INDIA'S NORTHEAST RESURGENT

ETHNICITY, INSURGENCY, GOVERNANCE, DEVELOPMENT

B.G. VERGHESE

India's Northeast is a sadly forgotten land. Originally a bridge to lands further east, the Northeast was rendered all but landlocked by Partition which dealt it a cruel blow from which it is yet fully to recover. The tendency of tribal communities, hitherto secluded in "excluded areas", to differentiate themselves and seek autonomy came in confrontation with contrary, integrationist tendencies at both the state and national levels.

Despite the formation of several new states and autonomous sub-states, six insurgencies continue to disturb the tranquillity of the region. Rapid social change resulting in a civilisational gap, new value systems, land alienation by a variety of "outsider" or foreign immigrants, unemployment and unrequited aspirations have added to ethnic ferment.

Yet, critical infrastructure nearing completion will open up this resource-rich region to a new and significant phase of development which is likely to present a far more attractive alternative to agitation and insurgency. Transit, trade and other elements of cooperation could effect a transformation. The search for creative long-term solutions must be placed in a larger regional setting that embraces the Brahmaputra-Mekong-Upper Yangtze quadrant. This volume suggests the way forward.

Rs 450

B.G. VERGHESE has been at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, since 1986 after retiring as Editor of *The Indian Express*. He was previously Editor of *The Hindustan Times*, having entered journalism with *The Times of India* in 1949 after reading at Delhi and Cambridge universities. He was Information Adviser to the Prime Minister (1966-68) and a Gandhi Peace Foundation Fellow and Editor of *Voluntary Action*, the monthly journal of the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (1977-82).

Verghese received the Magsaysay Award for Journalism in 1975 and remains an active columnist. He is the author of a number of books, among them *Waters of Hope* (1990) and *Winning the Future* (1994), and the co-editor of *Harnessing the Eastern Himalayan Rivers* and *Converting Water into Wealth*, the last three published by KONARK.

ISBN 81-220-0455-5

INDIA'S NORTHEAST RESURGENT

Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development

B.G. VERGHESE

Supported by the Programme for Asian Projects endowed by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and administered by the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila

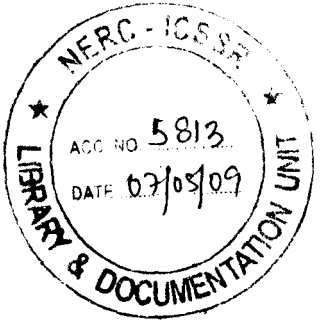
under the auspices of
Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi

KONARK PUBLISHERS PVT LTD

KONARK PUBLISHERS PVT LTD
A-149, Main Vikas Marg, Delhi 110092 (India)

First Edition: 1996
Second Edition: 1997
Reprint: 2002

End paper showing a collage of traditional north-eastern handicrafts (hats, combs, implements, tobacco tubes etc.) made of cane and bamboo and docorated with poker work designs.
Cover design by Dushyant Parasher, showing a Kamani Mishmi blouse print.
Courtesy: The Art of Northeast Frontier of India by Verrier Elwin, Northeast Frontier Agency, Shillong, 1959.



Exclusive Distributors
NATRAJ PUBLISHERS
17, Rajpur Road
Dehradun - 248001 (U.P.)
Tel.: (0135) 653382, 654584
Fax: 749914, 651108
e-mail : natrajbooks@vsnl.com

Printed at Harsha Process & Printers, Delhi

Contents

1

Northeast Passage

INDIA'S Northeast is rainbow country: extraordinarily diverse and colourful, mysterious when seen through parted clouds, a distant and troubled frontier for all too many. The Northeast was always remote to 'heartlanders', a wild never-never land, its two great rivers hemmed in by impenetrable jungle and soaring mountains, curtained for many months by incessant rain. Here then was a fastness between empires whose major concerns appeared riveted elsewhere.

Yet this was not always so. The Northeast has been a great crossroads, its valleys and passes being witness to centuries of migration as tribal communities have moved to seek new homes in response to populous lowlands pressing on the uplands in the region bordered by the Yangtze-Mekong-Salween in the east and the Ganga-Brahmaputra to the west. The ethnographic mapping of these movements is of considerable interest and their latter-day geo-political fallout remains a fact of life.

The Northeast was a gateway of commerce and culture that linked India overland to east and southeast Asia. It is a great meeting place. Political frontiers converge and overlap here. It represents an ethno-cultural frontier, encompassing much of India's rich but lesser known Mongoloid heritage, a complex transition zone of linguistic, racial and religious streams. It is also a unique bio-geographic frontier where the mingling of Indic, Sinic and Malaysian-Burmese strains have produced a treasure-house of floral and faunal bio-diversity.

It is a reversal of history and logic that the Northeast, so long a bridge, should have in more recent times come to be looked upon

almost as a divide. If imperial politics distanced the Northeast from its trans-border neighbourhood further east, Partition in 1947 all but physically separated the Northeast from the Indian heartland. It is today virtually landlocked, like Nepal and Bhutan, with under one per cent of its external boundaries contiguous with the rest of India. The remaining 99 per cent represents international borders (east of the tenuous 20 kilometre-wide Siliguri corridor) shared with Nepal, Bhutan, China (Tibet), Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The political, economic and social consequences of this situation were accentuated by the change of regime in Tibet and the new relationships with China that engendered, and the virtual closure of the hitherto open border with Myanmar (Burma) with insurgencies rampant on both sides. Added to this was the severance of the Northeast's major arteries of communication by inland water, road and railway through, and the loss of its traditional markets and entrepot, Chittagong, in East Pakistan/Bangladesh. The trauma caused by this combination of factors, especially the closure of the Bangladesh border, is even now not fully comprehended in the rest of the country.

The people of the Northeast are by and large the youngest members of the Indian family. According to the Anthropological Survey of India's monumental "People of India" study (Singh, K.S.; 1992), most communities in India see themselves as migrants. The bulk of them would be internal migrants within the confines of Indian territoriality, whereas most communities in the Northeast either have their roots outside India or have migrated into the region from the Indian heartland. In some ways, therefore, the feeling against foreigners (ex-India) and "outsiders" (ex-region) is surprising and manifests an understandable contemporary localism or defence mechanism against being overwhelmed demographically, culturally and in terms of ownership of land and access to economic opportunity by "the other".

Of the 5653 communities in India, 635 are tribal. Of the latter, a little over 200 categories are found in the Northeast. This includes some double counting as similar tribes reside in more than one State. But many sub-groups are also excluded and so the final picture that emerges remains an intricate mosaic of hill and plains tribes. This is confirmed by the amazing linguistic diversity found in the Northeast.

Of the 325 languages listed in "People of India" Vol IX (Singh, K.S. and Manoharan, S., 1993), the largest number belong to the Tibeto-Burman family and 175 communities (mostly northeastern) are shown speaking them. The Austro-Asiatic languages are also fairly widely spoken, the best known being Khasi which belongs to the Mon-Khmer-Nicobar group.

Social customs vary widely in the region. Matriliny prevails among the Khasis, Rabhas, Lalungs (Tiwas) and Hajongs, the latter three Assamese plains tribals.

International efforts to define tribal communities as "indigenous peoples" and original sons of the soil, thereby implicitly enjoying superior rights over the land and natural resources, are mistaken. The Kukis in the Northeast are late arrivals in relation to the Nagas, while the Lisus migrated to the Vijaynagar region in Tirap district in Arunachal Pradesh from Southwest China just at or after Indian independence in 1947. The Khamptis, a Buddhist-Shan tribe, entered Sadiya after the Burmese invaders were expelled from there in 1826. They came from Hkamtilong in one of the western valleys of the Irrawaddy basin. The Singhpos, an outlying branch of the Kachins of north Burma, moved into an adjacent part of Assam in 1793 during the Maomaria rebellion. The Ahoms, coming from the Shan States in Burma, overran Assam in the 13th century. They are more "original" than Assam's tea garden labour. These so-called "tea-tribes" are numerically the largest tribal group in the Northeast which gives "non-tribal" Assam the largest tribal population of any State in the region.

The British ousted the Burmese from Assam in 1826 and steadily consolidated and expanded their presence in the Northeast. Commerce yielded to conquest. But after debating the gains and losses from adopting a more forward policy, consolidation became the watchword through friendly alliances or establishment of suzerainty over the "wild tribes" along the eastern and northern borders. An "inner line" was drawn, differentiating the administrative boundary from the political boundary beyond. Punitive expeditions were mounted when head-hunting parties raided the plains and tea gardens and annual tribute was exacted to symbolise overlordship. These "backward" areas were later redesignated "excluded" and "partially excluded" areas under the Government of India Act, 1935 placing

them outside the purview of the provincial administrations and bringing them directly under the Governor of Assam.

It is from this lightly-administered seclusion that the eastern marches found themselves pitchforked by Japan into the Second World War. Independence followed with all the newly independent or reborn metropolitan powers between the Yangtze and the Brahmaputra vying to extend administrative control to the outer limits of their claimed political frontiers in India, Burma, China (Tibet) and even Thailand.

Tribal communities awakening to a new sense of identity, political consciousness, proto-nationalism and ethnic consolidation within larger kinship groups, sought to differentiate themselves from the new sovereignties being asserted by the heartlanders. Ethnicity, an amalgam of race and culture, including language, religion and the tribal way of life, came to define "we" and "they". Being athwart international frontiers, and with historical memories and kin-groups straddling them, the effort by these border peoples to resist "national integration" through differentiation appeared separatist or sessionist to "us" while plausibly offering such an option to "them".

In any adolescent frontier region within a far larger political entity engaged in the task of nation-building, transition is seldom easy. It requires patience, understanding and flexible responses on both sides, more so on the part of the metropolitan power.

The Northeast is in a state of becoming and, in some ways, of becoming Indian. This will be a process where, for some, India today represents a shared future aspiration more than a common past which only time and fraternal association will internalise. The continuing isolation of the region makes this so. Few perhaps know that many remote areas in the Northeast are still air supplied through what is possibly the largest and oldest air maintenance operation anywhere in the world. Tripura, Mizoram and even Manipur have slender road links that are often severed by inclement weather or civil commotion.

Nevertheless, change has been extraordinarily rapid, even if only in a relative sense, and has produced trauma and culture-shock. In 1953 the wheel was still unknown in Arunachal's Apa Tani plateau. Twenty years later, newspapers reported a young Apa Tani being commissioned into the Indian Air Force as a jet fighter pilot

At a broader level, traditional systems of land ownership, barter and social and political organisation have yielded to modernisation,

with a cash economy and commodification of the commons and of goods and services formerly bartered in simple exchange. Chiefs, traditional headmen and gaon buras or village elders have been edged out by younger elites composed of bureaucrats, politicians and business contractors with altogether new mores. This has resulted in a civilisational as much as a generational gap.

Yet the myriad communities inhabiting the rolling Northeastern marches are still strongly bonded by a sense of tribal identity and culture. The slow process of Aryanisation, Sanskritisation and Vaishnavite influence in the Brahamputra, Barak and Imphal valleys and the Tripura plains was later paralleled by the rather more dramatic spread of Christianity in the Naga, Mizo, Manipur and Khasi-Garo Hills, and latterly in parts of Arunachal, over the past century.

Christanity has been instrumental in Westernisation, differentiation and group-identity formation as a result of patient missionary efforts to promote education. Bible translations and lexicons have been brought out in various tribal languages in the roman script in the absence of any native alphabet. This has generated a new social and political awareness among these tribal communities. If Christianity is gaining adherents in the Northest today, it is more a manifestation of modernisation through a process of cultural osmosis than of evangelical zeal. Yet many tribal societies are searching for roots as evidenced by the return to Kok-Barok in Tripura, Sanamahi among the Meiteis and the Seng-Khasi movement in Meghalaya.

The locus of the Northeast within the cultural map of India has been portrayed as a relationship between core and periphery (Sinha, A.C., 1993, 1994). The core is identified with the north-central Hindi-Hindu heartland, with an associated core to the west, south and east of the country which is non-Hindi but Hindu. This then leaves two peripheral zones: one to the northwest consisting of the Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist regions of Punjab, J&K and upper Himachal and the other in the Northeast with its Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and tribal communities and indigenous faiths such as Donyi-Polo among the Adis in Arunachal.

The idea of the "mainstream" can unknowingly suggest an arrogant or dismissive attitude towards "little" traditions that are variously labelled regional, parochial or peripheral and which are sought to be "integrated". This goes against the more thoughtful and authen-

tic Indian tradition of accommodation and tolerance, seeking unity in diversity. The political itch to straitjacket the so-called periphery within some narrowly defined mainstream is misplaced and must be resisted. The country loses nothing and is indeed embellished by a Northeastern rainbow in the Indian sky. It has been well said that sometimes the need is not so much for language translators as for cultural-translators to interpret one people to another (Menamparampil, 1994). India is no melting pot. While its genius has always been in acculturation and synthesis rather than assimilation, there is little to be said for excessive ethno-centrism or cultural narcissism that fights shy of wider plural interactions.

The Northeastern hill tribes are in some important respects different from their far more numerous counterparts in Middle India. They consitute local majorities within recognised territories where their distinctive cultures have long flourished in relative isolation. This has enabled them to claim statehood or local autonomy. Educationally all the Northeastern States boast literacy rates that are well above the national average. The adoption of English as the official language in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal and the roman script for their own languages (combined with a knowledge of Hindi in many cases) has given them an access not available to other tribal communities in other regions who lack a similar ability to communicate.

Apart from the two princely states of Manipur and Tripura, the rest of the Northeast, including the congeries of small Khasi principalities, was part of Assam. Ahom ascendancy over the Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century overlay the earlier Bodo and Koch domains. The Ahoms kept the Mughals at bay but succumbed to the British who, after the Nepal war in 1815, employed Gorkha troops in expanding their Indian empire further east. The Assam Rifles with its strong Gorkha component was engaged in a series of frontier campaigns, in due course adopting the khukhri as its insignia. Gorkha ex-servicemen were encouraged to settle along the Assam foothills where they were joined by hardy graziers and others from Nepal. Parts of Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills had earlier been wrested from the Bhutanese by the British who were again content to have Nepalis settle in the area between the Bhotia uplands and the plains.

The British imported Bengalis into Assam after 1826 to man the

administration in this newly acquired territory. The Assamese found their identity threatened by what they saw as Bengali cultural-linguistic and political hegemonism, a fear not diminished by the steady influx of Bengali agriculturists from the more populous East Bengal districts of Sylhet and Mymensingh to open up and cultivate the yet sparsely peopled Brahmaputra Valley. That influx has never ceased and the demographic change it has wrought lies at the root of the recent Assam movement to detect, disenfranchise and deport foreigners in order to safeguard their cultural identity.

In their anxiety to protect and promote their own language and culture, and Assamese were not equally sensitive to tribal and proto-nationalist sentiments, leading inevitably to the break up of Greater Assam and the reorganisation of the Northeast in its present configuration of seven states and a number of autonomous district councils.

Six insurgencies are currently being fought in the Northeast: Naga (Nagaland-Manipur and adjacent transit zones); Meitei (Imphal Valley); Bodo (Lower Assam); ULFA (Assam); HALC (Meghalaya) and NLFT (Tripura). Sundry other insurgent groups or splinter organisations are at large while others have surrendered or are dormant. Many of these movements are manifestations of local aspirations or discontents. Some are secessionist. Of the latter, the Mizo insurgency is one that has uniquely abandoned the path of secessionist violence with the Mizo National Front taking to the path of democratic politics.

The political fragmentation of the Northeast has resulted in the creation of a number of mini-states or autonomous units within them. This in turn has given rise to issues of financial and administrative viability with former districts or even smaller units assuming all the trappings of full-fledged States, each heavily dependent on Central subsidies. Such top-heavy administrations have proved burdensome and swelled overheads. On the other hand, development has been hampered by poor infrastructure, a paucity of trained manpower, shortages of capital and entrepreneurial skills, high costs of small scale production, and marketing problems when economies of scale are sought. This applies even to large scale exploitation of the region's abundant natural resources of hydro-power, oil and gas, coal, and limestone. Fear of the outsider and a preference for sons of the soil are inhibiting and yet part of the reality that has to be strategically

accommodated in the development design.

Tribal attachment to the land and forests is strong and their alienation and encroachment have generated resentment. The erosion of the tribal blocks and belts in the Assam Valley is among the mainsprings of local autonomy demands among the plains tribals. Jhum remains the principal mode of agriculture in the hills though some tribal communities like the Angami Nagas and Apa Tanis have evolved highly sophisticated systems of terraced cultivation and water management. Horticulture, floriculture, herbiculture and plantations offer enormous potential with every type of agro-climatic zone available in the region. But the same problems of land, labour, capital and marketing intrude, though tea and rubber smallholders have proved eminently successful.

The constitutional formula for managing the diversity of tribal identities in the Northeast was the Sixth Schedule which confers considerable local autonomy on the formerly "excluded areas". But with the reorganisation of Assam and the formation of smaller states, the North Eastern Council was envisaged as a coordinating mechanism for purposes of development and security. This has worked only up to a point and is no longer greatly favoured by the constituent states although Sikkim's recent admission to that body would suggest a contrary tendency.

Nevertheless, both the Sixth Schedule and the NEC could do with a second look in view of intervening developments.

The Northeast is in ferment. In socio-economic terms there is a strange paradox. If the region remains a neglected backyard in some ways, and certainly in the perception of people living there, the internal pace of social change, especially in the hills, has overall been far more rapid than in most other parts of the country. Economic liberalism is at one level moving India away from state paternalism towards deregulation and globalisation. The transition must be negotiated with care and safety nets provided during the more delicate passages en route and for the more vulnerable sections of the population.

Likewise, the Northeast's passage to the future will require shifting to a higher gear. Having accommodated micro-identities and subnationalities with some political dexterity, a greater measure of integration within the region and between it and the heartland is indi-

cated. While there is yearning for a still undefined "new federalism" in the Northeast, the latter equation will be best accomplished through closer economic integration. Collectively, the Northeast has great latent wealth which could enhance both local and national prosperity. But there is equal promise in realising its lost potential as an economic and cultural bridge to east-central Asia, home to its major migrant streams, from Calcutta through Dhaka and Mandalay to Kunming.