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Insurgent North-Eastern Region of India

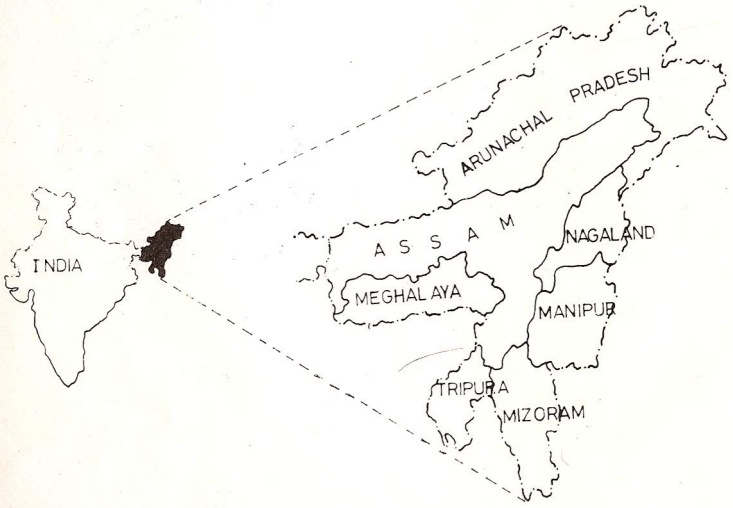


R. GOPALAKRISHNAN



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NORTH EAST LOCATION



Map No. 1 & 2

The North-Eastern States are undergoing dynamic change, responding to modernisation with varying degrees of tension and stability, experiencing conflict situations associated with problems of adjustment to economic development and political change. The most significant form of political change is associated with problems of performance and governance, aggravated by forceful, even aggressive, articulation of conflicting, divergent and disaggregated interests. These make consensus difficult, especially in view of an inadequate leadership.

Another significant change is that at the regional and sub-regional levels, there has been, over the last four decades, a reassertion of traditional loyalties and the individual ethnic identity, seeking legitimacy for issues with socio-political content.

The States are, therefore, caught in a paradox where the emergent elites tend to be parochial and frequently mobilize and exploit popular sentiments to further their cause. Full self-determination is unlikely to be conceded, though the possibility of territorial restructuring exists.

The issue before the States is the resolution of how, when and to what extent can there be a metamorphosis from social and geographical distinctiveness to political expression such as regionalism or even separatism.

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For
Vijay, Ramnath, Nikhlesh
and Khalid

Preface

I **S**tates in the North-Eastern regional system have dynamic societies and are modernising in varying degree of response, stress and stability. In fact, all the States are experiencing conflict situations associated with problems of economic development, participation, representation and political change. Interaction within this system is being affected constantly and assume dimensions that aggravate the crisis parameters in the regional system. Moreover, the States within the system are also changing their responses towards each other (as well as within) in ways that are directly related to the happenings in their respective political economies.

I **C**hange in the regional system is, therefore, an issue related to the political equations within and between the States on the one hand, and with the federal Government on the other. It is also frequently associated with contests and conflicts in interests between groups and sub-groups, elites and location. These also reflect intense activity over policies and institutionalisation of power in a region where the society have the alternative traditional political structure operating simultaneously with the modern ones. These are of particular concern as the regional system forms one of the pillars of territorial and political stability of the Indian State. These also have development aspects and affect cohesion, representation qualities, structural capabilities and performance (at the local and the regional levels). Change in the regional configuration of activities is frequently attributed to change in the characteristics of the actors, participants and levels of interaction. Questions of cooperation at scale are engaged in varying degrees and combinations. Consequently, problems of local regional political stability are made difficult.)

The most significant change is associated with the problems of performance and governability. Political geographical processes are affected by pluralistic stagnation, as performances are made difficult by aggressive and forceful articulation of conflicting and often divergent interests that are not aggregated. This frequently results in institutional overload and wasting of resources. Besides, there is a continuous pressure to satisfy a large proportion of demands of the constituent population groups and sub-groups, and are frequently resolved through allocation. This made the state to overextend their limited distributive resources to satisfy their respective political options. This stimulated disenchantment while making long term resolution difficult.)

This, then, suggests that change and transformation that followed consolidation of the region laid stress on irreversibility of change. Divergent responses to this, accentuated dormant and latent cleavages. It encouraged differences and contradictions within the regional society to emerge. It dominated the transactions and relations in the subsequent periods. These became acute after the partition of the sub-continent, Independence and administrative re-organisation of the region.

Post-1826 developments in the region clearly suggest that the responses to change were more or less proportional to the degree of impact the change had brought upon the groups and sub - groups whose territories were gradually, in distinct phases, incorporated into British India. These were considerably strengthened by the distance-accessibility conditions and framework. It was only when political change involving larger territorial interests and objectives became a reality, that the consolidation-control themes extracted specific responses from the inhabitants occupying peripheral areas of the Indian State . There was a proportionality of responses that went a long way in shaping the ideological perspective of separation - a theme that became increasingly common with various population groups and sub-groups when they mobilised themselves. Efforts to unite the diverse entities opened up new avenues to assert. And conditions, phased manner of administrative consolidation and equilibrium suggested complexities of the territories and among the population groups so involved. Objectives and priorities became

abundantly clear when dual administrative system- one for the plains and valleys and the other for the highland section, was adopted by the colonial administrators. The effect of the State, then, was an approach through the arms of the State to progressively equalise the inhabitants and their territories as well as marginalise the aggressive intents that encouraged destabilisation of the state. In doing so, various population groups and sub-groups assumed the inevitability and came under levelling influence of the State. This latter aspect accentuated fissures and differences both within and between groups, to move first towards developing a common platform and later to divide and sub-divide into active pressure groups. In fact, it can be said that the levelling impact of the state enhanced the levels of competition within the groups that had for long lived in a state of dynamic equilibrium and as a group, were involved in a constant struggle with available resources.

However, the post-1947 situations projected an entirely different equation altogether. The constituent units-population elements revived the themes for reversing the territorial-administrative process and once more assume their earlier pre-colonial status. But, the state's welfare measures (though limited), works of various agencies, and so on, had in fact, introduced several changes that affected the traditional societies of the region. These were in terms of relationships within as well as between the groups. And, in doing so had established the irreversibility of change in the politico-geographical processes that drastically transformed the region. The movements towards separation and the formation of several discontented groups in the region, therefore, suggest reasons that go well beyond their present stance and lies perhaps in their respective territories or aspects that closely influenced their concerned territories.)

Forms of political change, then, are mostly transitional in character. Elements failed to solve their respective legitimacy problems/issues and became vulnerable. In most cases, such instances were dependent upon resources or availability of resources either generated within the respective territories or provided by the regional/national core. However, normally, it was the geopolitical significance of the location of the territories that provided their

respective inhabitants with adequate leverage to negotiate. Again, such availability of resources were necessary for change, development and modernisation but were normally utilised to strengthen the respective political administrative apparatus, base, support and so on. Development issues though salient, remained the dominant theme. As a result, many of the issues that encouraged mobilisation of the inhabitants have remained centered around the questions of allocation of power and allocation of resources, running concurrently.

In the regional configuration, the state's interaction pattern exhibits significant variations and changes. Expanding but complex interdependencies are frequently overshadowed by geographical and historical inertia. This, in turn, called for reinforcements of integration processes. The states also exhibit difficulties in managing their respective political economies and associated policies. This reflects constant internal pressure for more effective direction. Regional and sub-regional patterns of interaction concern themselves with smaller dependencies that are gradually evolving in the respective state's landscape. The imperative towards cooperation are weak and tenuous and were overshadowed by disputes and disparities. This is in spite of the federal-sponsored regional cooperation alternatives. Moreover, cooperation within the sub-regional level has left a lot to be desired. In the North-East, political dynamism is hardly matched by social and economic development. In terms of continuing instability, economic backwardness has become a serious hindrance to sustained sub-regional and regional cooperation in the development of the various territorial compartments. This together constituted the states and finally the regional mosaic. In such a situation, the question on integration assumes particular importance and calls for measures that will not only minimise the degrees of effectiveness of political instability, but induce greater development or positive cooperation within and between the states of the region. (Politico-geographical process have encouraged maintenance of both individual identities of the various territories and collectively the regional distinctiveness and it required responsibilities and policies (including response reaction mechanisms as well).

Politico-geographical change in the region has to a substantial extent affected the structure, function, value and the societal involvement in the growth and development of the various territorial components. The changes in some instances have been abrupt and encouraged destabilisation. This has been frequently reinforced by poor/weak performances. Dimensions and speed of such transformation and change varied greatly and were less controlled or ordered.

In fact, this change has its background in the subordination of the various territories to the Imperial power, influence of the missionaries and the associated agencies and post-Independence developments. It introduced significant alterations in the regional polity (in terms of coherence and purpose). Structural changes that followed tended to concentrate power. Thus, efforts towards integration became weak and tenuous. Conflicts of interests and overlapping of functions made the consensus difficult. Most significant changes in the sub-regional and broader regional levels in the last four decades in the North-East, have been the reassertion of traditional loyalties and ethnic affinities; while legitimising the movements geared towards resolutions of the issues with separatist contents. The states in the region are, therefore, caught in a paradox, where the emergent elites tended to be more parochial and frequently resorted to mobilisation of popular sentiments to further their individual group causes at the cost of wider regional levels.

A prolonged instability has unmistakably altered the spatial arrangements of political geographical processes; so that no population group could demand exclusive rights over specific territory. Within the framework of the Constitution, there were alternatives that provided individual populations to establish their position and identity. This set off the interaction process. This aspect gradually allowed for antagonism in the group's perspective to emerge and created opportunities as well. Consequent dilemma, of either withholding the group's effort or encouraging them towards self-determination, has definite connotations for stability.

Full self-determination in the present-day state context is unlikely to be entertained, supported or conceded. Effective review of the situation exists within the spatial arrangements of the State that

allowed its various constituent territories and population elements to exercise their choice and retain their status. It permitted the possibility of territorial adjustments. In short, policy of accommodation admitted all local-regional level issues.

Further, the immigrants who now form a substantial percentage of the regional population, had initially entered the region as work force for the secondary and tertiary activities, initiated by the Colonial power in the region. Later, they settled in and around their place of work. Goalpara and Cachar became the core areas for the entry of these immigrants and from these cores the immigrants moved into other parts of the region. In doing so, they gradually began to upset the delicate socio-political balance of the inhabitants. Since 1947, these immigrant elements in the regional population have become the cause of several crisis situations in the region.)

However, the situations clearly indicated the functioning of tension parameters that was directly/indirectly aided and abetted by the region's geography and history. These parameters were- (1) natives versus natives, and (2) natives versus outsiders. It soon became part of the politico-economic development crises and centred around resources (particularly land, its system of allocation and transfers), and political participation and representation in the decision-making bodies.

✕ Of course, there is no denial that the socio-political movements that shook Nagaland and Mizoram, or for that matter, Assam, did not consider all alternatives but emphasised territorial separation in different stages. However, the movement that shook the region was in the Assam Valley from 1979 to 1985 which today has transformed itself into the ULFA problem. This is further accentuated by the fact that most of the insurgent outfits have joined hands and are attempting to direct a combined movement. One such effort is the formation of the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front. Besides, other significant population minorities in the Valley like the Bodos have also launched movements to gain recognition and legitimacy of their demands. Thus, indirectly seeking devolution of power and possibly the application of federal concepts at lower regional scales.

The question of viability of states has undergone a series of change. The demand for status (of the one which they had before

being amalgamated in the colonial administrative framework) has become common.) This can be no longer valid. (But, it has significantly moulded the behaviour and perception of the inhabitants of the respective territories, particularly of the protagonists of separatist movements. As a result, these demands have relegated the importance of the criteria of size and resource potential to a matter of secondary consequence. They have, in fact, enlarged the significance of power and autonomy/separation. Yet, the prospect of further re-organisation of the region has to be viewed with some foreboding. ~~The~~ question that is to be considered is that, whether further re-organisation or break-up of the existing regional arrangements is inevitable? It is obviously in the interest of the protagonists of the socio-political movements to justify this. But with the background which the region suggests, it is not possible. It should be noted here that repeated occurrence of these type of movements have made the State more controlled, centralised and perhaps more vulnerable as well.

Integration in its wider connotations is often subject to misinterpretation. The author is of the opinion that the term 'Integration' becomes more meaningful when equality, coherence, and reciprocity are maintained at all levels of transactions. But, if this sequence is subject to the influence of social factors such as ethnicity or language, then the resultant integration can be perceived as ambiguous. It will remain weak and tenuous. In the process, the links between the existing administrative units will tend to get further weakened. It will also enhance the tendency of dissatisfaction among the population groups and sub-groups. It is, therefore, understandable that why the minorities in a region reject the overtures to join the mainstream and resort to movements. Dissatisfaction may perhaps be ameliorated by discouraging parochial considerations and extra-territorial influences. Structural compulsions of the concerned polity and Colonial influences has always branded the movements as law and order issues. Under these conditions where urban and traditional elites, along with the vested interests dominate a strong objective push towards separatism is obvious. This, then, raises the question that why separatism/autonomy movements in the region make an impact on the country while in other areas, they fail to make such an

impact. The answer lies in the analysis of general objective conditions of the socio-political movements, particularly location and strategic perception. These identify the pre-conditions, incompatibilities, catalytic agents and the permissive systems.

Moreover, various population groups have their own fora and organisations. These propagate the respective locally-based group identity and are distinct from the regional and national counterparts. These aim at some form of territorial-political rearrangements and hence economic re-adjustments, re-organisations and status. Some pursue the path of separatism to achieve these ends. These suggest that the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic character of the region hid several layers of group identity and contain potentials for political expressions of autonomy and/or separatism at every instance. The issues that need conflict resolution are, therefore, how, when and to what extent there is a metamorphosis from social and geographical distinctiveness to political expressions of integration and autonomy/separatism. These then, indicate that\

- a) demands for resources and manpower of each administrative unit is increasing . The pressure to extend and expand welfare measures through educational facilities, health and other unproductive sectors have increased manifold at the cost of corresponding and proportionate increase in the infrastructural development (of economic base and network); and,
- b) there is a multiplication of efforts to mobilise these peripheries against natural centres which encourage assertion of distinctiveness; and,
- c) pressure groups and elites have not been able to build an effective counterpart (s) that can command (the socio-political movements have been able to do just that), in such a way that they are successful in attracting local national and international coverage and responses.

However, further explanations in this context will not help to account for the differences across the region. Instead, what is required is a broader perspective that include the need to develop a typology of territorial structure combining the cultural distances and economic conflicts with historical sources of differentiation for each

of the territories. It is also important to identify the functional and operational implications of the politico-geographical processes; and its ability to elicit responses from individual pressure groups that is favourable for the development of the region. This will also help in bringing the region closer to the national mainstream as well. It is clear that in the federal accommodation, where all the regions including the peripheries possess some guarantees for protection and survival of their distinctiveness along with a reasonable autonomy in decision-making, has to be looked at as an alternative towards resolving the conflict and tension parameters situations in the region.

Regional geopolitical compulsions and global politico-economic considerations substantially alter the political, social, and economic inter-relationships . In fact, these accentuate perception and responses of the majority of the inhabitants; thereby, encouraging the divisive influences on the face of modernism and development change. Elements of human geography of the region are also represented in the neighbouring countries of the region-Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet (China), Myanmar and Bangladesh. These countries exert sizeable influences on the regional activities and complicate the socio-political equations in the region. Thus, the region shows vertical and horizontal divisions - each as a compartment has its own interactional plane. These suggest that the resolution of the crisis lies not entirely in the dominant sub-systems that form the region but in a system that includes the neighbours as well.

The present effort proposes a synthesis embracing the politico-geographical processes (manifest and unmanifest) operating in the North-Eastern landscape. It is an attempt to show how these processes relate to one another not merely at the level of meso-phenomena but also at micro-local levels . The arguments are complex and match the phenomena that dominate the interactions and interrelationships in the region. At times, arguments go beyond easy reach of the reader not fully aware of the North-Eastern affairs. But effort has been made to project an insight to the chronic problems and tensions. It suggests a coherent way to relate seemingly unconnected and at times contradictory concepts and processes operating in the region; thereby, bringing out a possible new relationship, approach possibly, and an understanding to the problems that have continuously destabilised the North-East.

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