

Understanding North East India

Cultural Diversities,
Insurgency and Identities

Edited by
Madhu Rajput



UNDERSTANDING NORTH EAST INDIA

Cultural Diversities, Insurgency
and Identities

MADHU RAJPUT



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FOREWORD

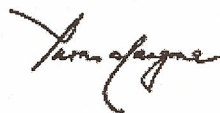
Madhu Rajput has done a very useful service to the society as a whole by publishing the collection of articles from renowned and eminent scholars and brought it in the form of a book "Understanding North East India." In fact, the book highlights various aspects which are not known to most of the people in the rest of the country. Any reader will easily get enlightened about the various aspects of different states, different tribes, their history, their origin, of the North Eastern region of our country.

The author has very skillfully divided the book into three Sections viz. History of North East, Insurgency and Society, Culture and Economy of North East India. Each Section deals extensively with the topics. For instance the Section dealing with History contains eight important articles such as Assimilation and Alienation of North East Indian States in Historical Perspective and Contemporary Situation, a Recent Perspective on the Prehistoric Cultures of North East India, Sino Indian Conflict of 1962 & Nehru, Arunachal Pradesh: A Matter of Dispute between India and China. Section II deals with

Insurgency in the North East. This Section is very important as the articles contained in this Section analyses the reasons for Insurgency, the mindset of the people of the North East, their alienation from the rest of the country, external influences on them, more importantly Inter Tribal conflicts in the North East India and the Problem of Social Exclusion. Understanding their ethnicity, identity crisis and the Ethnic Resurgence will help in finding a lasting solution to the insurgency prone North East. The third Section deals with the societies prevailing in the North East, their culture and their economy. The articles contained in this Section deal with the economic problems, cultural conflicts, the different tribes, their rich heritage, their pride etc.

I hail from the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and also belong to the Garo Tribe. The article Garos: A Study of Struggle and Accomplishments in this Section throws light about the topography, about the inhabitants, the history of Garos, social and religious institutions developed by the Garos, their matriarchal form of inheritance, about their customs, their beliefs, the efforts being made for bringing about the much needed transformation, with references from the books published by renowned authors viz. Tarunchandra Sinha's *Anthropological Survey of India* and Prof. B.B. Dutta's *Modernization of a Tradition the Garo Dimension*, Jhum A.G. Khan's *Cultivation and Societal Status: An Enquiry of Garo Tribe Women in Meghalaya* and Khan Ali Morshed's *Cheated out of their Own Land*.

I congratulate the author for the painstaking efforts she has made to throw light on the various issues confronting the people of North East such as alienation and the need to take effective steps to bring about national integration. It is a useful work which will help to understand North East from within.



(Purno A. Sangma)

PREFACE

In 1947, with independence a dream was born of a peaceful, self reliant India and later in 1950 when we adopted our constitution, it marked the dawn of a new era where we set the goal of making our mark in this world, not to repeat our past mistakes and become a global force to reckon with but today sixty two years later, it seems something has not gone according to the plan. There are still problems and discontent that threatens the integrity of the nation. To reach our full potential and implement the plans of the freedom fighters whom we owe our freedom to, we need to revise our strategy and remodel our act to get back on track to becoming a peaceful, prosperous, progressive India.

In our quest for harmony in a diverse nation we are still searching the answers to many questions, of which North East is one. North East is geographically bounded together except Sikkim; a region which shares a 2000 km long border with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and is connected to the rest of India by a narrow corridor 20 km wide. Except the two valleys the Brahmaputra and the Barak where the bulk of the population lives, the rest is dotted with hills of various heights.

North East comprises of seven sisters and Sikkim has been added recently as the eighth state. The division of the country in 1947 followed by the great earthquake in 1950 and the Chinese invasion in 1962, and Naga, Mizo, Bodo, Manipuri, ULFA and other movements and insurgencies, some still ongoing, had an adverse effect on the development of the North East region.

The exquisite charm and mystic splendour of North Eastern region of India has beholden many hearts since time immemorial. Rich in cultural heritage and home to variegated flora and fauna, it is none less than a paradise on earth. No human being with a sensitive heart can remain untouched by ineffable aura and appeal that the region emits. However this region is known for its ethnic diversity and conflicts which is a challenge for policy makers and administrators alike.

North East is rich in resources but is sadly neglected. The problems that plague the region did not occur overnight; they built up for more than half a century. This kind of damage does not heal overnight it requires time and patience and most importantly a sincere effort. Before we figure out the effort we need to analyze and identify the problems first.

The people of North East have lived with terrorism whether domestic or external, since independence. Insurgency paralyses the government machinery and halts the progress of the state in general as funds, resources and efforts are redirected to counter the graver problem in hand and even the important issues like education, employment industries, food and environment take a back seat in the presence of this dark omen.

There are no winners in this war, sides are predestined to loose from the beginning and that is the people of the state. Both the government and the insurgents, who claim to have welfare of the people as agenda, fail to meet their goal in reality. Infact the insurgent groups have no moral code to follow now; they have degenerated into money minting machines and don't hesitate to target even women and children.

To put a full stop on this proxy war, people have to be included in the effort.

We need to open a dialogue among the government, insurgents and the people. The grievances of the people must

be heard and redressed. Then only we can hope to solve this problem.

We should keep in mind that India has always been a nation of "Unity in diversity". Even the insurgents are our people and their discontent-ful actions are a sure sign of a bigger problem lurking around the corner. Maybe we are missing the big picture here, it's just not domestic terrorism like everybody seems to label it and may be some new approach is needed, to bring the reform. We need a fresh perspective which identifies the problems and suggest better solutions for peace. And once we achieve peace all the rest we so desperately strive for, will follow.

Dreams have to be changed in realities and people of North East who are tired of stagnation and aspire to see their region emerge peaceful, strong and marching on path of economic, social and cultural progress will have to develop a proper strategy somewhat like their neighbour Bhutan has found in their theory of Gross National Happiness. Good governance, preservation of culture and heritage, economic development and environmental protection may be the answer to the manifold problems inflicting this area.

This seminar on "Assimilation and Alienation of North East Indian States in Historical Perspective and Contemporary Situation", conducted by Department of Western History, University of Lucknow (U.P.), India, on 20-21 Nov 09 was one such gesture to identify and discuss the past, present and future of North East region. It was great encouragement for us that several scholars working at this region participated in this seminar. The deliberations in the two day seminar focused on the history, society, culture, economy and issue of insurgency in this region. It was discussed whether the North East Vision 2020 which is an effort to dream, think and plan for the future of this region is an answer to the problems facing the North East region.

The seminar was significant in building up a consensus on the issues concerning North East as the saying goes "Remember it is drops that fill up the ocean". No deed is small, and when every body chips in his share, I am more than sure

that North East will soar to new heights, it so rightfully deserve.

The proceedings of the two day seminar are now being published as a book which can be a useful as a research document. I hope that it will deepen the understanding of the region, so intricately a part of India. As the title suggests the book explores the process of assimilation of North East India, its journey towards development and the sense of alienation etched somewhere in the psyche that gives birth to turbulence that the region is subjected to.

Regrettably not all the papers presented could be published. We trust that their authors will understand the constraint of space under which we are working. The fact that they could not be published does not diminish in any way their importance or their contribution made in the seminar.

I hope that the formal papers and discussions that took place served the purpose of understanding the North East better; however some of the most valuable discussions took place outside formal sessions. These were not recorded but were a one to one dialogue with the scholars who had taken the pains to come from all over India sparing their precious time for us. The discussions have contributed in no small way to the success of seminar and to the development of close affinity.

The acceptance of my seminar proposal by ICSSR, New Delhi was not only a great encouragement but also opened a new learning chapter for me. I would like to express my deepest appreciation for aid and support given by ICSSR, New Delhi and North East Council, Shillong, Meghalaya.

Our Chief Guest His Excellency Shri Ranjit Shekhar Mooshahary not only took pains of coming all the way from Shillong but his presence was an inspiration for all those present. I would also like to thank the honorable Vice Chancellor of Lucknow University Prof. M. K. Mishra for agreeing to preside over the inaugural session and for the support and cooperation he gave us throughout the seminar. The guidance given by the head of the department Prof. P. K. Srivastava who was also the convener of the seminar and the team effort of the members of the organizing committee saw to the smooth conduct of the seminar. Space does not permit me to name all the individuals

who had played a vital role in the preparation and had so actively participated in the seminar. We trust that they know who they are and I look forward to working with them in the years to come.

I would only like to add that only awareness and discussion of any problem and a fresher perspective to the grievances of the people can bring about a solution and restore peace and development so that North East can rise to its optimum ability and pay its maximum contribution to the progress of nation.

This seminar would not have been possible without financial support of ICSSR, New Delhi, North East Hill Council, Shillong, State Bank of India and UCO Bank, Lucknow. I would also like to thank Mr. Afzal Ahmad advocate for his firing efforts during the Seminar and helping out to publish this work.

Finally I express my sincere gratitude to my publisher Shri M.P. Yadav for published this book in shortest possible time.

Dr. Madhu Rajput

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INTRODUCTION

*Shri Ranjit Shekhar Mooshahari**
Governor of Meghalaya

Let me first make it very sure that I am here as a man from the North East, as a state owner in the development of North East and its integrity with the rest of India. What I am going to say does not reflect the views either of my government or my official capacity in any way. This is the view of an individual who has worked all over India but who was born and brought up and educated in the North East and who has tried to combine the best of the culture that is there in this plural society of a big country.

I am sure that many of you have gone to the North East and seen the places, people and the lifestyle but there are many of you who may not have seen or visited but heard from the people about this region.

Many times I ask the young people competing in

* Inaugural Speech as delivered on 20th November 2009 in Malviya Hall, University of Lucknow (U.P.), India, on the occasion of National Seminar on North East.

examinations like CAT to tell me the capital of North Eastern states but they don't know. This absence of knowledge is a contributory factor to the distance that exists between the mainland and the North East. But if you look at the history of the North East particularly in ancient Indian history you can see the gigantic civilization, in particular in the valley. Let me narrate the North East in three chapters—the ancient, the medieval and the modern. In ancient times the North East was known as Kamarupa. Most of you may know why the name Kamarupa came. This is a part of the great Indian story that when Sati, the consort of Lord Shiva died due to vexation of her father Daksha, Lord Shiva was so angry and unhappy that he carried the dead body of Sati on his head and wandered about the world. Lord Vishnu followed him and chopped the dead body of Sati with a discus into fifty one pieces which fell all over the places. Most important parts fell in the North East. That is why the place came to be known as Kamakhya and Sati came to be known as goddess Kamakhya; the goddess of desire. But lord Shiva did not stop his penance and continued to wander about. The other gods feared that Lord Shiva may get the universal power so they decided to divert his attention, to dilute his concentration and they sent the Indian cupid Kamadeva to make Lord Shiva fall in love with it. Kamadeva succeeded but so enraged was lord Shiva after knowing the truth that he ruined his dreams into ashes with his third eye, the eye between his two eyes. That is why Kamadeva was reduced to ashes and thus the place was known as Kamarupa. Incidentally Kamadeva was restored to life. It is a story which indicates the spiritual and mythological integration of North East with the rest of India.

If you read Mahabharata there are number of references to the North East in it. It is said that Lord Krishna was so struck by the beauty of Kamarupa princess Rukmini that he married her much against the wishes of her father. Her father wanted her to marry someone from Kamarupa itself. So Krishna lifted her, brought her along and married her. Not only this, his grandson Aniruddha was also mesmerized by the beauty of the princess of Tezpur Usha. She was also forcefully married

by Aniruddha. Aniruddha was captured by Usha's father and lord Krishna had to go to rescue him and bring him back along with Usha. So this shows the irresistible beauty of the women of the North East.

Even when Arjuna and Bhima were wandering during vanvasa Arjuna fell in love with the princess of Manipur Chitrangada and married her. Their son became the ruler of Manipur for a long time. Bhima, the mighty Bhima of Mahabharata met princess Hidimba, when he was in the hills of Assam and married her. Their son Ghatotkatch fought in the war of Mahabharata and caused a lot of destruction in Kaurava's forces. These are the stories that we have. But despite all these, in modern times people tend to know less and less about the North East. They are busy more with their technological development and political factors. Once there was a debate about Mizoram. Someone said that Mizoram must be father of Jagjivanram. This is the extent of ignorance that can prevail in the matters of North East.

Why is it that it is the most volatile territory on the earth? It is not only in India that North East is volatile; it is volatile through out the globe. Let me tell you a small story again why it is so. When god created India he had four boxes with him. There were people from North, South, West and North East. God said that there are four boxes, you can take any of them, open them and see what is there inside and you are going to be that. North Indians, as they are very smart people, got up first and picked up a box. They opened it, it was written- Beauty. That's why north Indians are so good looking. People from south opened another box and it was written-brain. People from west opened the third box, it was written-wealth. Then the people of North East picked up the last box. Inside was written-emotions. Without emotions you can not enjoy beauty, brain or wealth. You need emotion to enjoy life. That is why people of North East enjoy life despite all the devastations. And people are very emotional that is why they are volatile. Where people are emotional it is bound to be volatile. So this is the story that narrates, to an extent, the characteristics of people of North East.

It is a recorded history that Hiuen-Tsang visited

Kamakhya in 7th century. He was the contemporary of Harshavardhana in 606-648. While Hiuen-Tsang came to his kingdom, Harshavardhana was in Bengal. He received the pilgrim in Bengal and he was very impressed. From Bengal Hiuen-Tsang went to Kamarupa. Harshavardhana invited him to come to Kannauj for a religious discourse. At that time Hiuen-Tsang was with Bhaskara Varman in Kamarupa—Pragjyotishpur, the ancient name of Guwahati. After receiving invitation from Harshavardhana, Bhaskara Varman decided to march to Kannauj. It is said that Harshavardhana marched on the southern bank of the Ganges from Bengal and Bhaskara Varmana and Hiuen-Tsang marched on northern bank. Bhaskara Varman had 500 elephants in armor accompanying him. After ninety days of journey they reached Kannauj. There was a huge gathering of religious and spiritual people. That was the integration of the people of that period recorded by Hiuen-Tsang and in the books of history of Assam. So this is very surprising as to why the question of alienation has come now when there has been so much of integration and assimilation of people of two territories?

The next important period in the history of Kamarupa was the advent of warriors from Siam. Those days Thailand was known as Siam. Some tribes and a prince came in early 13th century. His force consisted of eight officers, 1800 foot soldiers, 300 cavalries and two elephants. They came, conquered, established themselves and ruled Assam for six hundred years till it became a part of the East India Company. They were probably Buddhist when they came but in over the years they became Hindus. The conquerors were overpowered by the absorbent nature of Hinduism. Hinduism had established deep roots in that period. Later on they came to be known as Ahoms. The name came because the rulers had moved in from the land of Siam. Ha-Sam: Ha means land and Sam means Siam. That was the original Ha Sam which later on became Assam.

Ahoms had an advance sense of history. They kept a record of everything. So from the 13th century the history of Assam is recorded in a very thorough manner. In their six hundred years of rule many things happened but the most important was the

influence of Hinduism on the royal family. The royal family and their subjects converted to Hinduism. But it did not extend to the hill areas of North East. Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland were free from this development because these were very inaccessible areas and Hindu Brahmins did not feel safe to go to these places and take Hinduism to these areas.

Hindus worship Shakti. Even now there are sacrifices, much against the spirit of rational religion. In many parts of North East animal sacrifices take place. It is time now that we try to stop it.

Assam became a part of East India Company in early 19th century, precisely in 1826 but ten years down the century there was a decline of Ahom's rule in Assam. For ten years there was Burmese occupation and this was the one of the darkest period in the history of Assam. There was untold devastation and misery of the people because of perpetuation of cruelty and injustice in general. With the British came the exploitation of oil, tea and forest products. English literature and Christianity spread. They built rail which we still use in North East. With independence someone has remarked that the partition of Bengal made North East even more remote. Earlier the farthest capital of North East was Agartala and it was linked to Kolkata by road which was 300 km long. After the partition the distance became 1,700 km. North East became surrounded by five neighboring countries. India has international boundaries with six nations out of which five bound North Eastern territory while it is connected with only 10 per cent of the land of India. This is what partition did to North East and problem came after that.

After independence the hill areas realized that they were too remote to be part of India. First it was the Naga insurgents who said that they wanted independence. It was followed by Mizoram. When these insurgents manifested in very violent form, Indian forces had to take action against them and the alienation started from that point. At that time some people in India thought that insurgents in Nagaland were influenced by Christian missionaries as they were all Christians. Subsequently insurgency sprouted in Manipur and Assam but who were the

leaders of insurgents in Manipur and Assam? They were Hindus. They were as much Hindu as people in Lucknow or Mathura. Most of the insurgents in United Liberation Front of Ulfa and the other groups are Hindu exploiters.

These are contributory factors but the basic thing was that they wanted to preserve the identity of people. They wanted peace but not by assimilation with the bigger culture of India. Another factor that gave identity was a huge migration of people from across the border. They followed the theory of "Move to Open Space" since there are open spaces in Assam, Tripura and other North Eastern states. From across huge number of people came and displaced the local people. The difference between the displacement on the western border and that on the eastern border is that on the western border partition brought a war of displacement. Those who were Hindu and Sikhs came to India and those who were in minority religion groups went to Pakistan. It was a turn of a kind that was soon over. But in North East it continued for decades. It started in early 20th century and went on and brought about a great demographic distortion. People saw what happened to Tripura.

In Tripura people migrated in large numbers displacing the tribes who were majority at that time but are minority now. They are 32 per cent or even less than that. So people have become very sensitive to migration issue. The All Assam Student Union and the tribes feel that if this migration goes on, they will not be able to survive. So this was one of the factors that caused insurgency along with the discontent towards the government and outrage among the people. It went out of control and manifested in violence, destruction of the innocent people.

It has also been mentioned by the previous speakers that the treatment meted out to the North Eastern people when they are in other states, also breeds a sense of separation among them. Unfortunately it did not happen in the 18th century, it is happening just now. Once when I told my name to someone, he immediately connected it to Japan, then China and later to Thailand. When I told him that I was from Bodoland he did not know where Bodoland was. This is what happens and if it can

happen to me I can understand what the poor students must be feeling because it is not a compliment, it makes you feel a sense of not belonging. So we have to be sensitive in these matters at least those who are educated. But I am sure many of you also do not know where Bodoland is. It is a territory under the VIth Schedule of the constitution of India in Assam.

Assam has a number of administrative and autonomous units under the State Act under the VIth schedule of the constitution. In order to give expression to the aspirations of the people the government created a number of units so that they can prosper according to their own genius.

Insurgency groups today have no ideology. They have degenerated into money collecting groups without accountability. They no more enjoy any popular support and right now all the states in North East except Manipur and parts of Assam are very peaceful. The example that Mizoram and Meghalaya have set is that an insurgency inflicted territory can also become peaceful. Mizoram had the worst insurgency and Meghalaya had insurgency for ten years but today things have changed for better.

There are facilitators of integration. One of these facilitators is the mobility. Large number of people, particularly the young people is going out of North East in search of education and employment. Likewise large number of people from rest of India is visiting North East for industry, business and tourism. So improving communication is important. While this communication improvement is going on, I am sure that the governance improvement is a matter of time. Positively we will have better governance in North Eastern states.

Let's come to assimilation and alienation. We have seen the history of Assam from ancient times. I think in democracy assimilation is not the right thing, it is accommodation. The right word for integration is accommodation. We have to learn to accommodate unity in diversity. Unity in diversity does not mean uniformity in diversity, it means that the diversity must be protected; diversity must be united as it is. It is not that red color will overtake the black color and black will overtake other colors. All colors must constitute the mosaic of diversity.

We are carrying the burden of the past mistakes. Let us not repeat those mistakes and carry forward that burden into the future for every language and culture is drawn from various angles of this heart. As we have tested the drowning swim of civil war and segregation, let us now emerge from that dark chapter.

Mystical, enchanting and intriguing, India's North-East is a region of magnificent splendour and rich cultural heritage, spread over an area of 262,179 sq. km., and consists of eight states. It is a region with a long history and a that encompasses demography, language and culture. Its validity poses a challenge to policy makers and administrators alike. This book is an attempt to understand North-East—its history, culture, the roots of insurgency and factors which bind this region as one despite all the contradictions and conflicts it faces.

Dr. Madhu Rajput is working as an Associate Professor in the Department of Western History, University of Lucknow, Lucknow (UP). Her area of specialization is South Asia, specifically Bhutan. Her first book was *Bhutan: From Theocracy to Democracy*. North-East not only shares a long border with Bhutan but also has cultural similarities with it. North-East has always fascinated Dr Rajput as she wanted to know about the society, culture and people.

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