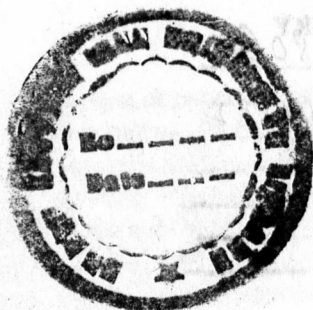


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ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND NATIONALISM IN
NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Edited by *Agrawala*

M.M. AGRAWAL

North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong



INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY

NEW DELHI

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First published in 1996 by
Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi

ISBN 81-7387-055-1

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Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi 110027, and printed at
Elegant Printers, Mayapuri Indl. Area, New Delhi

Foreword

The present volume is a collection of papers presented at a seminar on Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism: Problems in the Context of North-East India. The seminar was held in the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in the month of September 1995, with financial assistance from the ICSSR, Regional Centre, Shillong.

The broad objective of the seminar has been to evolve a fresh understanding of the issues and problems that beset this part of the country. The seminar aimed at removing some of the misunderstandings and misconceptions through its deliberations, and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in evolving conceptual tools and analytical framework for an authentic understanding of the problems.

As the mounting tension between the dominant discourses on nationalism and the various forms of local movements are intensifying, such a seminar can throw some light on the dark areas of our nation-building enterprise vis-a-vis identifying the areas of strength and weakness. In the context of perplexing insurgency and economic backwardness of the North-East region, the spirit of such a seminar is likely to illuminate the path of reconciliation and co-operation among various communities and the agencies of the state.

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Changing Economic and Technological Scenario: Some Ramifications for the North-East India

MAHESH LALWANI

Genesis

Since June 1991, India has initiated widespread economic reforms with the hope that major macro-imbalance in her Balance of Payments (BOP) and in her domestic union budget would come to reasonably accepted norms to strengthen her external and internal economy. Towards this end, it was also necessary for her to produce micro level structural reforms touching all important sectors in the economy. The balance of payments crisis had reached its peak in the summer of 1991 when her foreign exchange reserves declined to nearly 1 billion dollars and simultaneously inflation had soared to 17 percent with slackening industrial production and a low growth rate in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of barely 1.1 percent that year. The recently initiated economic reforms, claims Government of India, have stabilised the economy to register 5% growth rate in her Gross Domestic Product in 1994 and have brought down the annual inflation rate to around 10%, have raised the foreign exchange reserves to 15 billion dollars and have stimulated strong recovery of her export earning. The economic survey of 1993-94 has put her foreign exchange reserves to 10.9 billion dollars as on February 4, 1994 and *Economic and Political Weekly* dated 27th August, 1994 has quoted India's foreign exchange reserves at 17.73 billion dollars at the closing hours of 12 August, 1994. This is a phenomenal increase indeed! An inflow of over 2.5 billion dollars on account of foreign direct and equity portfolio investments is also expected this year. But one must also not forget that the recent sources causing

upsurge in India's net foreign exchange reserves are fickle-natured. The equity participation and direct foreign investment can come and go as may please the investor.

What is unprecedented is the speed and manner in which such reforms have been and are being executed as if India has lost all time. Besides, a picture has been presented as if the reforms in their present form are the only option left to India. "It is doubtful whether the causes of the crisis had been subjected to a thorough analysis and wider discussion. Not even in Parliament was a full scale discussion held. That only weakens the validity of the prescriptions which are administered as the 'only option' open to people of India" (Oommen, 1993). The situation cannot be better described than in the words of Bhagwati and Srinivasan (1993) themselves as the votaries of the speedy reforms. They stated that "conditionalities played a role, for sure, in strengthening our will to embark on the reforms. But the seriousness and sweep of reforms and Rao Government's explicit embrace of them . . . demonstrated that the driving force behind the reforms was . . . our own conviction that we had lost precious time and that the reforms were finally our only options". Considering structural reforms as the only option is rationalised by Bhagwati and Srinivasan in terms of efficiency and growth. They argued that India was faced with unsustainable deficits in her BOP and internal budget leading to macro economic inefficiencies. And this could be remedied only through (microeconomic) structural reforms resting on the tripod of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. In general terms, the structural reforms have to be pushed forward in critical micro-economic areas such as industrial and trade licensing policies, increased privatisation of the economy by lifting physical controls and providing incentives for fresh direct investments (both domestic and foreign); disinvestments in public sector units (PSUs); and finally the acceptance of the Dunkel Draft Text. The structural reforms have also been justified in terms of sustainable growth and the twin objectives of fighting the menace of poverty and unemployment. The structural reforms as pursued by the Government of India so far and the future course of them as would be engineered by the recently concluded GATT would find an increased role for multi-lateralism on the one hand and Trans-National Corporations (TNCs) on the

other hand, Such developments are said to bring forth sustainable economic growth for our economy. But nowhere have Bhagwati and Srinivasan put this hypothesis to empirical test. Perhaps they have acquired extraterrestrial powers to profess the course of future events so emphatically. The most one could say is that the opening of the economy to multilateralism and TNCs may bring forth economic gains. But then it is a hypothesis, which has to be empirically investigated. Besides, even if one grants what they have argued, the content of growth, the process of growth and the distribution of gains of such a growth are important issues that must be addressed to by any serious economist. But then today economics is less of science and has become more of tale-telling. This folkloristic content of the present writings of present economists is best reflected in the untested belief that growth will percolate its gain to the bottom rungs of the society. The truth is far away from this. In India, for instance, growth in employment has sizeably lagged behind the growth in Gross Domestic Product. Growth in annual employment slowed down from 2.8% (1972-73 to 1977-78) to 2.2% (1977-78 to 1982-83) and further down to 1.55% (1983-84 to 1987-88) and should have slowed down even more during the recent years. Compare these employment growth rates with the growth in Gross Domestic Product which was higher throughout these years. In fact, the 1993 Human Development Report of the UNO described this phenomenon as the period of jobless growth. And surely with the growing monopoly power of the TNCs, employment growth would slacken even more in the coming years.

Shift Away from Poor to Rich

Soon after the 1994-95 budget presentation, one has noticed huge fiscal deficit leading to recent inflationary trends. Disturbingly enough, rice and wheat prices have grown faster than that of manufactured goods. "In a pre-budget scoop in January 1994, the Government of India picked the pockets of the poor by increasing the issue prices of essential commodities like wheat, sugar, rice and LPG, followed by a hike in prices of petrol, high speed diesel, all of which affect the common man directly or indirectly. Through these measures, the government mopped up from the poor and the common

man an estimated Rs. 5000 crores. One assumed at that time that the poor had been given a chance to make sacrifices for the country which is facing a severe fiscal crisis. However, a month later, the budget of 1994-95 revealed that Rs. 5000 crores that had been gathered from the poor was not to reduce the national debt or deficit but to provide massive relief to the rich" (Jain, 1994) in the form of excise and income tax reliefs to individuals and corporate sector adding up approx. Rs. 5000 crores, with the end result that the poor were forced to pay for the latter class of people including this speaker. To top it, the recent upsurge in cost of living index has surely eroded the real wages of the poor, whose money wages are not compensated by the rise in dearness allowance. Do such reforms then convey any meaning for the poor? It is a well known fact that the landless farmers seek employment in non land-based activities like wage employment and animal husbandry. It is a different matter that much of the present profit oriented livestock activity is also capital intensive and is land using (green fodder cultivation for crossbred cattle, for instance). Aquaculture and exploitation of India's inland waters and oceanic economic zone for marine products are other capital intensive activities which by their intrinsic nature cannot be the avocation of the poor. Besides, there is found crowding of animals in marginal and small farm sizes (expressed in land-holding), resulting in low land availability per animal. The only redeeming factor is more labour use per animal in these farm sizes.

Patents

The recently concluded GATT to which India now is a signatory (15th April, 1994) has certain clauses related to patent rights that may jeopardise the interests of livestock and crop husbandry farmers directly. We recall that both production and distribution of foundation and certified seeds is not patented. As a result, adoption of HYV seeds by our farmers has been so easy at a nominal cost. In contrast, in Europe and North America, seed production and distribution is in the commercial sector. The *suigeneris* system commonly refers to the system of Plant Breeder's Rights (PBRs) under which the patentee breeder has the exclusive right for 16 years to produce and market the patented seed. Such rights are extendable by another 10

years if the commercial exploitation of the patent had not sufficiently paid back the patentee (section 14 and 15 of the Patents and Designs Act, 1911). Condensed in the Union for the Protection of New Plant Varieties (UPOV), seed patentees enjoy monopoly rights on the sale of variety but not on the variety itself or its genes. Thus other breeders could use any patented variety for further breeding work under the Breeder's Exemption clause. Besides, farmers could also use such a variety for production and could recycle it indefinitely in the subsequent seasons under the Farmer's Exemption. The recently signed Dunkel Draft Text does retain the farmer's clause but has dispensed with the breeder's exemption. This would have serious implications for both livestock and crop husbandry activities in India's agriculture. India's self sufficiency in foodgrains was largely a result of her sound plant breeding programmes in public sector ensuring dissemination of new knowledge to small and large farmers in every nook and corner of the country. Even under the farmer's exemption clause promulgated now, our farmers cannot retain sizeable quantities of patented seeds and surely they cannot market such seeds to other farmers. In this direction, it is relevant to note here that the bulk of the basic genetic resources are actually found in the tropics and sub-tropics. The USA forgets that her status as the largest exporter and producer of rice is due to her stealing away of Indica and Japonica rice germplasm from India and Japan.

Trade Sanctions and Arm Twisting of the Third World

With the advent of recombinant DNA technology, today's biotechnologist may be able to manufacture 'Transgenic Plants' through the modern molecular biological methods. His greatest advantage lies in his ability to shift genes across the species barrier, thereby making possible migration of disease resistance attributes from one crop to the other. The new variety of disease resistant crop therefore would qualify for product patent rights under the new scheme of things. It is pertinent here to distinguish between the process patenting and product patenting. Under the former, the process by which a new drug or plant seed is manufactured is patented and not the product itself. This left inadequate room for others to produce the same product through an alternative process

or improve upon the existing process to get the same product. Under the product patenting under the new scheme of things, it would not be possible any more to do so since product itself is patented. Many would be wondering if such patent rights could practically be practised across the globe. The answer unfortunately is yes. The world's biggest bully, the USA under the Special 301 intellectual property provisions of the Omnibus Trade and Competitive Act of 1988 (commonly known as 1988 US Trade Act) is empowered to take retaliatory action against any country which deny adequate and effective intellectual property protection. After making enquiries, an accused country is promoted from the watch list to priority foreign country status as a prelude to trade sanctions (USIS, 1993). In April 1992, imports from India to USA of pharmaceuticals were denied duty free benefits on the ground that India had failed to provide effective protection to American intellectual property. What had happened was that many Indian drug companies (Dr. Reddy's Laboratory, Cheminor Drugs, Shasun Chemicals, etc.) had produced some patented drugs through alternative routes at sizeably lower costs for the export markets in USA, thereby inviting wrath.

Effects of New Patent Laws

When implemented, the Dunkel Draft provisions on patents would prove worse than the 1911 Patent Act. Firstly, it would immediately take away the right of a country to have her own patent laws. India's 1970 Patent Act would soon look defunct. Secondly, patenting of both the process and the product looks unjust since bulk of the patents are already in the hands of capital rich countries. This bulk would bloat further with the upcoming rat race for acquisition of fresh patent rights among these countries. India could also join it provided man and material are found and deployed in this direction. Thirdly, with the sacrifice of breeder's and farmer's exemption clauses, interests of both farmers and researchers are going to be affected seriously. Fourthly, the net result of this would be the rising prices of drugs, medicines, pesticides, insecticides, seeds, fungicides, etc. which would make adoption of new technology by poor animal and crop husbandmen even more difficult. For them much of scientific advancements will have little relevance.

How sad for millions of them! One can imagine the fate of India's Integrated Rural Development Programme in which livestock rearing is an important activity. Fifthly, patenting of all life forms would make our crossbreeding programme infeasible for the want of patents locally and financial muscle in the hands of farmers as well as research institutions. Sixthly, India's drug exports may diminish sizeably and drug imports may rise in value terms creating macro imbalances in her balance of payments. Seventhly, there could be genetic erosion of all life forms under the new scheme of things. Green revolution has already lent dis-service to conservation of biodiversity. And now the increasing influence of TNCs in the world movement of trade in all life forms further lessen the chances of biodiversity found on the multitude of farms and cattle yards across the globe. Plant varieties or animal semen carrying economic traits of high yield or high profitability or disease resistance would get marketed more aggressively by the patentee TNCs. This would lead to fewer seed varieties or bovine strains being adopted by farmers. "This would have very unfortunate consequences for the viability of livestock and their ability to survive biotic and abiotic stresses" (Sahai, 1993). And, although under new patent laws research exemption clause has been retained, the results of such research cannot be commercially exploited. Indian agricultural scientists would thereby be constrained to use domestically found plant and animal germplasm (if patented) to breed improved species. Profitability would be the hallmark of all scientific research and acquisition of more and more patents would become an end in itself.

Recent Reforms and Indian Agriculture

There is a belief that structural reforms have too often related themselves to industry rather than agriculture. That is why tariff protection measures have been called incentives for industry. But subsidies to agriculture have been criticised. Many-a-scholar believe that by having quantity and value restrictions on export of many agricultural crops, we keep domestic agricultural prices depressed and as result farmers instead of receiving subsidies are actually subjected to net taxation. Unfortunately, no well documented research effort has been cited or carried out to establish the credentials of the

arguments. Government intervention in agricultural markets, on the other hand, is justifiable on the grounds of price and output stability and food security. Agricultural incomes are free of incidence of income tax, as well. This is additional ground to at least govern prices of agricultural produce of those who enjoy such tax benefits vis-a-vis other cross sections of the society.

Among agricultural reforms, subsidy on phosphatic and potassic fertilisers has been withdrawn but it has continued on nitrogenous fertilisers. It has led to imbalance in use of fertiliser mix with more than required application of urea. Zoning restrictions on movements of foodgrains have been lifted. Molasses prices have been decontrolled with its trade completely decanalised. Levy quotas on sugar have been drastically reduced. Trade and manufacturing restrictions on processed foods, fruits and vegetables have also been removed. Decanalisation of dairy products has already paved a way for private investments to enter this sector in a big way. Some of these reforms are in right direction and some need critical evaluation. But what looks sure is that India's endorsement of new patent laws surely would harm her millions of farmers spread out from remote North East to heart of Indian agriculture in Punjab and Haryana.

To sum up, the forthcoming process and product patent rights mostly in the hands of TNCs, having headquarters in the North, are going to make livestock and crop activities capital intensive. Globalisation of India's agriculture may bring direct foreign investments in food processing industry including dairy, aquaculture and meat industries. Those who have the land and capital resources may stand to benefit. But the condition of landless livestock farmer is unlikely to improve. Regional disparities (North East vis-a-vis Haryana) would start to accentuate. But in all fairness, let us consolidate our understanding on the subject by carrying out meaningful empirical analysis.

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