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THE PROBLEM OF CHANGE

A STUDY OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

B. P. Singh

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To my Mother,
Champa Devi

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Contents

Prologue

This work has grown out of a project, 'An inquiry into the adequacy of the administrative system in Assam: imperatives for change', sponsored by the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, which awarded me a Nehru Fellowship in 1982. But in several ways the project has a longer history, spanning the years from 1965 to 1985.

I went to Assam as an I.A.S. probationer in July 1965, after a year's stint at Mussoorie, and for the next ten years was intimately associated with various sections of the society of the region. I was witness to tumultuous events like the India–Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971; the Mizo uprising of 1966, ethnic conflicts between Assamese and Marwari traders in 1968, and between Assamese and Bengalis in 1972–3; the creation of the sub-State of Meghalaya in 1969 and the full-fledged State of Meghalaya in 1971; and the separation of Mizoram from Assam in 1971, etc. As a Returning Officer, I conducted general elections in 1967, 1971 and 1972, and several bye-elections. Again, when the agitation over the 'foreign nationals' issue reached its peak in the Brahmaputra Valley in April 1980, I was summoned to Gauhati to assist the administration, and later became Assam's Resident Commissioner in New Delhi in April 1981; subsequently, protracted negotiations took place in Delhi between the Assam movement's leaders and the Central Government. As the Observer of the Election Commission of India in 1985 I had the opportunity to oversee the whole process of the preparation of electoral rolls, including the disposal of claims and objections, polling and the declaration of results. More important than all these associations was perhaps the opportunity to learn from people of various walks of life, who offered me their perceptions on various aspects of their society, economics and politics. In retrospect, I am grateful that, in the course of my work and in earning my daily bread, I had the chance of making the absorbing mental journey which has found expression in this book.

I have had the special advantage of receiving reactions from my

children, who shared with me their candid feelings of what they saw, and heard from companions, in Assam as well as Delhi. When the manuscript was ready each one of them—Sumita, Rajeev and Pritty—read it, and told me where they found the text unintelligible, and of the possible reactions of college students of their age as well.

Some of the terms used in the book possibly need explanation: expressions such as 'Aryans', 'Assamese caste Hindus', 'Valley conflicts', 'modernization', 'socialization' and 'change' in particular. 'Aryans' denotes all those who migrated to Assam from north India and Bengal and, in particular, from Kanauj, Mithila, and Nawadeep in north Bengal at different periods. In the beginning of the Christian era and even earlier, these were the people who brought with them stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata to Assam. Their subsequent migrations strengthened the growth of Brahminism in north-east India. Hindu rituals, however, underwent a change in the region thanks to the influence of its tribal faiths and the interaction among various ways of life.

The terms 'Assamese caste Hindus' or 'Caste Hindus' in the region are not synonymous with the high-caste syndrome elsewhere in India. In fact, Assamese caste Hindus not only include Brahmins, Kayasthas and Kalitas but also several segments of the Scheduled Castes. The region is fortunately free of sharp cleavages between high and low caste that exist in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra. This does not mean that there is a total absence of conflict between different castes or between high and low castes in the region; however, the base of caste in the region is broader than elsewhere, for it includes the Scheduled Castes as well. Various factors like language, ethnic divisions, and the tradition of the Vaishnavite reformation movement have helped this process of consolidation.

The 'conflict' between the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys was essentially a language conflict between Assamese and Bengalis. This was accentuated with the incorporation of Sylhet into Assam in 1873. The opposing claims of the Assamese and Bengalis over the language of instruction in schools and colleges, and the question of the official language in Assam ever since the region's annexation by the British in 1826, plus the known British policy of divide and rule, kept the conflict boiling steadily. Even after 1947, when Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan, the inter-Valley conflict remained. In fact, only after 1947 have linguistic riots and conflicts over the distribution of development funds, employment opportunities, etc. occurred.

'Modernization' has a very wide meaning. It takes into consideration the advancement in education, the spread of scientific and technological knowledge and appliances, media coverage, dress and food habits, the establishment of new industries, progress in communications, etc.

The term 'socialization' has been used in discussing the process of relationships which occurs when people interact with each other. The process is essentially socio-psychological and its ambit includes such adjustments that a group induces in the language and dialect, religion and form of worship and ways of life of other groups of people.

In the widest sense, 'change' means the process through which a person or group become different from what they were before the process began. In our study, the word 'change' is used more in the sense of social change, which takes into consideration the entire range of inter-human relationships, including values and the institutions of society.

There are at least five major works on different periods of the history and politics of north-east India, which have added significantly to our knowledge of and insights into the region: Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*, first published in 1905; S. K. Bhuyan's *Anglo-Assamese Relations (1771–1826)*, first published in 1949; H. K. Barpujari's *Assam in the Days of the Company (1826–1858)*, first published in 1963; V. Venkata Rao's *A Century of Tribal Politics in North-East India (1874–1974)*, published in 1976; and Amalendu Guha's *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: The Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam (1826–1947)*, published in 1977. But no single work on the region covers all the aspects of its social life. Our study attempts to share perceptions on the processes of historical change particularly in the light of recent history and the issues confronting the people in general and political and administrative institutions in particular after 1947. The main aim is to penetrate the wall of bewilderment which appears to inhibit outsiders from taking an active interest in the affairs of the region. This book also brings out what I, for want of a better phrase, call the timeless aspect of cultural forces operating in the region. The question of political unity is important, but a more significant and dynamic challenge is the achievement of integration.

At the risk of stating what becomes obvious from a reading of this book, I should mention tha my approach towards the problems of change in north-east India is not that of a trained economist, a social anthropologist or historian. It is the perspective of an administrator who has worked in the area at various levels over the years. I have followed a traditional district officer's approach: before recording opinions one sees the ground, talks to the people concerned and consults the available records. In these pages I have only attempted to present the visible social, cultural and political factors that came to my notice during two decades of association with the people, geography and environment of the region, as well as through extensive reading about it. I have dealt with the present situation in the light of developments since 1947 and while, in the final analysis this work is my own, it represents the culmination of years of personal and intellectual exchange with scores of colleagues and friends in administration, in academia, in public life, and from contact with the life of the common people.

At every stage of development and discussion there will be a large number of people—politicians, civil servants, mediamen, artists, social scientists, social workers and students—who wish to understand the incredibly diverse problems caused by a plurality of ethnic elements and castes, languages and dialects, gods and rites, customs and behaviour—all existing at different levels of consciousness in north-east India, and trying to forge greater unity amongst themselves and with the rest of India and the world. If this study helps serve this wider purpose even in a small measure, I would feel rewarded.

To me the usefulness of a work lies in whether it speaks in times of crisis when consulted or becomes an ornament on a shelf. As the Hindi poet Ramdhari Singh Dinkar wrote:

> Creation is complete,
> but does it have life?
> If I interrogate it,
> will the idol reply?
> If one day fire erupts,
> in the temple's heart
> Will the idol speak,
> or remain still in strife?

I submit this book to such a test.

Balmiki Prasad Singh

Introduction

North-East India, which comprises the States of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram*, is a region that has witnessed particularly major changes in the years after the Second World War. During this period, north-east India watchers have always viewed the region as 'troubled' and afflicted with one 'crisis' or the other. This crisis syndrome has in fact, been caused by, or is central to, a number of rapid and inter-related changes in demography, production technology, political institutions, religious practices, attitudes towards language, changes in the environment of national security as well as in consumption patterns and the responses of people to these new realities.

The occupation of parts of Manipur by the Japanese and the battle between the Allied and Axis powers at Kohima during the Second World War stirred the people of north-east India and gave them both a new spatial consciousness and an awareness of modern technology. Hitherto, only a small section of the literati and business elite of the region had travelled outside India, acquired the habit of reading newspapers and hearing the radio as part of a daily routine. Most people in the region had no perception of the world beyond the Brahmaputra Valley, or any familiarity with modern technology and weapons of war. Within north-east there existed several societies at different levels of economic and political consciousness. There were glaring dissimilarities in the hills between an Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh bordering Tibet and a Khasi of Shillong, the seat of State administration, in terms of educational attainments, language and consumption patterns. None the less, a broad synthesis between the people of the hills and those of the plains was widely assumed by scholars, politicians and administrators at the time of Independence.

In the hills, the tribal political consciousness was confined to the village, within the clan and contacts with other clans, or with the markets in the plains. The technology used in the production of food, weaving, dyeing and the construction of houses was

*On 20 February 1987 Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh became the 23rd and 24th States of the Indian Union.

primitive. The village iron-smith made tools like the *dao*, axe, hammer, chisel, tongs and arrows from iron procured from the plains. These instruments were used for myriad purposes in agricultural operations, hunting, and in the preparation of food. The cloth used was mostly made from hand-spun cotton yarn on simple looms, and indigenous vegetable dyes were used for colouring. Locally available forest materials were used in the construction of houses. The *jhumming*, or slash and burn method, was used in the preparation of fields, as well as to keep the land fertile. The land was essentially communally owned.

The situation was different in the plains. Here the economy was predominantly based around settled rice-cultivation, particularly in the Assam plains, Manipur Valley and Tripura. There was widespread permanent cultivation of *sali*, wet rice, the land was individually owned, and there were also arrangements for minor irrigation. Weaving and spinning were widely practiced and the plains' people produced exquisite silk and other handicrafts. Although in most crafts and agricultural operations simple bamboo and wooden implements were used alongside iron implements, the tea industry and limited oil exploration had made the plains' people familiar with industrial technology. Automobiles, railways and aircraft were also known. Brick houses were unique to urban centres. While barter was an important form of exchange in the hills as well as in the plains, in the latter, currency was in circulation and the villagers had acquired the habit of paying land revenue in currency notes and coins. The process of monetization of the economy had received a fillip with the introduction of railways, particularly those connecting tea-producing centres with the markets of Calcutta, the exploitation of jute crops for factories located in East Bengal and Calcutta and oil exploration works.

It also needs to be highlighted that the phenomenon of temporal change in north-east India is different from that in other parts of the country. The advent of the industrial revolution, the development of communications and the remarkable cultural renaissance that characterized the rest of India from the second half of the eighteenth century—all these did not make any significant impact on north-east India till the twentieth century. Although the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys were the fiirst to receive modernization ideals, this new breeze did not reach the masses in the region. Nevertheless, a small but significant beginning was made with the establishment of Cotton College at Gauhati in 1901. It was only from the 1920s onwards, with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the scene, that a perceptible change occurred: the freedom movement led to a cultural resurgence. In this new task, the princely orders and the Christian missionaries played conflicting roles. Manipur and Tripura, which the British left to be administered by the princely orders, and large tracts of the hill areas, which were more under the care of Christian missionaries than of the British administrative system, could not become active participants in the new cultural, nationalistic and scientific movements even as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. The princely states of Manipur and Tripura helped in the propagation of new ideals of reform, like the abolition of Sati, the removal of untouchability, etc., and in the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Ramayana–Mahabharata tradition. Similarly, Christian missionaries in the hill areas of the region and elsewhere popularized modern education and health care. However, in so far as dissemination of the ideals of freedom and equality and a sense of belonging to the 'great' Indian nation were concerned, the Christian missionaries played a negative role. Similarly, the princely orders did not believe in the democratic rights of the peasantry and worked for continuation of age-old systems of inequality and the divine right of kings. British administrative policy segregated the hills from the plains and one result of this policy was that the hill areas remained virtually uninvolved in the national freedom struggle and its liberating social impact.

At the time of Independence, with the exception of the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys, north-east India was far behind the rest of the country in education, political awareness and administration and the entire region was economically backward. Yet all the political and administrative changes in the country which were introduced in the 1950s found their application in north-east India too.

The one-person-one-vote system for election to the Assembly and the Lok Sabha, the setting up of district councils in tribal areas and election of its members on similar principles had an unprecedented impact. The introduction of community development schemes in the 1950s not only took the State apparatus to every village, but the insistence on participation of the villagers in

development schemes brought in an unprecedented change in the political and economic consciousness of the people. This was in sharp contrast to the colonial master–servant relationship between the State and the people. In the hills, in particular, the concept of equality among the members of the clan was now extended to the entire gamut of economic and political activities, increasing manifold the capability of the population to interact with the economic, political and administrative organization of society. Hitherto dormant aspirations surfaced with great force, almost like the release of water from a dam, and flooded the State system with various demands. In the public eye, the State assumed the responsibility of being the chief agent of fulfilment of individual and group aspirations. In this new phenomenon the State appeared not only larger than the family or the clan, which in fact it was, but also demanded greater loyalty and the subordination of tribe and caste interests. It was difficult for people in certain areas to give their loyalties to a new State that was secular and primarily intangible, except that it found physical expression in the villages through a small presence of transferable civil servants and elected representatives with fixed tenures. The strengthening of police structure and the sizeable presence of security personnel, although justified on rational considerations, did not help improve matters.

Certain groups and, in fact, several tribes treated the new State as an intruder and the instrument of subjugation. The Nagas and, later, the Mizos revolted against the new order and claimed independence. It had long been realized that the only way India could be administered from New Delhi would be with the consent of the centres of power of small nationalities; but what was not realized was that the State apparatus of Assam, the centrally administered territories of Manipur and Tripura, and the district councils under these administrations were inadequate to cater to the aspirations of the people. These were a product of the new forces of modernization interacting with the old loyalties to language, tribe, clan, tradition and cultural diversity.

On the political side, the independence of India in 1947 was accompanied by vivisection both of its eastern and western territories. These developments were followed by the establishment of an independent State of Burma, with Tibet becoming part of a powerful State of China, and East Bengal of the new State of

Pakistan. Borders were marked by the presence of security forces of the respective States and the Sino-Indian hostilities of 1962 turned the area into a sensitive security zone.

In the east, the ceding of East Bengal to Pakistan disrupted traditional economic institutions in north-east India. It deprived the hill areas of the market for their agricultural products and handicrafts. It also meant an abnormal increase in the price of fish, a staple food, and a decline in the price of jute. River communications as well as road links were disrupted between one political unit and another in Tripura, Manipur, Cachar and Mizoram. Henceforth, the people of East Bengal needed passports to lawfully enter the Brahmaputra Valley and the tribals of the Chittagong hill tracts to enter the Mizo hills; the people of Arunachal Pradesh were confronted by security forces near the borders of Tibet; the Nagas found themselves living in India as well as in Burma; and the Mizos in India were separated from their kinsmen in Burma. All these groups had hitherto moved freely and resented international frontiers that restricted their 'natural' movements.

Both the Indian National Congress and the leftist parties of India popularized modernization ideals and the need for change in socio-economic structure. Thus, in the late 1940s there was more concern in India with education, health care, freedom, equality, land reforms, community development than ever before. After Independence, these ideals were officially recognized in the Preamble and Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution.

Several positive and negative factors operated in north-east India that were almost unique to the region. On the positive side, the region was not afflicted with the scourges of untouchability or the dowry system; the caste system was less rigid than elsewhere; Hindu–Muslim relations were closer; and socially and economically it was not marked by the widespread and deadening inequality of say, Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. On the negative side, Manipur and Tripura had princely orders which firmly believed in economic parasitism and gave respectability and sanction to Hindu obscurantist practices. The Congress and leftist parties, all of which had affiliations down to the village level in other parts of India, were absent or ineffectual in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and the other hills of the region (with the

exception of the Shillong area). The activities of Christian missionaries in these areas for nearly a century had successfully prevented the people from viewing themselves as part of the sufferings and aspirations of the Indian people. Even some years after Independence, the government's presence in parts of these areas remained symbolic—Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram had no police system till the mid-1960s.

Against this backdrop, several tribes of north-east India were simply not equipped, by inclination or experience, to deal with the new phenomenon of democratic institutions. The impact of change was, at places, bewildering because of the sudden graduation of some groups of people from a near-primitive situation to modernity. While in the rest of India the slogans of land reform, socialism, etc. were accepted on the surface, people knew, on account of their being meaningful participants in politics, that earlier traditions would continue to prevail. In most areas of north-east India this duality was never understood.

The social landscape of north-east India has always presented great ethnic variety. People have their origins in Aryan and Dravidian stock as well as to the Indo-Burmese, Indo-Tibetan, Kuki-Lushais, Meiteis, Chin-Kukis and Shan-Tais. Though these people came to the region at different periods of history, there was no major flow of population from the thirteenth to the first half of nineteenth century. The population assessment that followed Assam's annexation by the British in 1826 revealed fewer than a million people in the region. The British encouraged the migration of people from East Bengal, Orissa and Bihar into the region to encourage the expansion of the newly established tea industry and for the reclamation of land and agricultural operations. This process of migration from East Bengal, now Bangladesh, in particular, has continued despite the Partition of India in 1947. During the last century and a half (1826–1981), the population of north-east India increased from less than one million to a sizeable 26 million people. Unfortunately, while in terms of geography it was possible to accommodate this massive increase in population in terms of social engineering it posed serious problems and continues to do so.

The management of change is as complex a phenomenon as the process itself. On the one hand, it is widely advocated that social change must be radical and encompass the entire gamut of a

social order; and on the other, and equally important, is the need to appreciate that in order to keep the social fabric intact, the forces of change must be properly articulated and prevented from disrupting the social setting to the extent that anarchy prevails. The powers of the State, although considerable, are limited in its ability to control or direct the development of a rapidly changing society. Institutions like political parties, religious organizations, social and ethnic groups, trade organizations, middle class and even government servants in their personal capacities have a greater role to play in giving direction to processes of change towards orderly progress. Changes brought about through discussion and consent are more enduring. There is no denying that the State-system has the duty to protect and also a responsibility to advise, but it must not arrogate to itself powers of omnipotence, however pious its objective may be. When innovations are called for, as at present in north-east India, to strengthen economic institutions, to make democratic organizations fully participatory, to secularize the polity, to regulate migration of population, and to resolve cultural and linguistic conflicts, the State-system must be sensitive enough to respond to the opinions of various groups of people. Otherwise, the State-system will alienate large sections of the people it was planning to serve.

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THE PROBLEM OF CHANGE

A Study of North-East India

B.P. SINGH

The north-eastern region of India has undergone radical change since Independence, more so than any other part of the country. 'Development', along with the introduction of modern political and administrative institutions, has had repercussions that have transformed the region into one of the most volatile in India. In this book B.P. Singh analyses the problems and prospects of the north-east in the light of its complex history and the major socio-economic and political developments that have occurred over the past few decades.

B.P. Singh is a member of the Indian Administrative Service with prolonged, first-hand experience of north-east India as an administrator in the region. Once a Jawarharlal Nehru Fellow, he is the author of two other books and has contributed articles to academic journals. He is currently Secretary, Department of Culture, Government of India.

'This is an outstanding exposition of profound questions concerning the critical border area of India. ... B.P. Singh has made a major contribution to the understanding of a complex region. This work ... will stand as a classic in both its content and methodology.'

— Ralph Buultjens

'...makes a major contribution to our substantive knowledge of the area.'

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— *Indian and Foreign Review*

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