India. In Arunachal Pradesh, it is the high Himalayan

landscape of mountain ranges, deeply furrowed valleys, contrasting rich green or dry deciduous vegetal cover according to the exposure of the slopes to the climatic agents; river terraces; fast flowing perennial rivers and streams reaching the Barahmaputra, often breaching the piedmont cones. In the Barahmaputra Valley, it is the wide span of this infilled geological downwrap, inordinately heavy seasonal floods, swinging channels of the river, terai-swamps, levees, revarain islands like Majuli, and faulted hills remnants like the near Guwahati. In the rest of the region, it is either a landscape of high mountain ranges and deeply entrenched valleys as in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, or remnant plateau surfaces with gentle swales as in Meghalaya.

Conspicuous contrast is found in all the physical and cultural attributes of the region. The Lower Barahmaputra Valley is only about 134 metres above the sea level, while the majestic snow clad peaks of the Himalaya in Arunachal Pradesh are above 6000 metres in height. The wettest part of the world Maunsiram (near Cherrapunji) receives over 1000 cm of rainfall annually, while the average annual rainfall in the interior valleys of Garo Hills (Meghalaya), Lakhar (south Mizoram), and Sherdukpen (Arunachal

Pradesh) record less than 120 cm of rainfall annually. Variations are quite significant in the average annual and mean monthly temperature at the micro level. The month of April records the highest temperatures while January is the coldest month over the entire region. Over 80 per cent of the total rainfall at most of the rainfall recording stations is received during the season of *Barsat* (season of general rains) i.e. July to October. July is the wettest month and November is the driest. The vegetation type ranges from tropical moist species, extensively associated with bamboo clumps and cane brakes to dry deciduous in the northern foothills in the Barahmaputra Valley. But the vegetation cover is affected almost in all parts by *Jhuming* (shifting cultivation and terrace cultivation); wild banana growth serves as good indicator plant. Only at the higher levels in the Eastern Himalayas is there a transition to temperate species. That the region is still predominantly covered with forests is a significant feature of the regional ecology and environment. The lush-green bamboo and deciduous forests, the desolate slopes of Himalayan peaks, the rugged slopes, the fertile valleys of the Barahmaputra and its tributaries, the perennial rivers and the denuded surfaces of the jhum-fields with entrenched valleys have closely influenced the human establishments, economy, society, and cultural ethos of the people of North Eastern India.

North East India has a complex ethnicity. Most of the tribes and the Ahoms of the Assam have their origin in the countries of South East Asia, while the Aryan communities entered the Barahmaputra Valley from the west. Excepting Assam where the percentage of tribal population is around 11, in other states of the region their percentage ranges from 29 per cent in Tripura, 32 per cent in Manipur, 80 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh, 81 per cent in Meghalaya, 89 per cent in Nagaland, and 95 per cent in Mizoram. The tribal communities adhere largely to the hill regions and their slopes. The Boro, Mikir, Mishing and Miris (Assam), Konyak, Ao, Angami, Lotha, Sema, Rengma, Phom, Chang (Nagaland), Tangkhul, Kabui, and Thado (Manipur), Lushai in Mizoram, Khasi, Garo and Jaintia in Meghalaya and Chakmas in Tripura are the dominant tribes. Many of the tribes practice animism; some like the Khamtis and Naras are Buddhist, and others like Ahoms and Kochas (Rajvanshi) are Hindu by faith.

The influence of the Protestant Christians Missions is very apparent in the Khasi and the Jaintias in Shillong. Though there are some good anthropological studies (like those of Hutton on the Nagas), very little is known about the geography of the tribes - the spatial distribution of each tribe, their contacts with other tribes, relative social and economic status and the nature of response to modernism

and to the recently introduced political structures and democratic ideology. For knowing these aspects, it is necessary to make an indepth study of the areal distribution of tribes by means of filed studies. The Ahoms, who ruled the valley of Brahmaputra for over seven centuries and whose chronicles, *Buranjis*, are informative, have a wide dispersal with a major concentration in the Sibsagar District of Assam.

Each ethnic group of North East India has its own geneology, language, customs, traditions and way of life. The high degree of diversity in the languages of the region may be appreciated from the fact that in Nagaland alone there are nineteen different languages, altogether different from each other in their grammar, syntax and vocabulary. It is because of this constraint that the Nagas interact with their neighbouring tribes through the Nagami - a language being developed by amalgamating the words from the languages of Nagas, Assamese, English and Hindi.

North East India is characterised by uneven distribution of population, high rate of population growth and high dependency ratio. So far as the spatial distribution of population is concerned, Assam with 22.29 million has 71.03 per cent of the total population of the region, followed by Tripura 2.75 million (8.75%), Manipur 1.84 million (5.82%), and Meghalaya 1.77 million (5.61%). The states of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram have

only about 3.87, 2.73 and 2.19 per cent of the total population of North East India. The growth rate of population according to the census of 1991 over the decade of 1981-91 has also been unubiquitous. Interestingly enough the state of Nagaland, far away from the Bangladesh border and dominated by the Christian tribal population recorded the highest growth rate of population between 1981-1991, being 56.86 per cent, followed by Mizoram 38.98% and Arunachal Pradesh 35.69 per cent. The growth rate of population during the same period in Meghalaya and Manipur was 31.80 and 28.56 per cent respectively. In all the states of the region population growth is much higher to that of the national average of 23.50 per cent.

The average density of population in the region is 123 persons per sq km which however, is not uniform. The state of Assam covered with the highly productive alluvial soil of the Brahmaputra has the highest density, being 284 persons per sq km, (1991). The density of population in Tripura, Manipur and Meghalaya was 262.82 and 78 persons per sq km respectively. Mizoram is very sparsely populated with a density of 33 persons per sq km, while Arunachal Pradesh has the lowest population density (10 persons per km<sup>2</sup>). In general the mountainous, flood affected, densely forested and poor accessibility area are thinly populated, while the alluvial plains and the valleys of the tributaries of

Brahmaputra, and the Manipur valley have fairly high density of population.

The other demographic attributes like religious composition, sex ratio, literacy rate, occupational structure and life span also reveal striking variations. Paradoxically, North East India has often been considered as a predominantly Christian tribal region. The religious composition shows that nearly 61 per cent of the total population of the region is Hindu, 21.56 per cent Muslim, and 13.63 per cent Christian, while 3.8 per cent believe in animism and other religions. The concentration of Hindus is high in Assam (67.13%) and Tripura 86.50 per cent. In Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh Hindus constitute about 57.67 and 37 per cent of the total population respectively. Muslims with 28.43 per cent of the state population have a significant concentration in Assam. In Manipur and Tripura their proportion is 7.26 and 7.13 per cent respectively, while in the remaining states (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland) Muslims constitute less than 2 per cent of the total population. Nagaland and Mizoram are predominantly Christian dominated states. Nagaland has 87.46 and Mizoram 85.73 per cent Christian population followed by Meghalaya (64.58%) and Manipur (34.11%). In Assam and Tripura, the Christian population is 3.32 and 1.69 per cent respectively. In Arunachal Pradesh their proportion is 10.30 per cent.

The process of urbanisation associated with the concentration of population in urban places, towns and cities is slow in North East India. In India, the process of urbanisation recorded a steady growth after 1921, it got a quantum jump after Independence (1947). According to the Census of 1991 only about 14 per cent of the total population of North East India was urban and 86 per cent rural in character. The state of Mizoram with 46 per cent urban population has the highest urban population, while in Assam the proportion of urban population was only 11.10 per cent. In the rest of the states the percentage of urban population varies between these two extremes. The process of urbanisation is essential for generating economic growth and social change in the region which is still much below the national average of about 25 per cent. The underlying factors which are responsible for the comparative slow growth of urban population in most states of the region deserve investigation and explanation.

In all there are 183 urban agglomerations in North East India (1991) out of which 87 are in Assam, 30 in Manipur, 22 in Meghalaya. Assam has four Class I cities (100,000 people and above), namely, Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Silcher, while Shillong, Imphal, Aizawl and Agartala are the other Class I cities in the region.

Variations are also found in the level of literacy in the states of the North

East India Mizoram with 81.23 per cent is the second most literate states in the country after Kerala. The literacy percentage in Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura is about 61.3 60.4 and 60.4 per cent respectively. The proportion of literates in Assam is 53 per cent which is close to the national average. In all the states, the male literacy is significantly higher to that of females. The female literacy is lowest in Arunachal Pradesh which is only about 29 per cent, while in rest of the states, female literacy varies between 44 per cent in Assam to 78 per cent in Mizoram. The Christian Missionaries have played a very vital role in raising the level of literacy in the hilly states of North East India. In general the sex ratio is fairly high in the region excepting the states of Arunachal Pradesh (861) and Nagaland (890). The male female ratio is highest in Manipura (971) followed by Meghalaya (947) and Tripura (964).

Agriculture is the mainstay of life for about 86 per cent of the total population of North East India. Excepting the Brahmaputra plain (Assam) and other valleys of the region, the agricultural productivity is exceedingly low. The lowest productivity is found in the *Jhum* (shifting cultivation) tracts. In the productive plains of Brahmaputra and the valley of Manipur, the size of agricultural holdings has progressively declined, while the traditional *Jhum* lands have become barren, and

unproductive owing to the primitive techniques of cultivation that have accelerated the rate of soil erosion. The rural population suffers from chronic unemployment, under-employment and low incomes. As stated at the outset the population has more than doubled in the last three decades but the growth of alternate occupations either in the rural areas or in the small towns has not been on a scale which could absorb this growing workforce. The process of planning and economic development during the last five decades have not made much improvement in the standard of living and opportunities for employment and consequently, has accentuated the inequalities of income and wealth. The present volume containing articles of some of the leading social scientists of India is an attempt to examine the processes and extent of socio-economic and political transformation in North East India since Independence.

Based on eighteen research papers, the volume has been organised in three general themes, i.e. (i) Social Transition, (ii) Economic changes, and (iii) Political Transformation.

Dealing with social aspect, part I of the book opens with Danda's paper on "Ethnicity and Social Transformation. This paper highlights the various integrated facets of the concept of ethnicity. Referring the very nature of the widely different meanings the author tries to explain how the negative sense in ethnicity seems to have been

enforced on the concept through a subjective choice. In a wider perspective, ethnicity is expected to convey a value-neutral meaning highlighting the exact nature of processes involved. In this paper Danda has attempted to demonstrate that an apparently negative concept when adjudged afresh from a value - neutral position, acts as a major source for social transformation. Through some concrete illustrations centering around a few communities in North East India, the nature and extent of social transformation resulting from ethnicity have been pin-pointed.

Religious values of different ethnic groups create some obstacles in the process of social transformation. In this perspective the impact of Christianity on tribal society has been examined by Burman in his paper entitled 'Christianity and Development among the Hill Tribes of North East India' the author opines that the Missionaries have assisted the tribals in reinforcing their ethnic identities. Moreover, Christianity, according to Burman, has acted as a bridge between the tribal non-differentiated systems and the complex administrative mechanism of the nation state.

Religion knows neither frontiers nor geographical barriers with the exception of tribal religions which though differing from one another in form and ritual, all seek to explain the mystery of life insisting that nature is animated by spirits most religions have,

for one reason or another, spread beyond the lands of their origin. Religion, like language, is a symbol of group identity and cultural rallying point. It also closely affects the occupational structure of the society. Ratha in his paper 'Religion and Occupational Differentiation' highlighted this aspect of transformation. It has been underscored that when traditional calling change in India under the impact of development and urbanisation, they tend to be replaced by such occupations which go well with the religion, caste, and the traditional occupation choice. The data from the group Hindus and Muslims of Assam have been compared with similar data from Uttar Pradesh.

Demographic attributes and occupational structure play a vital role in the process of social transformation of an ethnic group. A vivid account of the demographic characteristics and occupational structure of the Tai-Khamptis inhabited in the Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh has been given by Bahera and Ziro. They conclude that the introduction of plan programmes after Independence has brought about some changes in the occupational structure and the marriage system along with a change in literacy and education. The importance of literacy in the change of occupations has also been examined in this paper.

There are significant variations in the spatial distribution of different tribes in the region. The tribal groups of

Manipur present a picture of contrast both in form as well as in the process of their successive development. All the groups are not spatially contiguous and they cannot be delimited spatially. The tribal boundaries are no longer well defined. The feeling for self identification has to be seen in the context of the weakening of the tradition-bound social affiliation. The emergence of an effective polity has given a new fillip to the whole process of refocusing tribalism. This has been closely examined by Das in his paper on 'Problems and Prospects in the Study of Tribal Groups in Manipur'. It has been emphasised that the Meiteis with respect to the tribal groups have a super ordinate role because of the fact that kingship could grow and flourish only in the Meitei-inhabited central stretch of fertile land of Manipur. The whole question of Meitei-tribe relations could be seen in the perspective of power authority autonomy. In spite of their many revealing differences the tribes display a process of unity of mind which could be the source of their common strength. Today there is a distinct political overtone in their mode of operation. This may be viewed as a corollary to their growing familiarity with the contemporary situation. The whole analysis of problems and prospects of tribals in Manipur has been done with great dexterity.

Bhot is a distinct ethnic group of Sikkim. Bose in his paper 'The Bhots of Northern Sikkim' correlates the

ecology, economy and society of this ethnic group. The geopolitical situation of Sikkim has influenced the economy of Bhots as the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese has created restrictions in their movement and trade relations.

The cultural values, customs and traditions differ from tribe to tribe and from region to region. The life course of tribal people passes through certain significant stages. For them such transitions are crucial point in their life and exert tremendous physical and psychological stress on individuals. Quite often such observances incorporate a tribal initiation. The initiation of a tribal girl to the society has been logically discussed by Sonowal in his study on 'Becoming a Girl - A Study on Female Initiation Ceremony among the Deoris and the Sonowal Kacharis'.

Part second, based on five chapters deal with the economic transformation in North East India. Economic process is a multifarious in character which modifies the economic activities of the people at the macro, meso and micro levels. Bardoloi and Neog examined the economic transformation in the region in their paper entitled, 'Structural Changes in the Economy of North Eastern Region' with a major thrust on the structural changes in economy that have taken place during the planning period. For the analysis several indicators like per capita income, literacy percentage, urbanisation, poverty and unemployment ratio, tribal population, level of infrastructure

development, credit deposit ratio, level of industrialization have been taken into consideration. The authors concluded that different results may be obtained by correlation of different indicators. For example, on the basis of per capita income, literacy rate and unemployment percentage, the Hill states of N.E. India are fairly developed, but if one goes by the consideration of tribal population, infrastructure, credit deposit rate and industrialization, the region shows a dismal picture of underdevelopment.

Agriculture is the mainstay of tribals and *Jhuming* (shifting cultivation) the dominant economic activity of the tribes. In some of the tribes of Mizoram and Nagaland over 80 per cent of the workforce is engaged in agriculture. *Jhuming*, however, is a primitive technique of agriculture. The basic axiom of the shifting cultivators is 'from each according to his capacity and to each according to his needs'. The rationale behind the shifting cultivation and its adverse effects on environment and ecology have been cogently discussed by Husain in his paper on 'Shifting Cultivation and Sustainable Development in North East India, The physical environment of most of the hilly tracts of the region has gone under radical transformation. The bio-diversity has declined which is creating ecological imbalances.

Environmental change is a continuous process that has been in operation since the earth came into

existence. Man is no longer a passive agent of environment, he is also its transformer and creator. Man has been interacting with his physical environment right from the primeval stage of human development and continues to do so at present even with great vigour. As a result, the quality of environment and ecological relations have been to a large extent irreversibly disturbed. The ecology of the tribal societies has been substantially damaged. This aspect has been explored by Mohapatra and Konwar in their paper on 'Status of Environment in Meghalaya with Special Reference to West Khasi Hills District'. It has been concluded that preventive measures are necessary to maintain the quality of environment and to keep it in a healthy and sustainable condition.

Apart from shifting cultivation, some of the tribes in Sikkim are dependent on herding, and they practice 'transhumance'. The transhumants oscillate with their herds from valleys to the mountain-pastures in the summer season and descend in low altitudes of valleys in the winter season. Transhumance in the La-Chen and La-Chung Valleys of Northern Sikkim has been examined by Das Gupta and Rai. An objective assessment of environmental changes is possible with the help of socio-economic data and infrastructural variables. In his study, Sahu took into consideration thirteen relevant socio-economic variables to investigate and determine the levels of

'Intra-regional Disparity in the Process of Economic development in Arunachal Pradesh, it has been rightly concluded that in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the process of economic development is seriously constrained by the difficult terrain and other physical factors.

Part Three of the volume covers the aspects of political transformation in North East India. In all six papers have been included in this part. The region under review is passing through a period of political crisis. The ethnic unrest in North East India suggests that the ideological nexus to integrate the little nationalities does not seem to be as unambiguous as the administrative enthusiasm to hold the superstructure of Indian statehood in the tentative unity. The subnationalism of the tribals has retarded the process of integration. This question has been thoroughly probed and illustrated by Roy Choudhury in his paper 'North East India; Elitist Paradigms and Agonising Reality. It has been stressed that the central government of India must modify, wherever necessary, the interprovincial borders in the region, keeping into mind the ethnicity, language and traditions of the peoples. The question of ethnicity and political mobility has been discussed by Danda. Ethnicity by and large is understood as the manifestation of narrow loyalty. This could perhaps have been a statement of fact provided the concerned people had only a single identity. In pluricultural situations

where multiplicity of identity is usually the pattern, whether the expressed loyalty can be said broad or narrow would primarily depend on the perspective. A person having tribal background, if becomes interested and involved in any regional socio-political process, he generally does so in lieu of any role exclusively meant for the members of his tribe. In the national perspective, this may appear as the manifestation of narrow loyalty, but from the stand point of the tribe, this is the example of widening up of the horizon. Under the circumstances, drawing a parallel from the pattern of social mobility the phenomenon can perhaps be appropriately designated as an instance of political mobility. Physical setting, terrain, topography, climate and resources have a close influence on the spatial dimension of politics. The geo-political aspect of North East India has been analyzed by Chaube in his Paper, 'State politics in North East India,' while Roy Burman presented a critical note on the Fifth and Sixth Schedules in the context of 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution of India. In this paper it has been concluded that the 8th Schedule in the present form hardly serves any useful purpose, yet it should not be abrogated and the Sixth Schedule requires to be revised so that all powers (judicial and legislative) in the Eleventh Schedule could be conferred on all the hilly tracts of North East India.

On the basis of empirical and reflective study, the post-Independence political transition has been discussed by Talukdar in his paper 'Dynamics of Socio-political Change in Arunachal Pradesh: A Study in Political Transition since Independence.' The immigration of plains people in the tribal areas is a cause of great concern for the local people. An attempt has been made by Sarma in his study on 'Politico-Legal Status of the Plainsmen in Sikkim' to probe this problem. The study vividly shows that since the plainsmen do not have a right to purchase immovable

property in Sikkim they are not at par to other citizens of the state. Moreover, they are not allowed to settle in the strategically vulnerable parts of North Sikkim as well as in the eastern parts adjacent to the Chumbi Valley. Merger of Sikkim with the Union of India, has however, given the plainsmen more economic, legal and political security.

The editors express their sincere thanks to all the contributors of papers in this volume. They also feel highly indebted to friends who helped them in the organisational work of this book.

January, 1998

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