THE PERIPHERY STRIKES BACK

CHALLENGES TO THE NATION-STATE IN ASSAM and NAGALAND

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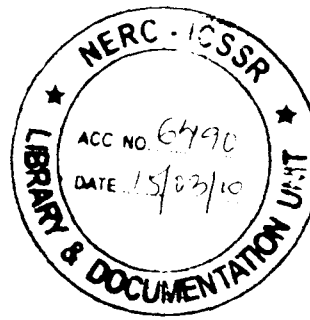

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Contents

Foreword

To state that diversity has been a central feature of Indian history amounts to stating only the obvious. But what has not been stressed as often is the fact that the nuances and implications of this diversity were very well understood and appreciated. The oft quoted Rigvedic verse '*tadekam sat*, etc.' is one of the earliest expressions of Indian sensitivity to cultural and ideological diversity. Political thinkers and law givers were especially aware of the complex plural base that the political domain had to confront and come to terms with. This plurality ranged from the highly mobile frontier nomadic-pastoral economy to the sedentary agrarian core areas, bound, often precariously, together by networks of trade and commerce. And then there was a social structure holding a variety of groups. It has thus been asserted repeatedly in the Dharmasastras-Arthasastra works that the ruler should respect customs and usages of *grama*, *sreni*, *jati*, *kula*, etc., and that a conqueror should be very very careful in imposing the laws and customs of his own country displacing those habitually practised in the newly conquered territory. Kautilya advised the ruler not to meddle with in the internal affairs of the 'forest people' even though they lived under his sway.

Ethnic affiliations have been a factor that all states had to contend with in some measure. However, the nation states of the West have been successful in neutralising the centrifugal pulls of ethnicity by building a larger sense of loyalty. Countries like India, which are now in the midst of nation-building process, face the problem of ethnicity more acutely. The present work, which has grown out of a fellowship project at the Institute, analyses the problem in the context of Assam and Nagaland.

I hope the reader would welcome this work for extending and deepening our understanding of the problem.

15 November, 1999

S.C. BHATTACHARYA
Director

Preface

Though the initial project submitted to the Indian Institute of Advanced Study dealt with the problem of ethnicity and nationalism covering the entire north-eastern region of India comprising of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, yet the realisation soon dawned on me that instead of a general study dealing with the entire North-east, a more specific approach to the problem would perhaps be meaningful in the long run. Accordingly, I decided to confine the parameter of my work to two states of the north-eastern region, Assam and Nagaland, where armed struggles aimed at securing sovereign, independent nations are in progress. My choice of Assam and Nagaland was motivated by several factors. Assam, which today constitutes the Brahmputra and Barak valleys, has had centuries-old interaction with the rest of the Indian sub-continent and has much in common with other parts of the country in matters of language, culture and history. Unlike many of the other nationalities of the northeastern states of the Indian Union, the Assamese were deeply involved in the freedom struggle and from time to time the leading socio-cultural and religious reform movements of the sub-continent have had their share of influence on Assam. Moreover, state-formation in Assam which had taken place during the time of early rulers of Kamarupa, was later on given a solid base by the Ahom kings who ruled Assam for six hundred years. Several tribal state formations such as the Chutia and Kuch Kingdom existed from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. However, by the seventeenth century these were absorbed by the Ahom state. Only the Kachari state continued its separate existence till the early part of the eighteenth century. Assam's history is amongst the best documented in the country and its transition from tribalism to feudalism has been well traced.

By contrast, Nagaland, which comprises the Naga Hills district and Tuensang division of undivided Assam, is a classic case of a direct transition from tribal modes of production-relations to a market economy. The Nagas, divided into two dozen major tribes, were occupied with inter-tribe warfare till only a few decades back and their participation in the freedom struggle

led by Gandhi and the Congress was nil. Culturally, linguistically and socially, the different Naga tribes constituted "republics" of their own and but for trade with the Assam plains, had little interaction with either the Assamese or their other tribal neighbours. It was only in the nineteen forties that the idea of a Naga "nation" slowly started emerging and under Angami Zapo Phizo's leadership the different tribes came together on a common platform of Nagaism. The Naga National Council, supposedly the one voice of the Naga "nation", questioned the Nagas' relationship with free India and insisted on either voluntary union or separation. Thus, began a struggle which has lasted for more than past fifty years and which may be said to be the earliest challenge to the nation-building process in independent India.

While the Naga movement for independence has been viewed from different angles, yet there seems to be a general point of agreement amongst scholars and political analysts on the question of the historical isolation of the Naga tribes from the Indian socio-cultural process—an isolationism deliberately aided by British colonial policy. Hence, there has been much talk about bringing the Naga people within the national "mainstream". But the case with Assam is very different. It should be highly interesting to probe into the reasons as to why Assam, with its centuries-old socio-historical and cultural links with the rest of India, should be today in the grip of an armed movement led by the United Liberation Front of Assam and whose prime objective is to secure a sovereign, independent Assam which would be part of a confederation of independent north-eastern states. Why has the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), despite its ideological weaknesses and aberrations, been able to strike a responsive chord in the hearts of the Assamese masses is a question which has no easy answers. For this, one must go back into the history of Assam's relationship with the rest of the country and how, after independence, the insensitivity, ignorance and prejudice of the Central leadership helped to alienate Assam from the Indian Union.

The period of my study begins primarily with the nineteen forties, even as the British were preparing to leave India, and moves upto the present times when the entire northeastern region of the country has been riven by inter-ethnic conflicts which have claimed thousands of lives. Given the ethnic diversity and the different stages of socio-economic progress, the struggle of the different nationalities of India's "North-East" for what they consider to be their due, poses a great challenge to the Indian State. The future of the Indian nation-state depends a lot of how it can resolve the questions centered on ethnicity, nationalism and sovereignty being thrown

up by the movements in the North-east. This modest work is an attempt to probe into the causes of such conflicts, the factors keeping them alive and the role of the Indian State.

Though the selection of the Naga and Assam movements for sovereign status has helped me in concentrating on certain specific areas and issues, yet I feel that my work would have been more comprehensive had I been able to deal also with the insurrectionary movements in Tripura and Manipur and the growing feeling of alienation among the people of Meghalaya. Maybe, I shall at some future date be able to enlarge the scope of the present work to include these states as well.

I am grateful to Prof. Mrinal Miri, Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, for having given me a nine-month fellowship at the Institute in 1995-96 so that I could take time off from my teaching duties and work on the project. The excellent academic atmosphere at the IIAS, the highly co-operative library staff and the extremely polite and ever-helpful employees of the Institute made my stay there a really happy and meaningful one. Friends like Uday Kumar, Papiya Ghosh, Jyotirmaya Sharma, Suresh Sharma, Shekhar Pathak, Birinder Pal Singh, Sucheta Mahajan, Raghavendra Rao, Sujata Miri, S. Sundarajan, S.A. Jabbar, Alekha Jabbar and a host of others added to my stay at the Institute in all possible aspects. To them I shall always be grateful for helping me unravel some of the knots of my work and to see certain things in a wider perspective. I shall always cherish those special evenings with Bhisham Sahni and Shila Sahni which overflowed with the warmth and affection which comes so naturally to them. A special word of thanks to Tilottoma who has not only been providing me with the intellectual stimulus to my work but who, during the period of my absence, managed the home-front all by herself. To my daughter, Sanghamitra, and son, Arindam, I shall always be grateful for their constant encouragement and enthusiastic backing.

15 February, 1999

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CHAPTER ONE

India's North-East: An Illusive Construct

There seems to be a growing tendency among policy planners and social scientists these days to club together the different states of the north-eastern region of the country as the *North-East*. While there is no denying the geographical reality of the North-east, yet complexities are bound to arise if the term is used as an umbrella connotation involving political and cultural aspects as well. It is true that the different states of India's "North-east" share a host of common problems ranging from communication bottle-necks to drug-trafficking, illegal infiltration and insurgency. It is also true that several of the states which today make up the North-east were once part of the undivided state of Assam, and still happen to share certain commonalities. But it would undoubtedly be simplistic to view the problems of the different states through a common *North-East* perspective. For, these states not only possess distinct culturo-historical traditions, but economically too they are in different stages of growth. Present-day Assam, made up primarily of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, for example, presents a very different picture when placed with the neighbouring states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal. Assam had a deep and wide-ranging cultural intercourse with the rest of the Indian sub-continent centuries before the other neighbouring hill regions came to know of the "mainstream". When most of the other regions were living on a subsistence economy, Assam was engaged in trade and commerce with neighbouring Bengal and state formation had taken place (Guha, 35).

Of all the hill tribes, it was only the Khasis and the Jaintias who had a moderately developed economy, with the Khasis engaging in vigorous trade with the plains of Assam and with present-day Bangladesh, while Manipur also underwent the process of state formation from relatively early times. Politically too, all the states of the north-eastern region cannot be seen one general unit, facing similar problems. Assam, for example, possessed a completely different political lineage and cannot be equated

with other states of the north-eastern region, as brief introduction to its history, culture and politics will reveal.

Today, because of the rise of insurgency in the entire north-eastern region, "experts" tend to view the problem as a total North-east issue. But even when analysing the roots of insurgency in different states of the region, it would be advisable to take into account the history and economy of each individual state. For, the socio-economic factors which have given rise to insurgency in the different states cannot be put in one basket. Therefore, it is imperative that while dealing with the states of the north-eastern region of the country, the distinct history and culture of each people should be kept in mind and attempt to club all together as the *North-East* should be avoided. In matters of language and literature, culture and religion, the degree of Aryanisation or Sanksritisation etc., the Brahmaputra valley stands distinctly apart from other states of the north-eastern region.

Thus, the similarities that exist between different states of the region should not overshadow the different stages of socio-cultural and politico-economic development. This point was well illustrated during the Film Festival held in New Delhi in the year 1996. In the India Panorama section Assamese, Bodo and Manipuri films had been shown. But when it came to meeting the Press, all the directors belonging to the north-eastern region of the country were slotted together, whereas directors from other parts of the country were given exclusive time slots. This was resented by the Assamese film directors, Bhabendranath Saikia and Jahnu Barua, both winners of several national and international awards, as they felt that the very purpose of interaction with the journalists was nullified by such clubbing together. The Press Information Bureau of the Government of India, however, saw no problems in grouping all the directors of the north-eastern region together. For it, the "North-East" was one single category. The Assamese and Manipuri directors boycotted the Press-meet after making their point clear that in such matters they resented being grouped together. In his editorial in the popular Assamese fortnightly, *Pranteek*, Saikia observed: "I don't think it is rational to club the North-east together on every single issue. One should know where to use the term collectively to include all the states of the region. There are certain issues like foreign infiltration, communication, terrorism and the like on which matters could be discussed keeping in view the entire North-east. But can this be applied to the case of the movies? Do the states which are being clubbed together as North-east depend on one another in matters of film-making? The history of the Assamese cinema is sixty years old. Does this fact alone not add

some significance to Assamese films? I make a film on the strength of my culture and tradition, on the strength of my intellectual powers and hard work. You select it for the Indian Panorama. After that you should present it first as a movie. Only after that could questions of language and region arise. But to begin with the North-East itself? The different states of the north-eastern region must keep up the best of ties with one another. Yet, the distinct historical past and cultural identity of each state or region must not be crushed under a common geographical and, at present, political entity called the 'North-East'. We often use the term 'South India'. But, does that mean we would club together Kerala and Tamil Nadu or Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Mani Ratnam?" (*Pranteek*, Guwahati, 16-19 February 1996: Trans: author). Bhabendranath Saikia was making a strong case that though geographically, and also at times politically, it might appear to be convenient to refer to the region as the North-East, yet it would be wrong to steamroll the different histories and cultures of the people inhabiting this area under the blanket term, "North East". The use of the illusive construct, the *North-East*, has not only led to discriminations in matters of financial allocation to resource-rich and larger states like Assam, but, more importantly, to serious administrative mishandling by the Centre of the complexities of the region. The tendency of the Indian State to treat this extremely diverse region as one unit has resulted in the growth of totally incomplete and often misconceived notions about the different states that make up the northeastern part of the country. Such monolithic conceptions about a region, which stands out for its diversity of cultures and civilisations, would only help to nourish the biases and prejudices which have marked the Indian State's approach towards Assam and her neighbours since independence.

The history of Assam, which is made up of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, stretches back to the epics and the Puranas and mention of the region is found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Chaudhury, 10-14). The political history of the Brahmaputra Valley could be traced to a period long before the foundation of the Varman line of kings of the fourth century AD. For instance, Amalendu Guha says: "The ancient history of the Assam plains could also be extended backward beyond the fifth and fourth century AD. The Mahabharata and several Puranas that were re-written between circa second century BC and the second century AD and the copper plate Prashastis of the Kamrupa kings—all contain elements of late recorded oral history related to Assam's early Indo-Aryan settlers who were the carriers of the new civilisation marked by iron, cattle, wet rice and the plough" (Guha, 35). The process of state formation in Assam in the fourth

and fifth centuries AD and epigraphic evidence show that the political chronology of Assam can be well traced from the fifth to the twelfth centuries AD (Lahiri: 1991, 7-8). The earliest of the inscriptions was the Umachal rock inscription of Surendravarman (AD 518-42). It was during the rule of Bhaskarvarman (AD 594-650) that the kingdom of Kamarupa reached new heights of political power and influence. Bhaskarvarman was a friend of Harsha Vardhan and the alliance between the two kings was formed on an equal plane (Lahiri, 72). Though some historians hold that Bhaskara was a vassal of Harsha's, others like R.C. Majumdar assert that there could be no doubt about the independent status of Bhaskara's kingdom especially when one takes into account the *Harsacarita* and the detail of the region given by the Chinese pilgrim, Yuang Chwang (Hsuan Tsang) who visited Kamrupa during AD 643 at the invitation of Bhaskarvarman (Barua: 1933, 76; Chaudhury, 180, 201). These, alongwith the Dubi and Nidhanpur copper plate grants of Bhaskarvarman give an idea of the state of the kingdom of Kamrupa in seventh century AD, whereas the "Nalanda Clay Seal" of Bhaskara tends to support the contention that boundaries of the kingdom extended upto or even beyond Bengal (Barua: 1933, 86-7). It was during this period that Assam developed links with not only neighbouring Bengal, Orissa, Mithila, Magadha and Kanauj, but also with China. Choudhury writes: "It appears that after Yuan Chwang's return to China, Bhaskara exchanged envoys with China and showed a keen interest in Taoism. When the two envoys Li-Yi-Piao and Wang-Hiuantse visited India (AD 643-46), Bhaskara asked them to send a portrait of Lao-tse and a Sanskrit translation of the Tao-teh-king. . . . The evidence indicates the cultural contact between Kamarupa and China" (Chaudhury, 194; Bagchi: 1950, 200ff).

Assam had trade links with countries and regions lying to its north-east and to the west. One of the earliest references to commercial relations between Assam and China is to be found in the accounts of "Chang Kien" (200 BC) which have been highlighted in the works of Joseph Needham and P.C. Bagchi. There is a reference in the "Shung Shu" (AD 420-79) that a particular king of Assam sent an envoy to China. (Chaudhury 381). Initially, there seemed to have been one major land route to China through upper Burma (Chaudhury, 382), but later on other routes were developed through Burma, Bhutan and Tibet. The Patkai Pass in upper Assam, through which the Ahoms came in the thirteenth century, must have been an important link in Assam's early relations with Burma and China. The *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* states that there were as many as thirty-five passes between Assam and Tibet (Chaudhury, 383).

Most historians, however, agree that Assam's cultural and commercial relations with the rest of India have been closer (Chaudhury, 384). Lahiri and Chakravarti, though not denying the Assam-Burma route to China, have expressed their doubt about the frequent use of this route from the second century onwards (Lahiri, 157). They maintain that even the later Assam-Burma-China routes mentioned in British records were sparingly used and whatever trade was conducted was in the inter-community barter system (Lahiri, 161). Lahiri and Chakravarti say: "Interestingly enough, the collective testimony of the thirty-two Assamese inscriptions between fifth and thirteenth centuries AD, which contains the bulk of the historical material of the period, goes against any close Chinese or Burmese link. The place names of different regions outside Assam, occurring in these inscriptions are substantial in number, and what is interesting is that they do not invoke China or Burma in any way. There is, in fact, no reason to doubt that throughout the course of her early documented history, the Brhamaputra Valley looked towards inner India ranging from the Deccan to Karnataka on the one hand and to Kashmir and Kamboja on the other" (Lahiri, 157). Chaudhury says that the most intimate contact which early Assam had was with Magadha and that the earliest trade routes between Kamarupa and Magadha are to be found in the *Arthasastra* (Chaudhury, 385). The Brahmaputra must have served as the main communication link between Assam and the rest of India and, compared to the river route, the land route through mountainous passes to Burma and China must have been a difficult one. Hence, the latter routes must have fallen into disuse by the time the British arrived on the scene.

The process of Sanskritisation and Aryanisation of Assam has been a long one. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee is of the view that the Aryanisation of the ruling classes in Kamarupa was completed as early as c. AD 400. Chatterjee says that "by the early centuries of the Christian era, Assam as Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa had become definitely a part of Hindu India, although the masses of its people were probably still Bodo-speaking, as in 16th century North Bengal among the Koches" (Chatterjee, 18). He further maintains that "by the end of the early medieval period, that is by AD 1200, Assam, meaning specifically the plains-lands watered by the Brahmaputra, definitely appears to have become a part of Aryan-speaking India" (Chatterjee, 35). The process of Sanskritisation gathered momentum during the period of Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568), the reformer-saint whose liberal brand of Vaishnavism brought thousands of tribal people of the Brahmaputra Valley within the fold of Hinduism. By the sixteenth century substantial numbers of Bodo-Kacharis and Tai-Ahoms embraced Hinduism

(Guha, 25). But the process of Aryanisation was heavily influenced by the tribal life-pattern of the region and this may be seen in the absence of the growth of professional classes or groups along caste lines (Guha, 25). The non-rigidity of the caste system and the relative egalitarian pattern of society were the direct results of the tribal influence. The lack of occupational specialisation in pre-Ahom Assam is also borne out by some of the inscriptions (Lahiri, 118). Nonetheless, Brahminical culture, which was largely Sanskrit-based, made its presence strongly felt in ancient Assam and continued to be an important influence throughout medieval Assam (Chaudhury, 336-7). The impact of the process of Aryanisation was to be seen in the growth of wet rice plough cultivation in lower Assam during pre-Ahom times and Guha says that 'sali' cultivation in the Assam plains was at least as old as the process of Sanskritisation itself (Guha, 73).

The predominance of Sanskrit-based languages in the Brahmaputra Valley is an important indicator of the process of Sanskritisation (Guha, 2). It is to be noted that language of the epigraphs from fifth to twelfth centuries is Sanskrit. As mentioned already, the earliest use of the Sanskrit language in inscriptions in Assam is the Umacal rock inscription of the fifth century AD (M.M. Sharma, 1977, 1-3; Lahiri, 29-30). The Sanskrit language was used right through the fifth to the thirteenth century and contributed to the development of the Assamese language. The earliest known script of Assam is said to be the "Devnagari" and the art of writing was known in Assam as early as the sixth century AD, if not earlier. This is proved by the grants of Bhutivarman (Chaudhury, 390-1). The Assamese language developed as early as the seventh century AD, its direct ancestor being Magadhi Apabharamsa (B. K. Barua: 1964, 5). The script and the language reached a final shape in the 12th-13th centuries AD, Sanskrit contributing largely in its evolution. The non-Aryan influence added a distinctness to the Assamese language. Bani Kanta Kakati has shown the different influences on the Assamese language ranging from the Aryan and non-Aryan to the Austric and Tibeto-Burmanese (Kakati, 25-52). By the middle of the tenth century, the Assamese language had taken shape, although evidence of the use of Assamese words is found in the copper plates and stone inscriptions from around the seventh century onwards (S.N. Sarma: 1981, 10). Bani Kanta Kakati is of the view that written literature in Assamese actually begins from the fourteenth century, Hem Saraswati and Harihar Vipra being the earliest Assamese writers. In his poem, Saraswati paid tribute to his patron king Durlavnarayan who ruled Assam in the later part of the thirteenth century (Kakati, 13). Assamese prose grew from the end of the sixteenth century onwards and the Buranjis or Assamese prose

chronicles may be found from the middle of the seventeenth century. The verse Buranjis like the "Darrang Rajbangsavali" were written in 1791.

The thirteenth century saw the coming into Assam of the Ahoms, a northern Tai or Shan tribe of upper Burma. Initially numbering only a few thousands, the Ahoms quickly assimilated with the local population. From 1228 onwards the Ahoms gradually extended their domain and ruled Assam till 1826 when by the Treaty of Yandaboo the British took over control of the region. Apart from their well-ordered system of administration, the Ahoms brought about a radical change in the economy of Assam by introducing wet rice cultivation in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra valley and extending it by building hundreds of miles of embankments (Guha, 70-1). Wet-rice cultivation, however, had been going on in lower Assam during the Kamarupa empire and must have produced enough surplus to sustain it. The process of Hinduisation continued during Ahom rule and reached new heights in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus "if the sixteenth century dominated by the expanding Koch kingdom was the formative period of Assamese society, the next one century and a half was the period of steady consolidation under the Ahoms. The extension of plough at the cost of hoe cultivation and of wet at the expense of dry ricelands alongside a general agricultural expansion—a process that was going on for some time in Upper Assam—led to a rapid increase in the surplus produced. The consequent rise in population provided the Ahoms with the material base for their further economic and political expansion. Firearms, introduced in the area first in the 1530s, were increasingly put to use and, by the sixteen sixties, excellent gunpowder, matchlocks and cannons were manufactured locally" (Guha, 85).

Though it is beyond the scope of the present study to go into the process of state formation during the Ahoms, yet suffice it to say that the Ahoms gave Assam a continuous rule for some six hundred years during which a transition from tribalism to feudalism took place (Guha, 89). Trade and commerce flourished during Ahom rule and despite its relative isolation, Assamese traders went as far as Bihar and Bengal in their boats. According to Sihabbuddin Talish (1663) gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper and silk-cloth were in great demand. When the British first came to administer Assam in the early nineteenth century, they described the people of Barpeta in lower Assam as vigorous traders. Though the tribal influence was still very strong on the economy and the overall life-pattern of the people, yet accumulation of wealth by the newly emerging feudal and spiritual lords was a common feature. The contradictions between the feudal lords and "gosains" or spiritual heads of monasteries on the one

hand and the bulk of the peasantry on the other, sharpened from the middle of the eighteenth century and resulted in the series of civil strife known as the Moamaria Revolt (1769-1806) which eventually paved the way for the British entry into the region.

Compared to the well documented history of Assam from the fourth century AD onwards, little is known about the hilly regions of the northeastern region which today forms part of the states of Nagaland, Arunachal, Mizoram, Tripura and Manipur. The lone exception seems to be Meghalaya, made up of the Khasi and Jaintia hills, where agriculture and trade were relatively developed, with primitive tribal organisations having been long replaced by a political organisation bringing together the different village republics. With most of the other states however, the tribal pattern of life dominated and there was little interaction with the plains. Referring to this Guha says: "In our region of seven sister states one cannot but note a degree of unevenness in the structuring of history of these states, particularly in terms of the time dimension. Assam is a well-charted field of enquiry with some relevant records going back to the fourth century AD. The historiographical literature on Assam is rich with its neat periodization into times ancient, medieval and modern. But this kind of neat periodization breaks down the moment the historian enters the parts of the region where literacy came rather too late. We have no knowledge as to how the hill areas were peopled and how they fared in ancient times"(Guha, 31). It is only from the thirteenth century onwards that one comes to have some historical details about Tripura and Manipur, while little is known about Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. Many historians have, therefore, stressed upon the importance of oral history in understanding this region. Social anthropology and archaeology have also been seen as important entry points. It is only with the coming of the British that we start getting a connected history of the hill areas, although mention of the hill tribes, particularly the Nagas, is there in the Ahom Buranjis and also in pre-Ahom historical literature.

Unlike Assam, most of the hill tribes did not possess the experience of state formation and continued to be governed by their own established tribal organisations. Guha says that "among the different tribes, it was only the Khasis who appeared to have moved towards statehood several centuries before the coming of the British" (Guha, 6-7). Most of the hill tribes maintained their autonomous existence. Village and kinship ties governed the average tribal's life; this being especially true in the case of the Nagas (Sema, 10). Not only in the case of the Nagas, but with most of the tribal people of the region, the central political and economic unit was

the village (Horam, 117). So, it may be concluded that in matters of political organisation, the Nagas and other tribes did not go beyond the village and the immediate community.

Jhumming or shifting cultivation was the predominant form of agriculture in the hill region, with terraced cultivation being practised by the Angamis of Nagaland, the Tangkhuls of Manipur and the Apa Tanis and Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh. The plough was not known in the hills and hoe cultivation was the usual practice. Little use was also made of pack animals (Guha, 4-5). It was the Khasis only who, apart from the traditional jhumming, also engaged in wet rice cultivation and had terraced fields. In most cases it was a tribal economy based on barter. The rice economy of the hill region was supplemented by food-gathering, hunting and fishing (Guha: 1991, 3). The hill people used to come down to the plains mostly in the winter months to barter their forest produce, rock salt and iron for rice, dried fish and cotton goods. Thus, communication links between the hill regions and the plains of Assam were quite active, particularly in areas bordering the Assam plains. Some of the Naga tribes, for example, came into close contact with the Ahoms. Barter trade was restricted usually to immediate necessities. Of all the hill tribes, only the Khasis and Jaintias were engaged in regular trade with the Brahmaputra valley and the plains of East Bengal (now Bangladesh).

The majority of the hill languages and dialects belonged to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages and the absence of a written script is common to most. Only Khasis and Jaintias belong to the Austro-Asiatic group, though they too did not possess any written script. As far as the hill tribes were concerned, it may be said that excepting for the Jaintias, there was no Sanskritisation or Hinduisation at all (Horam, 69). Till the advent of the Christian missionaries, the tribal peoples of the region followed their own rituals and traditions. The traditional pattern of tribal society did not provide for specialisation of professions, though certain villages specialised in the crafts.

In view of the above facts, it would, therefore, be wrong to place Assam on the same par, historically as well as economically, with rest of the states of the north-eastern region of the country. Any discussion of the problem of ethnic resurgence linked with insurgency must take into account the large degree of difference which exists on almost all planes between Assam and her neighbours. The purpose in presenting the above historical facts has been to highlight the socio-cultural and political divide which exists between Assam and the other units of the "North-East", with the former having a recorded history and written literature stretching back to centuries,

whereas in the case of the latter one has to rely primarily on oral tradition till the advent of the British in the nineteenth century.

It is in this complex mosaic of different nationalities at different stages of socio-economic and political growth that the Indian nation-state is today facing some of its gravest challenges, with the entire process of nation-building being questioned. It is here that the centralised authority of the Indian State is being repeatedly questioned, issues based on the uneven development of the socio-economic order raised, and the idea of the "mainstream" re-defined. Time and again, the Indian nation-state has had to work out new strategies and adjustments to deal with the issues raised by the different autonomist and "secessionist" movements of the northeastern region. Though the Indian nation-state's management of the problem of dissent and political identity has been commendable, especially when one takes into account the experience of most third-world countries, yet there seems to be a long way to go. The idea of "one nation" which gathered strength during the country's freedom struggle and which was buttressed up during the years immediately following the partition of the country and its independence, received its first jolt in the hills of the northeastern region. This was an area which had been virtually untouched by the freedom struggle and also historically, outside the pale of Indian civilisation. Hence, it was difficult for those who believed in the unifying force of the Indian civilisation to understand and appreciate the demands for autonomy that were raised in the Naga Hills and other areas soon after independence.

The idea that the Partition had led to the creation of a homogenous Indian nation-state with a strong central government soon came to be questioned because of the nationalist struggles in the northeastern region of the country. The idea of a uni-cultural nation with one dominant language, held together by a strong State which drew its strength from the diverse strands of the rich and varied Indian civilisation, was challenged by the Nagas and the Mizos and finally, even by the Assamese. While the autonomy and "self-determination" or "self-rule" struggles amongst the Nagas and the Mizos was understandable in the light of the historical situation, the subsequent struggle of the Assamese for a *Swadhin Asom* led by a militant organisation, calls for deeper scrutiny. Such a scrutiny would be all the more relevant because the Assamese were not only involved in different stages of the freedom struggle, but also shared with the rest of the country common socio-religious bonds, the politico-geographical isolation from rest of the sub-continent during certain periods of Assam's history notwithstanding. Interestingly, the Indian nation-state

seems to have tackled the problem of socio-political identity as posed by the hills of undivided Assam in quite a successful manner, the creation of separate states and adequate constitutional safeguards being major steps in that direction. It is through hard experience that it has realized that military is no answer to the quest for self-rule amongst the different nationalities of the north eastern states of the Union. During the post-Independence period, the rise of nationalistic aspirations among different communities has nowhere been so prominent as in undivided Assam. This has been a classic case of different ethnic groups at different stages of socio-economic growth emerging as nationalities with a corporate will and determination to shape their own destiny within India if possible, and outside it if things do not work out. What is significant is that this has not been a gradual process but has struck the Indian nation-state with a suddenness. The incorporation of areas which had hitherto been "unadministered territories" inhabited by people living in tribal isolation, into the democratic framework of a new nation committed to the ideals of secularism, equality and representative government, speeded up the process of nationality-formation which otherwise might have taken ages. All its ad hoc measures and blunders notwithstanding, the Indian State has, to its credit, succeeded till now in accommodating these different nationalities within its system. This becomes all the more significant when one sees the plight of small nationalities not only in third-world countries but also in advanced nations like Iraq and Turkey.

But, the success of the nation-state in providing meaningful space within its system to the different nationalities has not been uniform. Assam today poses a really grave challenge to the entire process of nation-building. With its really complex ethnic situation, the almost unsurmountable problem of influx and demographic change and the backward, almost "colonial" state of the economy, Assam has emerged as the problem state, next perhaps to Kashmir. The future health of the Indian State will depend on how well can it resolve the many problems which Assam today throws up. Many years ago, Ram Manohar Lohia had said that the struggle for Indian independence was being fought in the hills of Assam. That was said with reference to the first outbreak of insurgency in the Naga Hills district of Assam. Today, the Indian nation-state is fighting not just insurgency in Assam and the other northeastern states, but is fighting for the survival of those very values on which the Indian Union stands. This is bound to be a difficult struggle because the fight is not restricted merely to the swampy jungles of the region but is very much a fight on the plane of ideas. Moreover, it is a fight with its own people. The very idea of the

Indian nation-state is being challenged by those who are fighting for an independent Nagaland or a *Swadhin Asom*. Will the nation-state be able to accommodate these recalcitrant nationalities within the framework of its Constitution? What are the structural changes in the Constitution that will have to be made for this? Success in dealing with the nationality issues being raised in the northeastern region is bound to strengthen the Indian nation-state, while failure to check separationist tendencies in regions like Assam could have far-reaching negative effects on the country as a whole. As such, an attempt would be made in the succeeding chapters to show how certain historico-political factors have been nourishing the ideas of separateness prevailing among communities as distinct as the Assamese and the Nagas. In the process, focus would naturally be made on certain conceptions and notions which have, in all these years since Independence, marked the Centre's approach as well as the overall "national" response towards this region which has been conveniently labelled as India's "North-East". Today, however, there seems to be the growing realisation that the issues raised by the insurgent/autonomy movements going on in the different states of the northeastern region can never be resolved by force but by a meaningful political dialogue. The success of Centre's response would depend largely on its ability to discard set prejudices and monolithic perceptions and on its willingness to try to understand and appreciate the wide variety and distinctiveness of the different nationalities of the region as also their struggles for autonomy or self-rule. Chapters 2 and 3 take up for discussion the origin and growth of the Naga struggle for independence and how, over the years, the course and content of the struggle has changed. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the beginnings of the idea of *Swadhin Asom* and how, through the different phases of Assam's pre- and post-Independence history, the idea of an independent homeland for the Assamese people has survived and even acquired new connotations. The concluding chapter tries to look into the conflicts and contradictions involved in the struggle of the Nagas and the Assamese for independent homelands and how the Indian State has been reacting to these.

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It is in the country's northeastern region, with its complex mosaic of ethnic nationalities at different stages of socio-economic and political growth, that the Indian nation-state is today facing some of its gravest challenges. Time and again, the Indian State has had to work out new strategies and adjustments to deal with the issues thrown up by the different autonomy and secessionist movements of the region. The process of nation-building received its first major jolt when the Nagas, a people virtually untouched by the freedom struggle, expressed their reservations about becoming a part of the newly independent republic and launched an armed struggle for an independent Naga homeland. But, it is the secessionist movement in Assam which seems to pose a much more serious challenge to the nation-state, especially in view of the fact that the Assamese has had centuries of socio-cultural interaction with the rest of the sub-continent and had played a major role in the national struggle. Today, with its really complex ethnic situation, the unsurmountable problem of influx and demographic change and the backward "colonial" state of the economy, Assam has emerged as the problem state of the Indian Union. This is a study which analyses in detail the socio-historical and political factors which have led to secessionist insurgency in states as different as Nagaland and Assam and shows how the future of the nation-state in India depends a lot on the ability to resolve the questions that are being thrown up by the struggles for a *Swadin Asom* and an independent *Naga Lim.*

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