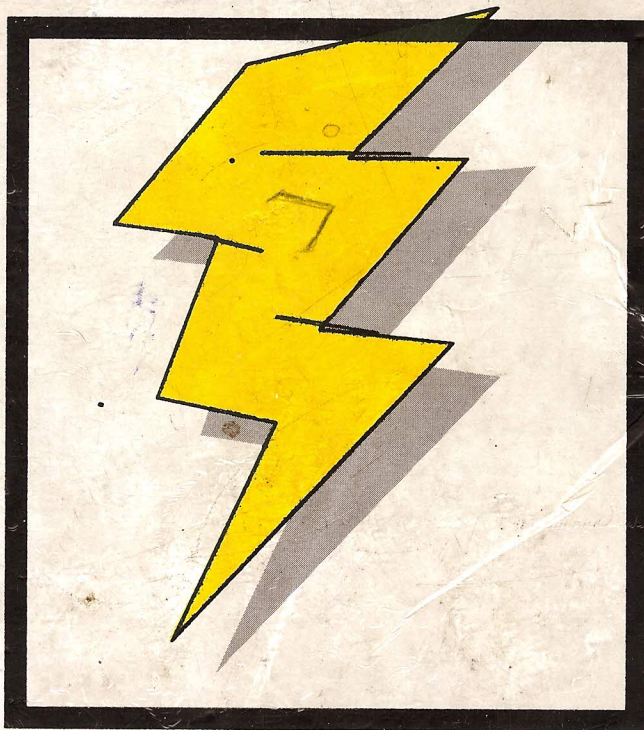


NORTH-EAST INDIA

*Problems,
Policies
&
Prospects*



H.K.BARPUJARI

For decades India's North-east is in the throes of tension and turmoil. This book seeks to identify the problems of North-east India and analyse and assess the policies of the Union and State Governments to ensure peace, stability and security of the strategically important sensitive region.

The restructuring of the States on linguistic basis did not find favour with the emerging elite of the ethnic groups both of the hills and the plains. To satisfy the political aspirations of the tribesmen, the balkanisation of Assam was set in motion and the process continued, but an appropriate solution of the problem is still not in sight. To aggravate the situation an unending influx of migrants of the post-Independence period created an explosive situation upsetting the demographic balance of the entire region. The author has delineated objectively, the nature and extent, apart from the effects of immigration, the role of political parties and how and to what extent the Union and State governments have tackled this volatile and emotive issue. The entire region is seething with secessionism, militancy and insurgency bred by a sense of alienation, deprivation and neglect. The endeavours that had been made by the Centre and State governments to bring militancy to the negotiation table bore no fruit. The policy of the government, the author strongly feels, should be conciliatory, but firm; if conciliation fails, the divisive and secessionist forces must be brought under control with an iron hand lest the situation be out of control.

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**NORTH - EAST INDIA:
PROBLEMS, POLICIES AND PROSPECTS :
SINCE INDEPENDENCE**

by

**H.K. Barpujari, M.A., Ph. D (Lond)
Professor Emeritus : University of Gauhati**



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Preface

Since the Transfer of Power India's North-east came into prominence and geo-political significance as it bordered three unfriendly countries—China, Burma (now Myanmar) and East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). For decades the entire region was in the throes of tension and turmoil. (This book seeks to identify the problems and to analyse and assess the policies of the Union and State governments in the post-colonial period to ensure peace, security and stability of this strategically important sensitive region.)

The restructuring of the States on linguistic basis did not find favour with the newly-emerged elite of the tribals in the hills: it deprived them, as they felt, of their political and cultural identity in the context of the territory composed of diverse ethnic groups at different economic levels and political development. The Sixth Schedule devised to satisfy their needs and aspirations within the framework of the parent State could not meet their demands. Hence followed the fragmentation of Assam with the emergence of Nagaland as a full-fledged State in 1964. The Assam Reorganisation and the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 which created five States and two Union Territories (now States) could not but inspire Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills and the tribesmen in the plains to make demands of autonomy as a stepping stone to Statehood. To what extent the balkanisation of Assam thus set in motion, provided a appropriate solution or created new problems; answers to this question will be found in succeeding pages.

The influx of immigrants in the wake of the partition of India and the emergence of Bangladesh had created an explosive situation upsetting the demographic balance in the north-east. If the inflow remained unabated, the plainsmen felt, they will be aliens in their homeland and their very identity will be lost. The hillmen also feared they will be outnumbered and swamped; their main prop the land and forests will also be lost to them. The inevitable reaction, an anti-foreigner's drive paralysed the government and then followed in its wake an orgy of violence, looting, arson and killings which took a heavy toll of human lives and loss of property worth millions. What is the nature and extent of the influx of immigrants? Is the identity of the ethnic groups, including the major community namely the Assamese, really in danger? What was the rôle of the political parties including the party in power? How and with what effect the Union and the

State governments tackled the problem? Is the problem of influx insoluble? These are some of the questions which this book seeks to explain.

There had also been a growing sense of alienation bred by geographical isolation, communication gap and above all prolonged neglect and indifference of the Union government. Small wonder that the region is seething with secessionism, militancy and insurgency. The endeavours that had been made by the Union and State governments to bring the ultras to the negotiating table bore no fruit. The policy of the government, the author strongly feels, should be conciliatory but firm. Conciliate to the utmost, not by words but by deeds, eradicating feelings of alienation, deprivation and neglect. Conciliation should not be perverted to appeasement which is a sign of weakness. If conciliation fails, the divisive and secessionist forces must be brought under control with an iron hand and in the process, care should be taken, the innocents should not be punished along with the guilty.

The current or contemporary history is yet to attract the attention of the Indian historiographer. He is to deal with the raw data, 'proximity of events and personalities' and 'involvement of events and happenings' around him. There is nothing like a final verdict in history: for a better perspective and understanding history is being reassessed, reinterpreted and reconstructed from time to time in the light of new sources unearthed. True, a historian may discover facts which may be of vital importance to him for explorations of truth or express a judgement which may adversely affect interests at certain quarters or powers that be. The author strongly feels, history is no respecter of persons and that the duty of a historian is to lay bare facts or pass a judgement without fear or favour. Under no circumstances should he suppress or distort facts to suit interests personal, political or communal. Clio has no other interest than the search for the truth, the whole truth, irrespective of national, religious, linguistic or regional considerations. Above all, his findings must serve the interests of the community by removing misunderstanding, strengthening views and enlightening the public on both its strong and weak points.

Archival materials on North-east are not accessible to scholars for the period under review. Annual, quinquennial reports, and documents of historical importance remain unpublished nor readily available. The present analysis is based by and large on reports, official and unofficial, monographs, brochures, scholarly papers and articles published in journals, periodicals and media, local and national. These are invaluable source materials for the subject under discussion based as these are on personal

(vii)

knowledge or on the reports of those who had witnessed the events. Grateful thanks are due to all those whose pioneering works the author extensively made use of.

Chandmari : GUWAHATI

H.K. Barpujari

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The present work has grown out of author's Presidential address read at the fifty-sixth session of the Indian History Congress, Calcutta, December 1995. It would not have seen the light of the day but for the encouragement and help the author received from several quarters. Grateful thanks are due to ex-Chief Minister late Hiteswar Saikia, for having given the author an opportunity to verify some of his statements, to Professor Hiren Gohain for his valued comments and suggestions and to Dr S.K. Barpujari for the assistance rendered throughout for the preparation of the typescript. Acknowledgements are due to Professor Imdad Hussain, *NEHU*, and Sanjoy Hazarika of *The New York Times*, New Delhi, for furnishing invaluable materials, clippings and books not readily available and to Srimati Rita Das and her colleagues of the Central Library, Guwahati for the courtesy and help rendered in the collection of materials in their custody. Thanks are also due to Girindra Nath Deba for the typing work done by him, and to Krishan Kumar of Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, for undertaking the publication of the book despite the prohibitive cost of printing and paper and other inputs.

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Abbreviations Used

- AAPSU*, All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union
AAMSU, All Assam Minority Students Union
AASU, All Assam Students Union
AAGSP, All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad
ABSU, All Boro Students Union
AGP, Asom Gana Parishad
AJD, Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal
AJYCP, Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad
ALMA, A'chik Liberation Matgrik Army (Garo Hills)
AMSU, All Manipuri Students Union
APHLC, All Party Hill Leaders Conference (Meghalaya)
ASDC, Autonomous State Demand Committee (Karbi - Anglong)
ASR, Assam Secretariat Records
ATTF, All Tripura Tiger Force
BAC, Boro Autonomous Council
Barpujari, H.K. Barpujari
BPSMC, Boro People's Statehood Movement Council
Br. SF, Boro Security Force
BSF, Border Security Force
BSMC, Boroland State Movement Council
BSS, Boro Sahitya Sabha.
CEC, Chief Election Commissioner
CENSUS, Census of India, Report (Assam), Part III
CHT, Chittagong Hill Tract

CPI, Communist Party of India

CPI (M) Communist Party (Marxist)

CRPF, Central Reserve Police

Deka, Kanak Sen Deka

DHD, Dima Haram Dauga (N.C. Hills)

EITU, Eastern India Tribal Union

Gupta, Shekhar Gupta

HALC, Hynniewtrep A'chik Liberation Council (Khasi Hills)

HSPDP, Hill States People Democratic Party

Hazarika, Sanjoy Hazarika

Hill Tribes, Problem of Hill Tribes, North Eastern Frontier

HPC, Hmar People's Convention

IBRF, Indo- Burmese Revolutionary Force

IFC, Indian Armed Forces

IM(DT) Illegal Migrant (Determination by Tribunals) Act

IOR, India Office Records

ISI, Inter Services Intelligence (Pakistan)

Judicial Enquiry, Judicial Enquiry under Chairmanship of T.U. Mehta

KASDC, Karbi Autonomous State Demand Committee

KCP, Kangleipak Communist Party (Manipur)

KIA, Kachin Independent Army (Myanmar)

KNA, Kuki National Army (Manipur)

KNV, Karbi National Volunteers (Karbi - Anglong)

KSU, Khasi Students Union

MNF, Mizo National Front

Menon, Romesh Menon

Murty, T.S. Murty

Nayar, Kuldip Nayar

NDFB, National Democratic Front of Boroland

NEC, North-Eastern Council

NEDFI, North Eastern Development Financial Coporation Ltd.

NEEPCO, North Eastern Electric Power Corporation

NEFA, North East Frontier Agency

NEIHA, North East India History Association

NEICSSR, North East India Council of Social Science Research

NESCC, North-East Student's Co-ordination Committee

NLD, National League for Democracy (Myanmar)

NLFT, National Liberation Front of Tripura

NNC, Naga National Council

NNO, Naga National Organisation

NPC, Naga People Convention

NSCN (K) National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang)

____ (M) National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Muivah)

NSF, Naga Students Federation

PDF, People's Democratic Front (Boro)

PLA, People's Liberation Army (Manipur)

PLP, Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad

PREPAK, Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (Manipur)

Prabhakara, M.S. Prabhakara

PTCA, Plains Tribal Council of Assam

RAW, Research and Analysis Wing

RPF, Revolutionary Peoples Front (Manipur)

Rustomji, Nari Rustomji

SDUF, Self-Defence United Front of South - East Himalayan Region

SHDC, Singlung Hill Development Council

SLORC, State Law and Order Restoration Council (Myanmar)

SRC, State Reorganisation Commission

SULFA, Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam

Tewari Commission, The Commission of Enquiry under Chairmanship of
Tribhuvan Prasad Tewari

TNV, Tribal National Volunteers (Tripura)

TUJS, Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti

UDF United Democratic Front

UMF, United Minority Front

UNI, United News Agency of India

UNLF, United Liberation Front (Manipur)

UNPO, Unrepresented Nations Peoples Organisation

UPPA, United People's Party of Assam

Verghese, B.K. Verghese

The Reorganisation of States

The territorial changes were made in India, students of Indo-British history are well aware, as a result of accident following the growth of British power in India. These were designed to serve imperial interests administrative, economic, strategic and military, not in the interest of the needs, wishes and aspirations of the people. With phenomenal development of regional languages in the nineteenth century, there had been an increasing demand for the redistribution of Indian provinces on regional lines. The Montagu-Chelmsford Report, 1918, commended that 'the business of the Government could be simplified if administrative units were both smaller and more homogeneous... It is also a strong argument in favour of linguistic or racial units of government that by it possible to conduct the business of legislation in the vernacular, they would contribute to draw into the area of public affairs men who were not acquainted with English'¹. Notwithstanding the difficulties to be encountered in the State reorganisation and financial implications, the *Indian Statutory Commission*, 1930, made definite recommendation 'for reviewing and, if possible, resettling the the provincial boundaries' as early as possible, and that race, religion, economic interest, geographical contiguity should be factors which should govern redistribution². The Indian National Congress (INC) indirectly supported the linguistic principle in 1905 when it demanded the annulment of the Partition of Bengal.³ In its Nagpur session 1920, the Congress recommended that 'time has come for redistribution of provinces on linguistic basis', and this was reiterated in its sessions Calcutta 1937, Wardha 1938 and in its election manifesto 1945-46.

There had been a radical change in the perception of the Congress leaders in the wake of the new problems after the Partition of India demanding serious consideration on implementation of earlier commitments. The question was examined by the *Linguistic Provinces Commission* of the Constituent Assembly or the *Dar Commission*, July -

-
1. *Report on Indian Constitutional Reform*, 1918, para 246.
 2. *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission*, ii, para, 25.
 3. Sitaramayya, P., *History of Indian National Congress*, i, 62.

December 1948. The Commission considered it 'inadvisable' under prevailing circumstances as the country had then to face more important problems of defence, refugees, food, inflation and production. Moreover redistribution of States required a great deal of preparation and planning for which administrative personnel then available was not adequate. In forming provinces, the Commission also felt that emphasis should primarily be given on administrative convenience. Apart from homogeneity of language, stress should be given to history, geography, economy and cultural mores.⁴ At the Nagpur session of the Congress, 1948, a committee was appointed consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattavi Sitarammya, the *JVP Committee*, to consider in the light of the new problems that had arisen after Indian Independence and in the context of the report of the Dar Commission. Concurring in the recommendation of the Commission, the Committee recorded a note of warning against linguistic provinces and emphasised on security, unity and economic prosperity of India and that every separatist or disruptive tendency be rigorously discouraged.⁵

In spite of qualified support of the Dar Commission and I.V.P. Committee, the Ministry of Home, Government of India, had to go ahead with the scheme of reorganisation of States on linguistic basis. The reasons were not far to seek. Linguistic redistribution of States had been a part of Indian National Movement. It had gone deep into the minds of the masses, any reversal of the process 'would lead to a frustration with serious consequences'. This had become all the more necessary since India with her programme of large scale planning demanded 'enduring permanent Units'. In view of uncertainties there existed a general reluctance to invest funds in disputed areas.⁶ *The States Reorganisation Commission* (SRC) appointed by a Resolution of the Ministry of Home, 29 December 1953, with Sayyid Fazl Ali (*Chairman*), H.N. Kunjru and K.M. Panikkar, was required to examine 'objectively and dispassionately' the question of reorganisation of States of the Indian Union. The Commission issued a Press Note on 22 February 1954, inviting written memorandum from members of the public and private association interested in the problem of reorganisation of States. Of the basic principles to be kept in view in the reorganisation of State the Press Note laid down :

-
4. Cited in the *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission*, paras 131, 147.
 5. *Ibid*, 2-7.
 6. *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*, 1955 ; Introduction and Appendix A., Resolution of the Ministry of Home Affairs, 29 December 1953.

The language and culture of an area have an undoubted importance as they represent a pattern of living which is common in that area. In considering reorganisation of States, however, there are other important factors which have also to be borne in mind. The first essential consideration is the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India. Financial, economic and administrative considerations are almost equally important not only from the point of view of each State but for the whole nation. India had embarked upon a great ordered plan for economic, cultural and moral progress. Changes which interfered with the successful prosecution of such a national plan would be harmful to the national interest.⁷

In a federal plan, advocates of the linguistic States believe, the constituent States must possess a minimum degree of homogeneity to ensure emotional integration so necessary for the working of democratic institutions. That a multiplicity of such languages would tend to weakness and inefficiency in administration and rivalry and jealousy in politics. Linguistic States, therefore, 'is the only national basis for restructuring the States as it reflects the social and cultural pattern in well defined regions of the country'. Therefore, in a democratic set-up like that of India based on universal adult suffrage the political, administrative and academic activities of the States should be conducted in regional language. On the otherhand, linguistic principle tends to encourage exclusiveness. It impedes if not obliterate feelings of national unity with its emphasis on local culture, history and language. Instances are too many, States based on languages are intolerant, aggressive and expansionist in character, 'a sense of irredentism' is discernible in unilingual States claiming neighbouring territories on the basis of linguistic statistics.⁸ The policy-makers in New Delhi utterly failed to realise that in a multi-racial and multi-lingual country like India, erection of linguistic States would unlock Pandora's box for further division of the country destroying her unity and integrity and opening up flood-gates of racism, linguism and parochialism and in its train arson, violence and killings. This had happened in many parts of India and is happening even now in North-east India which will be unfolded in subsequent pages.

In its memorandum to SRC, the Government of Assam represented to maintain the *status quo* : of course it would welcome the merger, if

7. *Ibid.*, Appendix B., See Press Note.

8. *Ibid.*, Chap. II and III.

possible Cooch Behar, Manipur, Tripura and close connection with North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Proposals were made for the formation of a Kamatapur State consisting of Goalpara, Garo Hills, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri besides a Purbachal State consisting of areas in and around Cachar⁹. In a conference held at Tura, October 1954, Hill leaders led by Williamson Sangma resolved to submit a memorandum to SRC demanding a Hill State on the ground that the Sixth Schedule did not endow the autonomous districts with adequate powers to safeguard their interests social, economic and political.¹⁰

The Commission was guided by the principle that a border State should be a well-administered, stable and resourceful unit capable of meeting emergent problems arising out of military exigencies. 'It should be safer to have in our border relatively larger and resourceful States rather than small and less resilient units'. In spite of her multi-racial and multi-linguistic character, therefore, it recommended that the new State of Assam will include all the existing areas and include Tripura (about 89,040 square miles) which cannot stand by itself. Though Bengali is the language of the majority of the people, West Bengal was not interested in this territory and its merger with Assam, the Commission thought, would bring the entire border between India and Pakistan, under one single control, namely Government of Assam. The proposed Purbachal State consisting of Cachar, Tripura, Lushai (Mizo) Hills, Naga Hills, Manipur and NEFA, having international boundaries on three sides, it was felt, will have neither resources nor stability to the border areas. On the same ground creation of Kamatapur was not acceptable. The integration of NEFA was not feasible as a special kind of administration was contemplated for this frontier province¹¹. In regard to the demand for a separate hill State, the Commission was strongly of opinion that the hill districts will not be able to mobilize, despite reasonable grant from the Centre, the necessary resources, both human and physical, to implement successive development schemes. In its view, the separation will add to the cost of administration and render difficult coordination of policies and programmes between the State of Assam and hill areas, on the one hand, and the hill districts themselves, on the other. Moreover, it was found with the exception of Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, tribes in other areas were not

9. *Ibid.*, Chap. XVI, 183 f.

10. *Infra*, 14

11. *Op. Cit.*, 183f.

in favour of separation. The scheme was, therefore, considered 'neither feasible nor in the interest of the tribal people themselves.'¹² The Commission's recommendation with regard to Assam and hill areas was accepted by the Government of India. Tripura and Manipur were made Part C States in the Indian Union. NEFA was retained as the Frontier Agency and later turned into Union territory of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Commission held the view that the *Inner Line Regulations* were introduced ostensibly 'to discourage unnecessary interference with and economic exploitation of the tribal people'; in reality 'to exclude all contact, between them and the inhabitants of the plains'¹³. A perusal of the archival materials will reveal that the *Regulations* did not aim at segregating the people of the hills from those of the plains, but 'to check the overzealous military officer's advance to dangerous and exposed positions' which had been the source of complications with the frontier tribes. The district officers were told not to¹⁴ extend their effective jurisdiction upto the Line and beyond it;

the tribes.. should be left to manage their own affairs with only such interference politically on the part of our officers as may be calculated to establish personal influence for good among the chiefs and tribes. Any attempt to bring the country between our settled districts and Burmah under our direct administration even in the least way.. or to govern it as British territory, should be steadily and sternly resisted.¹⁵

The district officers, however, could not remain passive when trans-border tribes raided their administrative units or indifferent to murders and many of these just across the border. Self interest and humanitarian reasons prevailed, areas of administrative control grew and the *Inner Line* moved forward. Apparently, the concept was kept flexible. In 1875 it was not so much political as economic considerations that actuated the Government of India to extend these *Regulations* into the Darrang and Lakhimpur frontier.¹⁶ At present it has outgrown its original purpose to curb 'impetuous British officers and to leave tribals undisturbed'. It has

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Foreign Proceedings, Political-A.*, 1872, May, Nos.16-34. Aitchison to the Secretary Government of Bengal, 30 January'; Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes : North East Frontier*, iii, 10-11 : Chakravarti, P.C. *The evolution of India's Northern Borders*, New Delhi, 1971, 23f.

15. *Ibid.*,

16. *Ibid.*, 117-8.

come to be regarded as the only effective mechanism to protect and preserve tribal identity and culture. Small wonder that in early 1995 when the Home Minister S.B. Chavan indicated Centre's intention to withdraw *Inner Line Regulations* to enable the tribesmen to derive the benefits of the new economic policy, Chief Ministers of hill areas stoutly opposed on the ground that if restriction is withdrawn the entire region would be open to outsiders 'to set-up trade and industrial projects, jeopardising the interest of the sons of the soil and upsetting demographic balance by the influx of foreigners'¹⁷. That the *Inner Line* provides the tribal people a protection regarding the land which is very dear to the tribal people'. Said Nagaland Chief Minister: 'until and unless another safeguard is provided in lieu of ILP we cannot support the move.'¹⁸ 'The need for tribal people is', the Home Minister was told by the Mizos, 'survival as a tribal and development is our secondary issue.'¹⁹

(Admittedly, geographical and administrative unification of North-east India or undivided Assam was artificial and not a real one. Historically, linguistically, socially and culturally the hill tracts have no affinity with the people of the plains. It is a historical accident for administrative reasons these areas had been tagged to the province. Under the Government of India Act 1919, administration of tribal areas came under the Governor and outside the purview of the Minister. These areas, known as 'Backward Tract' were excluded even from the operation of the Constitution Act, 1935.) The Statutory (Simon) Commission maintained that :

The stage of development reached by the inhabitants of these areas prevents the possibility of applying to them methods of representation adopted elsewhere. They do not ask for self-determination, but for security of land tenure and freedom in the pursuit of their ancestral customs. Their content does not depend so much on rapid political advancement as on experienced and sympathetic handling, and on protection from economic subjugation by their neighbours.

As recommended by the ^{Simon} Commission these were divided into two categories viz. *Excluded Areas* : Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, North Cachar Hills and North-East Frontier (Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur) Tracts; *Partially Excluded Areas* : Garo Hills, Mikir Hills and British portion of Khasi-Jaintia Hills²⁰. The former, excluded from the operation from the

17. *The Statesman*, 8 August 1994.

18. Exclusive interview with S.C. Jamir, CM, Naga Hills *The Sentinel*, 14 July 1994.

19. *The Sentinel*, 3 September 1994.

Act, had been administered directly by the Governor and the elected Ministry had no jurisdictions over them, though finance and staff had to be made available from the province. The latter had elected representatives and the Ministry was primarily responsible for the peace and good government.

As a matter of fact the separation of the hill areas from Assam and the formation of a North Eastern Agency comprising hill areas of Assam, Burma and Chittagong may be traced to the Chin-Lushai Conference of 1892. The scheme was deferred on account of 'insuperable difficulties'²¹, particularly intercommunication, but revived on a wider scale by the Government of Assam in its comment on the 'Recommendations' of the Statutory Commission, 12 August 1930. It was suggested that the Centre might 'enquire whether it would not at least be desirable to combine with administration of the 'Backward Tract' in Assam with that of Arracan, Chittagong and Pakokko Hill tracts, the Chin Hills and the area inhabited by the Rangpang Nagas on both sides of the Patkais²². This was based on the notes prepared by J.H.Hutton, DC, Naga Hills and N.E.Parry of Lushai Hills.²³

A definite shape to the proposal was given by Sir Robert N.Reid, Governor of Assam (1939-42), in his *A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam*.²⁴ Stressing the differences between the people of the administrative areas of the plains with those in the hills, ethnologically, linguistically and culturally as well as their conflicting interests, Reid considered it absolutely necessary with the introduction of Provincial Autonomy some form of protection until they would stand on their own feet either as an integral part of the province in which they were located or as independent units of the federation as a whole. He was convinced :

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20. *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission*, also known as *Simon Commission*, II, Part iii, Chap 2; Reid, Sir Robert, 'The Excluded Areas of Assam'. *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1944, 18f.
 21. *Despatch, Court of Directors*, Military, 24 December 1891.
 22. *ASR., Political (Reform)*, December, Nos. 1-3 RFM 8/8801. August.
 23. *Vide Views of the Local Government on the Recommendation of the Statutory Commission*, 1930, 408-9.
 24. *IOR, L/P and S/12/3115A*, see 'Note'. It is believed at certain quarters that the author of the scheme was no other than Reginald Coupland, Beit Professor of the University of Oxford. He visited India prior to the publication of his notable work, *British Obligation: Future of India* (1944), and had discussions on the subject with officials concerned both in New Delhi and, Shillong.

The inhabitants of the Excluded Areas would not now.. not be ready to join in any constitution in which they would be in danger of coming under the political domination of the Indians... The other Excluded Areas are less... politically minded, but I have no doubt whatever as to their dislike of the idea of being attached to India under a Parliamentary system. Throughout the hills the Indians of the plain is despised for his effeminacy but feared for his cunning. The antipathy to him of the Assam hillman is strictly comparable with that of his cousin the Burmese and merit a serious consideration. The people of the hills of Assam are as eager to work out their own salvation free from Indian domination as are the people of Burma, and for the same reasons.²⁵

Reid was therefore strongly of the opinion that there was no other solution of the tribal problem other than that as advocated by Hutton and Parry, formation of a North-East Province or Agency embracing all the hill tracts from the Lushai (rather Lakher) on the south right round the Balipara Frontier Tract on the north embracing Chittagong hill tracts of Bengal, the Nagas and Chins of Burma as well as the Shan States. He would place the new province under a Chief Commissioner, freed from the control of the Government of India, directly under an appropriate department at Whitehall. In the event of rearrangement of boundaries, Reid was prepared even to sever 'unnatural, alliance of Sylhet and Cachar with Assam' and returning those two districts to Bengal. The remainder might be too small for a Governorship, yet the balance of advance, he was convinced' would be all the other way, 'A new Assam, small but homogenous would be a much happier place than now'; for 'valleyism' would disappear and it would be a 'greater boon.'²⁶

Several meetings were held at Simla in December 1943. It has been held by scholars, in view of 'immense difficulties' geographical, linguistic and financial, the scheme was abandoned²⁷. In reality the problem of tribal areas of Assam continued to be discussed both in New Delhi and Whitehall even after 1942. It appears, Mr Amery, Secretary of State, was well aware that proposals were on anvil for preparation of legislation with the object of declaring, certain Excluded Areas to *Tribal Areas*,²⁸ making them

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 21-2.

27. Bimal J. Deb and Dilip K. Lahiri, 'North-Eastern province and its viability', *NEIHA*, 1986, 206-7.

thereby the responsibility of the Centre. While awaiting for the considered proposal from the Department of External Affairs, he desired in his despatch on 1 February, 1945 to examine the wider question of future administration of the tribal areas both from political and defence point of view.

Sir Andrew Clow, Governor of Assam (1942-46), in view of uncertainties of the future of the tribal areas and of India, had grave doubts whether it would be possible to frame at that stage a satisfactory plan, and as such he refrained from making any comment on the subject. As to the suggestion that the tribal areas in the south should be brought to the same status as those in the north, it was pointed out that if that were done, the Province of Assam would be 'a long narrow finger, stretching up the Brahmaputra Valley'. Clow preferred a future in which the Tribal Areas and the Excluded areas should be merged into the province of Assam rather than cut off from it and he was at that stage inclined to regard the proposal to convert the Excluded Areas into Tribal Areas as retrograde at any rate south of the Brahmaputra.²⁹

A meeting was held, on the suggestion of the Secretary of State, at the Department of External Affairs on 10 March, 1945 which was attended apart from Olaf Caroe, Secretary External Affairs, J.P. Mills, Adviser to the Governor of Assam, Tribal Affairs, Mc Guire, Scheduled Areas Department, Government of Burma. From the proceedings it is clear that the Burmese government was not in favour of amalgamation. All that they wanted was:

An Agency on the Burma side and one on Indian side under separate forms of administration. The Agency on each side eventually being contemplated as federating with Burma or India, but meanwhile ministerial sphere by cadres which would not be common, but would be under Burma or India in each case, but might be exchangeable.³⁰

It was generally agreed that 'the boundaries would be drawn with regard to ethnography rather than geographically' and these distinct tribes should not be divided between two administrations. The meeting

28. These were beyond the administrative areas of Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts, but within McMahon Line and outside the administrative boundary of the Naga Hills and lying between that district and Burma.

29. *IOR, LP and SB115A*; Secret Ext, 5296/44, Whitehall, 1 February 1945; Andrew Clow, *The Future of Tribal People of Assam*, 46-7.

30. *Ibid.*, Secret Record of Informal meeting, 10 March 1945.

also ruled out altogether, as suggested by the Assam Governor, the conversion of Partially Excluded Areas, which had already enjoyed a measure of democratic government and elected members to the legislature, to the status of Tribal Areas.

The colonial scheme of co-ordination or 'Crown Colony' though had its burial with the Transfer of Power in 1947, the kaleidoscopic changes in north-east India in the wake of India's Independence bear ample testimony to the fact that erstwhile tribal experts clearly visualised the complexities of the problem of the tribesmen of North-east and some of their comments and observations were prophetic.

The administration of the *Backward Tracts* was confined to the maintenance of law and order and little thought was given to economic development or welfare of the people. The administrative head of the district was the Deputy Commissioner (D.C.) Neither the D.C. nor his subordinates took much interest in promotion of the welfare activities in their respective areas. Some of the tribesmen had *morungs* or *Bachelor Halls* which served as training centres to impart education on tribal life and warefare, but no organisation for socio-economic development. As a result even Partially Excluded Areas *viz.* Mikir and Garo Hills, remained backward. Tribal economy continued to be predominantly agricultural conducted largely by *jumming* almost completely lacking in secondary (mining, quarrying, household and manufacturing) and tertiary sectors (trade and commerce). In Garo and Lushai Hills, thanks to the Christian missionaries, progress was made on elementary education. Contact with the plains and the capital of the State being located at Shilong, the Khasis were the most advanced, but the frontier steeped in utter backwardness as they had no contact with the civilized world.³¹

The Constituent Assembly set-up an advisory committee to make recommendations for administrative development of the tribal areas. The latter appointed a sub-committee, the *North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas* also known as the *Bardoloi Committee* after its Chairman Gopinath Bardoloi and other members, Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, Rupnath Brahma, A.V. Thakkar and Aliba Imti (not a signatory of the report). After visiting tribal areas, the Committee noticed unlike other parts of India where tribals had assimilated to a great extent the life and culture of plainsman, the process of assimilation was minimal in the

31. *Report of the Commission of Hill Areas of Assam (Pataskar Commission) 1965-66.* Ministry of Home, Government of India, 4-16.

interior of the Assam hills, particularly in the Naga and Lushai hills ; that the tribesmen in north-east were very sensitive about their land, forests, system of judiciary and that they should be left free from any fear of exploitation or domination by the advanced section of the people. The Committee recommended in the light of the discussions they had with the hill leaders Autonomous Districts and Regional Councils providing adequate safeguards to the tribals in respect of their land, social customs and usages, language and culture.³² /

Opinions were divided among the members of the Constituent Assembly when the amended Schedule was taken up for discussion. Some members opposed the measure on the ground this might lead to a further demand for vivisection of truncated India. Members were warned, 'If you want to keep them separate, they will combine with Tibet, they will unite with Burma, they will never combine with the rest of India'. What the tribesmen wanted, it was opined, 'not separation but adequate safeguards.' On the otherhand, tribal leader Jaipal Singh cautioned the members of the Constituent Assembly to be somewhat charitable in their approach to the tribal problem in north-east India. What set at rest the sensitive issue was the cogent and forceful reasonings of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar in the defence of the *District Councils*. He made it clear that the tribals in Assam hills are different from rest of India inasmuch as the latter were more of less Hinduised and assimilated with the culture and civilisation of those with whom they lived.³² In fact,

the positions of the tribals in Assam was somewhat analogous to the position of the Red Indians in the USA, as against the white immigrants there The United States government felt that their laws, mode of life, their habits and manners of life were so distinct that it would be dangerous to bring them immediately and at one time within the range of laws made by the white people or the whites and white civilisation.³³

On these grounds, Ambedkar added, *District and Regional Councils* should be created in Assam on the lines adopted by the USA for the Red Indians. Under the new constitution the administration of these areas would be carried on by the Governor (not in his discretion) on the advice of the Council of Ministers, while Legislative Assembly and the Union Parliament would have the power to legislate for these areas, with few

32. *Constituent Assembly Debates*, 6 September 1949, ix.27.

33. *Report of the Commission of Hill Areas of Assam, op. cit*

exceptions, in all matters. The tribal areas would be represented in the Parliament and State Assembly enabling them thereby to take part in law making process for the country as a whole including areas of their own. This would result in integration not disintegration, an improvement over the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935.

Under the Sixth Schedule an Autonomous District Council of not more than twenty-four members, not less than three-fourth, are to be elected on adult suffrage. The *District Council* had been invested with legislative powers to make laws for administration of land, management of forests (other than reserve), to regulate *jhum* (shifting) cultivation, appointment and succession of Chiefs, headman etc. and relating to matters having a bearing on personal and social life of the tribals. The jurisdiction of the State Legislatures extends to the hill districts, though its Act do not apply to an autonomous district. They may be extended with such modification as considered necessary by the *District Council*. The council is empowered to set up various types of courts, including appellate ones, construct and manage primary schools, dispensaries, roads and 'prescribe language and manner in which primary education shall be imparted'. Above all, it possesses power to assess and collect land revenue on the same principle as are generally followed in the States and to levy and collect certain taxes for which it can frame regulations. In accordance with these provisions, in 1952 five *District Councils* were set up for Garo Hills, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Lushai Hills and the United Mikir (Karbi) and N.C. Hills.

The Bardoloi Committee also recommended the establishment of Regional Councils if there were distinct sub-tribes within autonomous district. Immediate constitution of *District Councils* in all Hill States, it was felt, would be a question of time. Pending establishment of district councils five *Tribal Advisory Committees* were set-up in all Hill States, except one, to enable the tribal representatives to associate themselves with administration of their respective areas.

Thus, while the tribals in other States were governed by the Fifth Schedule, the tribesmen of Assam hill tracts had been accorded autonomous status under the Sixth Schedule. Unlike *Panchayats* in other parts of India, the *District Council* had parallel legislative powers with the State government in respect of certain subjects. Not only they had separate judiciary, except the High and Supreme Court, but separate budgets prepared in general budget of the State, though the income of the council stood at a small percentage of the budgeted expenditure and the balance

had to the borne by the Centre and the State government. Special grants apart, tribals enjoyed exemption from payment of income-taxes, reservation of services and special facilities for students and in matters of admission into educational institutions, scholarships and stipends.

Privileges and liberalism notwithstanding, complaints were often made of discrimination and negligence of the government of alleged treatment of tribals as second class citizens. That the development of the hill areas was subordinated to that of the plains and funds earmarked for the hill areas were utilised for benefit of the plains and even Central grant under Article 275 were often utilised for purposes other than intended. The allegations were found to be without any substance by the *Pataskar Commission* in 1966. Over a period of twelve years (1951-62), the Commission has recorded the per capita contribution to the State revenue had been more than double, that of the hills remained more or less the same. Per capita expenditure of the hill districts, which stepped up several times during same period, was more than the plains. As a result the rate of progress in all the fields had been faster in the hills than in the plains. Thus the net area sown per head recorded an increase from 0.15 hectares in 1950-51 to 0.19 in the hills whereas it declined from 9.25 to 0.13 hectares in the plains. During 1950-51 to 1963-64 the number of hospitals rose in hills from 45 to 163, plains 397 to 670, in 1951 the percentage of literacy in hills was 16.29 and it rose to 28.36 in 1961. The corresponding figures in plains were 18.49 and 27.23.³⁴ Evidently 'the State government had treated the hill districts fairly in respect of development within the resources available to them'. In spite of the progress made, geography of the lands, difficult terrain, lack of communication, shortage of labour and material had retarded a faster rate of development to the satisfaction of the tribesmen.

In a rapidly changing world tribals cannot live in their secluded hills, all the more their basic problem is economic development which is not possible in isolation. In fact,

the hill districts are a 'series of economic islands' joined only by the plains. The prospect of both will depend largely on interchange, as in all major economic problems the two regions are interdependent. The hills are dependent on the plains for food, which the latter cannot produce unless the growing intensity of soil erosion is controlled by

34. *Ibid.*, Chap. IV; Rao, V.Venkata, *A Century of Tribal Politics in North East India, 1874-1974.*, 84; Datta Ray, B., 'Operation and Implementation of the Sixth Schedule, North-Eastern India', *NEIHA*, 1982; 229f.

suitable measures in the hills and there is an integrated problem of irrigation and flood control.. In the development of water-power and industries, too, the two regions have to work together.. the hills will have to depend on the plains for any useful communication programme.. the development programmes of the two regions have necessarily to be integrated.³⁵

Distrust and suspicion bred by long neglect and isolation in the past had rendered difficult integration of the people of the hills and those of the plains. The *Eastern India Tribal Union* (EITU) under Williamson Sangma, Chief Executive Member Garo Hills, made the demand for the creation of a separate Hill State. In his memorial to the S.R.C. following the Tura Conference in October 1954 Sangma made it clear that there had been no political, social, cultural and emotional ties between the people of the plains and those of the hills. To the memorialist, the attitude of the people of the plains was one of 'contempt and subtle hostility'. Apart from endeavours that had been made by the Assamese to impose their language and culture on the hillmen, they were trying to dominate the hills. That the Assamese who were only 56 percent of the total population, control 75 per cent of the seats in the Legislature, 90 percent of the Cabinet and 75 percent of the public services. Practically all the major development works and all the major technical and non-technical institutions were located in the Brahmaputra Valley. Therefore, he pleaded for a separate Hill State for all the hill areas of Assam with an area of 27, 599 sq. miles and a population of 11, 71, 098.³⁶

The demand for the Hill State was not unanimous. The United Mikir and North Cachar Hills stood against a separate Hill State. The National Councils of the Garos and the Mikirs (Karbis) demanded maximum autonomy possible in their respective States. Nichols-Roy, a member of the Assam Cabinet, in a secret memorandum clarified: 'I give my moral support to this demand for a Hill State ... on condition that none will speak in any way as to cause feeling of hatred and enmity against our Assamese brethren and that unnecessary, unpleasant and unreasonable expressions should not be uttered against the Government of Assam which might create unrest.' He opposed the very move for a separate State as it would be economically not viable and do away with the *District Council* and shifting of the capital to the plains which would seriously affect the economy of the tribals. To protect the interests of the tribesmen, he wanted

35. *Ibid.*, 31-2

36. Rao, V.V., *op. cit.*, 182-84.

to have a Hill Ministry in each *Autonomous District* having a Minister or Deputy Minister in the Council of Ministers in Assam to be appointed by the Governor in his discretion. For administration of common subjects the Governor as the Agent to the Governor-General should form a part of the Assam Cabinet.³⁷

There had been a change, in the meanwhile, in the leadership of the Congress Legislative Party. Liberal-minded B.P. Chaliha replaced Bishnuram Medhi, supposed to be a die-hard Assamese. Not only Chaliha inducted a Mizo, Lalmawia into the Ministry, but made a garo Williamson Sangma, Minister for Tribal Areas Department with Cabinet rank. This was followed by the introduction of the *Tribal Affairs Advisory Council* for improvement of the relationship with the tribals and abandonment of the idea of forming a separate State. That Williamson Sangma was sincerely desirous of preventing an agitation for Hill State was obvious when he wrote to the Chief Minister : 'The decision of the Government to creation of a new State of Nagaland is bound to lead to far reaching repercussions in other hill districts unless the amendment of the Sixth Schedule as recommended by the Advisory Council can be taken up at a very early date'.³⁸ The situation however took a new turn with the introduction of the Official Language Bill, 1960, as will be seen in the succeeding pages.

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37. *Ibid.*, 339.

38. *Ibid.*, 346-51.

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