

North-Eastern Frontier of India

Structural Imperatives

and Aspects of Change

A.C. SINHA

NE
301.
24095416
SIN;3

The present book is divided into two parts: the structural imperative of the region; and the various aspects of social change. While the first part with its six chapters provides the geographical, historical, ethnic, religious and societal background of the region on the larger context, the second part delineates specificity of the transformation in terms of agrarian, urban, environmental and technological situations in the next five chapters.

This book may prove useful to the scholars of anthropology, geography, history, sociology and political science, besides administrators and planners.

Professor Awadhesh Coomer Sinha is a recognised authority on the Himalayan studies in India. An M.A. in Anthropology from Ranchi University, Ranchi and Ph.D. in Sociology from Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, he has taught in Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi and North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He has been visiting faculty in a number of Indian and foreign universities such as Karnataka, Allahabad, Cambridge (U.K.), Paris (France), California, Hawaii and East-West Centre (U.S.A.). He has done field work among the Santals (Bihar), Bhils and Dangis (Gujarat), elite formation (Sikkim), ethnicity and politics (Bhutan) and Christianity (Nagaland).

His academic interests lie in political sociology, historical sociology, sociology of religion, sociology of science, technology, communication and environment. He was a Smut scholar in the University of Cambridge (U.K.) in 1983 and a Senior Fulbright Visiting Professor to U.S.A. in 1989. He is the author of half a dozen books, another half a dozen research reports and above three dozen articles. After heading the Department of Sociology for a decade, he is presently the Dean, School of Social Sciences, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

By the same author

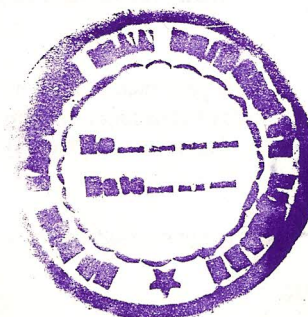
1. Politics of Sikkim, 1975, 1994
2. Studies on the Himalayan Communities, 1983
3. Bhutan: Ethnic Identity and National Dilemma, 1991, 1994
4. Beyond the Trees, Tigers and Tribes, 1993
5. Hill Cities of the Eastern Himalaya: Ethnicity, Land Relations and Urbanisation, 1993

NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER OF INDIA

Structural Imperatives and Aspects of Change

A.C. Sinha

Department of Sociology
North-Eastern Hill University
Shillong, Meghalaya



INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY
NEW DELHI

Gen

F232
74

NE
301.24095416
SIN;3

To
Professor B. Pakem
The First Tribal from the North Eastern Region
To Become the Vice-Chancellor of a Central University

NEHU LIBRARY

Acc. No. 213002

Acc. by (AP) 24/9/02

Date 24/9/02

Class by

Sub. Heading by

Enter by

Transcribed by

© 1994 Indus Publishing Company

First published in 1994 by
Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi

COMPUTERISED

ISBN 81-7387 009-8

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced
in any manner without written permission of the publisher

Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi 110027, and printed at
Efficient Offset Printers, Shahzada Bagh, New Delhi 110035

Preface

A series of titles on the aspects of land and people of the region appear regularly. At times one feels that there is too much rush for the print media to come out with publications on the region. To the extent that old ethnography, reports and monographs have been reprinted, rather shabbily, under different titles. Then a series of quickies, and mostly from the journalists on occasional assignments to the region, are in the publication market. We find the ex-soldiers penning down thier sojourns on the strategic issues of their charge. The various Christian churches have their theological, missiolic and occasional academic exercises in publication. Lastly, the different academic institutions have their theses, anthologies, text-books, research reports, seminar proceedings, etc, published on the region. In short, if it is not a spate, at least it is a good shower of publications on the region.

I gave a serious thought to this before I decided to go for this publication. I have done, a year before, two books on two important themes—urbanization and environment respectively—of the North East region, besides my books on Sikkim and Bhutan. They were well received by the critics as well as the readers.

I weighed my occasional writings on the region and found that most of them were either on the social structural aspects or on the social dynamism and rapid regional transformation. I felt the need to put some of them together. Some of them were updated, revised and edited for the purpose. I added the *Prologue* and the *Epilogue* for introducing the various themes and summing them up at the end. The volume is of a modest size on the regional aspects of continuity and change and I hope the readers will find it relevant for understanding the region in a better way.

As a tribute to the fast changing regional scenario, one of the senior academics of the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

with whom I have a privilege to work for years as a colleague, was elected as the first tribal from the region to be the Vice-Chancellor of a Central University in India. As a token to celebrate such a choice he gracefully accepted my dedication of this volume to him, for which I feel gratified. Before the raw idea of publication took a distinct shape, a number of my colleagues—Prof. Imdad Hussain, Dr. David R. Syiemlieh, Prof. P.K. Mishra, Prof. R. Gopal Krishnan, Dr. P.M. Chacko, Dr. I. Lanu Aier to mention just a few—helped me in various ways to clarify the issues through occasional discussions. And for that I am obliged to them and ‘others’ whose names do not appear in the print. The secretarial assistants of the Department of Sociology, M/s R. Dutta, A. Dkhar, N.P. Sharma and A. Rahman, did the typing and related rigmarole as usual, for which they deserve my special appreciation. Lastly, I am thankful to Mr. M.L. Gidwani, my publisher, not only for attractive and quick publication of the book, but also for his various professional advices.

A.C. SINHA

Acknowledgements

We thankfully acknowledge the kind permission for inclusion in the present anthology granted to us by the organizers of the ‘International Conference on Environment and History in South and South East Asia’ at the National Institute of Science, Technology and Developmental Studies, New Delhi for the paper on ‘Forests of British Assam’; the Director, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla for the paper on ‘the American Baptist Mission Among the Nagas’ presented in the Seminar on ‘Continuity and Change’; and ‘the Nepalese Immigration’ from N.K. Rustomji and C. Ramble (eds) *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, published by Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla; the Member Secretary ICSSR for ‘Inequality and Stratification in the Hill States’ based on the ‘Trend Report on Tribal Studies’, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi.

B.L. Abbi (ed) *North East Region: Problem and Prospects of Development*, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, for chapter five; M.N. Karna (ed) *Peasant and Peasant Protest*, Intellectual Publishing House, New Delhi, for ‘Peasant and Peasant Conflict in Nagaland’; the Editor, *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, Vol. 27(1), for ‘Tipaimukh Hydel Electric Project and the Hmar Apprehensions’; the Director, ISRO, Ahmedabad, for chapter ten from the Research Project Reports on ‘Video Penetration in North East India’ and ‘Rural Messaging Needs in Meghalaya’, and NEHU publication for ‘Structural Imperatives of the Indian Core and North East Region’ from B. Pakem (ed) *Regionalism in India*, Har Anand Publishers, New Delhi.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	7
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	9
<i>Prologue</i>	13

PART I: STRUCTURAL IMPERATIVES

1. Natural Resources and Pre-Colonial Economy	23
2. Forests in British Assam	46
3. The American Baptist Mission Among the Nagas	69
4. <u>Inequality and Stratification in the Hill States</u>	90
5. <u>Managing the Social Consequences of Smallness</u>	117
6. <u>The Nepalese Immigration</u>	132

PART II: ASPECTS OF CHANGE

7. Peasant and Peasant-Conflict in Nagaland	159
8. The Character of Urbanization in the Hill States	169
9. Tipaimukh Hydel Electric Project and the Hmar Apprehensions	186
10. Communication and Development	209
11. Structural Imperatives of the Indian Core and the North-Eastern Region	229
<i>Epilogue</i>	242
<i>Author Index</i>	249
<i>Subject Index</i>	252

Prologue ✓

The North-Eastern Frontier Region of India, the ancient Pragjyotisa and historical Kamrupa and the British province of Assam, consisting of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, has a distinct identity. This landlocked territory representing as much as 7.97 per cent of the Indian geographical area has Bhutan, Bangladesh, Burma and Tibet region of China as her immediate neighbours and a tenuous link to India in the West. Topographically, the entire region as the encatchment area of the Brahmaputra river system is the part of the Eastern Himalayan Extension. Historically, it had strong links with the Gangetic plains, though its natural orientation was towards North to Tibet and East to the South East Asia. Ethnologically, though there have been distinct Caucasoid and Austroloid strains in its population, the main ethnic stream belongs to the larger Mangloid stock and their legends of ethnic migration link them to the North and the East. Same is the situation in terms of linguistic affiliation. The region has a variety of social formations from the highly complex state systems such as the Ahoms to the small, isolated, nomadic band organizations. As an Indian territory its destiny is intimately linked with the larger Indian Union. However, its regional characteristics are so pronounced that the scholars find it convenient to emphasize its closeness to the South East Asian Communities.

It goes without saying that animism was the most prevalent faith among the various communities before they came in contact with the great religions of the world such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Meiteis, Ahoms, Kochs and Tripuris among others were the earliest communities to come within in the Hindu fold. However, under the influence of the Vaishnav movement and Swami Shanker Deb the Hinduism in the region has been free from the various caste disabilities prevalent elsewhere. Islam

entered the region during the Mughal period of the Indian history and got assimilated within the regional dominant cultural contour. In this context, Azam Fakir's *Zakir* and *Zikir* are the precious ingredients of the regional folk cultural commonwealth. The Hinayan Buddhism of Chakma, Magh, Nocte and Singphos and the Mahayan faith of the Monpas and Sherdukpens add further to the religious mozaic of the region. By the middle of the 19th century A.D. a number of Christian missionaries came to the region with their evangelical, medical and educational expertise and they could establish various denominations among Ao, Angami, Garo, Lhota, Mizo, Khasi, Tangkhul, Kuki and other communities. It is a fact that by the time the colonial rule came to an end in India, Christianity turned out to be the most dominant faith among the hill communities of the region south of river Brahmaputra and it could open a modern, westernized and technologically superior window for them. The various buffer and bridge communities of the past, adopted new names for themselves; collated to form larger identities such as the Adi, Naga, Chakhesang, Mizo, etc. and some of them fragmented to new formations such as Hmar from the earliest larger communities.

The historians inform us that there were various principalities before the Ahoms could establish themselves in the Brahmaputra valley. The way they organised their water managed economy through an intricate system of *pyke* on the basis of *Khel* and *Mel*, which was reminiscent of Wittfoegel's *Oriental Dispotism* (Wittfoegel, K.A., 1962). Though plains were ruled with a heavy hand, frontiers were secured through the payment of *posa* and institution of *Kakoti*. Many of these distant communities were loosely linked with the Ahom state and at times their services were requisitioned. There was a limited social intercourse and, at times, Ahom princes were married beyond their limits for the benefit of political alliance. Though there was an economic hierarchy, Ahom Hinduism was largely free from social disabilities experienced in other Hindu kingdoms in India. At the cultural level, early Assamese language was emerging as a lingua franca for the entire region.

At the formal political level, there were three dominant models available in the region: (i) Hindu and Hinduized kingdoms such as Meiteis, Ahoms, Jaintias, Kochs, Dimasas, Tripuris, etc.; (ii) Bud-

dhists like Chakmas, Khamtis, Bhutanese etc. and (iii) tribal polities such as Khasi Syiemships (Sinha, S.C., 1987). Then there were a number of incipient state formations such as Mizos (Lushais), Angamis, Konyak and others. The basically subsistence hill economy generated an extremely limited surplus, which was too insufficient for maintenance of a state structure. On the other hand, the region was on a difficult and agriculturally unsuitable locale, where possession of a plot of land was not preferred to an extensive topographical niche for hunting, grazing or transhumance. The basic character of a hill man is that of defiance and struggle against the natural obstacles and human intrigues (Lattimore, O., 1982). Thus, if a surplus was not generated locally, it was considered imperative to acquire such articles of necessity and luxury by force leading to raid, feud, invasion and even war.

After 1824-26 Anglo-Burmese War, Lakhimpur district, which touched all the geographical sub-regional variations to a great extent, was considered an ideal location for colonization of the white settlers. As luck would have smiled on them, a stray and insignificant vegetation of the region—tea—caught the imagination of the then technologically advanced British entrepreneurs. This resulted in an organised expansion of the tea plantation economy on an entirely technologically primitive base. The natural resources—land, forest, minerals and wild life—were considered inexhaustible. The key word was expansion through adventure, intrigue, greed, treaty and treachery. Among the *posa* articles offered to the Adis and the Mons tribesman bottles of rum, opium, tobacco, were the items gifted to the hillmen (Sinha, A.C., 1986). Still the hillmen were referred as barbarians, savage, uncivilized, wildmen, head-hunters and what not. In this way, while the valley land in the region was being transformed into one of the most progressive plantation economy in the world, the newly emerged formation was causing a havoc to already stagnant indigenous economy.

In case one may make very broad generalizations on the pre-British hill formations, the scenario presents relatively simpler contour. The hill communities possessed of extremely crude technology with their sparse population and abundance of natural vegetation, were engaged in hunting of the wild animals and collecting of the forest products for their subsistence. A second formation was

taking shape in the form of family/community-based subsistence farming through slash-and-burn type of rotational cultivation (*jhumming*) often described as the 'Asiatic mode of production'. Ethnographers have described this economy in which there were no roles for the specialists. A few of them were engaged in barter trade in wild products for exchanging them with salt, dried fish, threads, iron and other necessities. As their legends of migration indicate, hill areas witnessed incessant human movements leading to feuds, raids, reprisals and even wars. It appears by the middle of 19th century the entire hill tract was closely identified with various ethnic groups. Thus, there was hardly a patch of land in the region, which was 'no man's land'. However, the hills with their almost impregnable forests were no 'isolates'; in fact, there were trails across all the significant ranges.

It is a fact that the British did not directly administer the hill districts as they did in the case of the Brahmaputra valley. But over-all British control on the regional economy and inter-tribal relations led to the freezing of the tribal situation as if their natural process of growth was clipped off. A far reaching process was introduced in terms of capital and house taxes. Slowly and slowly, the entire hill region barring the upper ridges of Arunachal Pradesh was brought within the British capitalist economy. This was secured through introduction of cash economy, petty blue coat jobs, elementary education through the Christian churches and creation of administrative market and urban centres (Aier, L. 1986). What resulted in the process was the scenario in which subsistence farming tribes were exploitatively linked to the world metropolitan market in which they were reduced to suppliers of the marginal raw materials and consumers of the industrial goods. To the extent that even *Jhumias* were induced to cultivate some minor crops for cash transaction which were channelled through markets to the urban industrial centres. However, with the carving out of the *scheduled districts* in the hills the British appeared to be reluctant rulers to some of the native tribesmen. Though even their paternalistic caring for the tribesmen did not stop enroad of the private commercial establishments such as Rajasthani wholesalers, timber merchants etc. to tribal areas.

The present book is divided into two parts: the structural im-

peratives of the region and the various aspects of change. While the first part with its six chapters provides the geographical, historical, ethnic, religious and societal background of the region on the larger context, the second part delineates specificity of the transformation in terms of agrarian, urban, environmental and technological situations in the next five chapters. The first chapter introduces the region, its various natural sub-divisions, vegetations and related economic activities and the broad contours of the pre-colonial regional economy. The second chapter on the Forests in British Assam informs the readers how did the British introduce the 'Forest Reserves' on community land, encourage the cattle grazing by the Nepalese on the wasteland for the sake of revenue, get the captive labour from the newly settled 'forest villages', provide tea chests to the tea plantations at the cost of the forests, tackle the Garo movement for de-reservation of the forests and divert the revenue earned by the Forest Department to elsewhere at the cost of the ill-paid forest personnel.

The third chapter on 'The American Baptist Mission Among the Nagas' introduces a new dimension to the regional scenario. The missionaries were introduced to the region with the open support from the administration, they received support from the colonial rulers for their educational and medical activities and occasionally were hand in glove with the colonial masters in their efforts 'to civilize the savages' on the frontiers. There were many reasons for tribals' conversion to Christianity and Christianity has led to some new problems for the tribesmen. However, the Christianity has provided the tribal Christians with a new sense of identity, a window to the modern world and an affiliation to the larger Christian World religion. Chapter four on the tribal social stratification introduces a rather little known social fact that the tribal societies have not been necessarily equalitarian. After providing the ethnographic details of the traditional tribal stratification, the author describes the various processes through which the inequality has further increased after the creation of the tribal states in the region. With the emergence of private landed property in place of a flexible communal control, phenomenon of absentee landlordism, wage labour, share cropping, landless labour, agrarian tension, neo-rich contractor-politician elite have turned out to be the significant fixture in the regional

market oriented economy.

Chapter five reviews the basic character of the regional communities and the tribal states as necessarily that of 'small scale communities'. This chapter raises a number of issues than it answers them. The last chapter (six) of part one is on the Nepalese immigration to the region, which analyses its various aspects. This chapter may be seen in terms of the second chapter on the forest history, which reports the presence of herdsmen and graziers on the waste land and degraded forests. Broadly speaking among the Nepalese immigrants the chapter records the ex-soldiers resettled by the Government on certain strategic locations as 'soldiers' farm', the herdsmen and land hungry farmers and artisans and professionals. Many of the immigrants do not possess documents to establish their citizenship. However, the problems of the ethnic identity in the tribal states for the Indian Nepalese is very serious. The community has suffered hardships in the past and is presently confronted with making a hard choice in terms of reinforcing and re-evaluating the Nepalese identity in India rather than melting away among the various ethnic groups and sub-nationalities in India. In this way, part one identifies geography, history, religion, social structure, smallness of the communities and the immigration as unique structural imperatives, which demand proper understanding before a serious analysis of social transformation is undertaken.

Part two with its five chapters begins with emergence of the peasants on the substantive communal production systems, which was necessarily an aspect of subsistence economy of the past. With the land and economy intricately linked with the world-wide metropolitan marketing system, the past ethnic autonomy on their lands is replaced by co-existence of multi-ethnic communities, leading to occasional conflicts, as reported from the Medziphema Development Block in Nagaland. The chapter eight examines an entirely a new and different aspect of social scene in terms of the nature of urbanization in the tribal states in the region. After informing the readers that urbanization among the hill communities is hardly a hundred years old and a creation of the British 'administrative outposts' in the tribal heart-land, author examines the structure of hill cities, the nature of the urban political participation in the civic affairs and comes out with about half a dozen recommendations for

a meaningful urban management.

Chapter nine on the Tipaimukh Hydel Electric Project examines the social and environmental consequences of a large scale, high technology and multi-purpose river-valley project on a small community such as the Hmars. This chapter reports confusion among the Hmars, callousness of the state authorities and non-concern and mechanical approach of the technocrats. It rightly warns the authorities to examine all the implications before undertaking a Rs. 1400 crore ambitious project in an insurgency-prone frontiers. The chapter ten explicates a different scenario in which the roles played by electronic communication medium has been examined. This chapter reports the social and economic consequences of the availability of the video parlours on the tribal heartland and way it had affected the regional social fabrics. Similarly, it highlights the ground realities of relatively isolated tribal rural set-up, where satellite based telephonic and telegraphic devices are being set up. The process of sending a message is yet to be developed as a mechanical facility; rather it is seen as an occasion to re-establish face to face interaction among the individuals in the region. The last chapter (eleven) examines the conflicting national and the regional perceptions on the character of the social realities and the nature and extent of participation in the public affairs. The epilogue at the end summarizes the structural compulsions and direction of change undergoing in the region.

REFERENCES

- Aier, L.I. 1986, 'Contemporary Social Formations and Ethnic Identity: A Case of Development or Decay' MSS Ph.D. thesis, NEHU, Shillong.
- Lattimore, O. 1962, *Studies in Frontier History*, Mouton, Paris.
- Sinha, A.C. 1986, 'Video Penetration in North East India' MSS, Deptt. of Sociology, NEHU, Shillong.
- Sinha, S.C. 1987 (ed), *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Eastern and North Eastern India*, K.P. Bagchi, Calcutta.
- Witfoegel, K.A. 1962, *Oriental Despotism*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Other Books of Related Interest

- 1. Hill Cities of Eastern Himalaya: Ethnicity, Land Relations and Urbanisation**
By A.C. Sinha, P.M. Chacko & I.L. Aier
- 2. Sikkim: Problem and Prospects of Development**
By Manas Dasgupta
- 3. Trees of Sikkim Himalaya**
By Topdhan Rai and Lalitkumar Rai
- 4. Darjeeling: A Favoured Retreat**
By Jahar Sen
- 5. Tribal Identity: A Language and Communication Perspective**
By Lachman M. Khubchandani
- 6. India and Nepal: Some Aspects of Culture Contact**
By Jahar Sen
- 7. New Technological Civilization and Indian Society**
By B.D. Nag Chaudhuri
- 8. Traditional Potters: Entitlements and Enablements of Artisans**
By Shantha Krishnan

INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi - 110027