

FRIENDSHIP BUT NOT CONFRONTATION

XAVIER P. MAO

The North East India comprising Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim is situated on international border, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, Bhutan and Nepal are the countries with which these states have common border. But is most unfortunate that India does not have good relation with its neighbours. Further, Bangladesh which became a sovereign nation with the explicit support and help of India does not have also good relation with India. Perhaps, the adage that neighbours become worst enemies and strangers good friends has some truth in it. For some reason or other the relationship between India with its neighbouring countries is far from satisfactory. As a result, it has created problems not only for India but for those countries as well. Further, taking advantage of this embittered relations Pakistan which is far away from the North Eastern part of the country manages to operate in this region for engaging in subversive activities. After all, in international politics befriending an enemy's enemy is a much easier job than making a new friend. It is obvious that the North-eastern states are as sensitive as the state of Jammu and Kashmir which has border with Pakistan. But there is a difference between the problems faced by these two regions. They have to be discussed and understood with the help of two different and distinct parameters.

The North-eastern region except Sikkim and to some extent Assam is by and large a tribal area. The tribals inhabiting this part

of the country are as diverse as anything. The Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos and a host of other belong to various ethnic and linguistic groups. Even there are sub-groups among the Nagas and they speak different and distinct languages so much so that one group does not understand the language spoken by the other group. This type of diversity has posed insoluble problems. The Khasis and Garos inhabiting the same state of Meghalaya speak different languages and one group cannot easily understand the language of the other group. If the principle of formation of states in linguistic consideration is accepted nobody knows as to how many states the North-eastern region would be divided in future. Insurgency has been resorted to as a means by certain groups to solve their problems. The Naga insurgency is the oldest in the region followed by insurgency of other tribal groups. Scholars have tried to trace out various causes of insurgency in the North East. Some of the causes are real and certain others are imaginary, vague and sometimes exaggerated.

Though it is necessary to pin-point the exact causes of insurgency yet in human situation remedies could be prescribed and situations could be improved even though no exact cause of a problem is ascertained. As a matter of fact, there cannot be a single cause of a problem in the human world. In this context, the defence of the North East could be planned keeping in view two important points: (i) Insurgency prevailing in the region must be brought to an end immediately, and (ii) the neighbouring countries must be befriended. But these things are the most uphill tasks to achieve. No country in the world can be said to have achieved absolute and perfect equilibrium in these respects. In other words, every country in the world has some sort of internal problems and no country in the world has ever befriended all its neighbours. But this is no consolation that the Indian situation is no exception to that prevailing in the world and so these need not be cause for worry and anxiety on this count. But we must take our decision independently of what is happening around the world. While taking a decision on such issues the interest of the nation has to be kept uppermost in mind. Accordingly, we must take a decision in this regard without waiting for any other consideration. The first

and foremost thing to be done in this respect is to create a sense of confidence among the indigenous people of the region. The suggestion may appear very vague and ambiguous but at the same time this is the first stage of establishing internal peace in the region. An attempt must be made both by the Government agencies and the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) including the conscientious citizens of the region in this regard without further delay. There can be no cut and dry formula to guarantee confidence among the people. The contextual situation has to be taken into account while embarking upon such a proposal. Infrastructural facilities including minimum basic utilities like, all weather roads to all villages, clean drinking water, primary schools and health care units to all villages have to be extended so that the indigenous people get the feeling of being cared for by the government. Environment and eco-friendly small scale industries have to be set up to generate employment in the region. It is no more possible to give white colour jobs to the unemployed teeming millions in the country what to speak of absorbing the unemployed youths of the region in government offices. The country goes on mindlessly producing graduates and post-graduates in Arts, Science and Commerce at the expenses of primary and secondary education and the North East is no exception to it. What is needed in the North East today is establishment of good secondary and primary schools in the rural areas and not more universities with post-graduate departments that continue to spread half-baked ideas among the students. Education in the country in general and the North East in particular has to be need based and employment oriented. Otherwise production of unemployable graduates and post-graduates is likely to result in frustration and consequent emergence of insurgency, terrorism and extortion. Once the internal problems in the region are solved it becomes easier to befriend the neighbouring countries that have border with North East.

For ages people from the North East used to have trade and commerce with neighbouring countries like Myanmar, China, Nepal and Bhutan. The case of Bangladesh is very significant and crucial. Till the other day, it was a part of the subcontinent. In fact, India and Bangladesh share in common thousand years old

history and civilisation. The Nagas in India have many things in common with the people of Myanmar. It is quite likely that most of the decorative pieces that the traditional Nagas put on their dresses meant for specific occasions have been brought from Myanmar through trade and commerce. Besides India has very ancient ties with Myanmar, China, Nepal and Bhutan. India must explore these ancient ties for mutual benefits. In a sense, mankind is one and attempt must be made by all nations to build good and friendly relations with one another. This is a moral maxim and noble political ideology and takes long time to cultivate it. But as a matter of fact historical connectivity and ancient socio-cultural ties are easy to explore and sustained relations could be re-established without much effort. This does not mean that national interest has to be sacrificed in order to befriend the neighbouring countries. In fact, national interest is not incompatible with friendship with neighbouring nations. It is true that in human history empire building and emergence of nation state had embittered relation among nations and gave rise to the phenomenon of subjugation of relatively weaker nations by stronger ones. The two World Wars in the last century were the result of such embittered relations among some nations. But the institution of emperor and empire-building have become things of the past like the colonialists and the colonies though superiority complex and feeling of supremacy among some nations are still very prominent even till today. There are nations in the world who try to overpower other nations somehow or other. That is why tension and conflict still continue in the world.

On many important issues powerful European countries have come together under the leadership of the United States of America. As a result, a kind of Euro-Centric International relation obtains today in the world. Unfortunately, though the Asian countries like India and China are the inheritors of the most ancient civilisations in the world yet such a strong political and economic tie among the Asian nations is yet to emerge. Historically speaking, though Pakistan was a part of the Indian Subcontinent yet the relation between India and Pakistan has run into rough weather. The relation between India and China though not very bad at

present is yet to improve perceptibly. Unless the relation of India with its neighbouring countries improves peace including defence of the North East will be in question: In the context of global economy it is in the interest of the Asian nations that they come together. First of all the border dispute including outstanding issues between India and its neighbouring nations must be resolved. This is a hercules task and requires political will on parts of both the countries. It is time that these are historical reasons for such conflict and dispute but political leaders must be sagacious and wise to resolve the dispute because war or cold-war like situation is not going to be in the interest of any nation. In this context India is required to play the most crucial role. To begin with border trades opened and encouraged. After all for countries trade and commerce used to be carried on by the people from both sides. Of course, opening the border for trade and commerce may create fresh difficulties, i.e., influx of population from one country to another. Such an influx has already created problems in the North-eastern states particularly in Tripura. The indigenous people of Tripura have been reduced to minority because of constant influx from Bangladesh. The Assam Ganaparishad in seventies started its agitation against such an influx from Bangladesh, while it is required that the border is to be opened for trade and commerce at the same time it is most important to see to it that it does not pave the way for influx. To do both, i.e., to open the border for trade and commerce and to check infiltration is a very difficult problem. The proposal can succeed only when border trade permit is issued on strict basis and it is checked from time to time. Besides, cultural exchange programme including visit of scholars, students and artists between North East, and the neighbouring countries should be encouraged so as to bring the people from both sides much closer than ever before. Once mutual trust and confidence is built outstanding disputes if any relating to border should be dissolved. The principle of live and let live should be the motto particularly for the Government of India. For whatever reasons for past many decades after independence successive political leadership in India did not do much to improve the relationship with its neighbouring countries bordering North

East. The slogan of *Hindi-Chini, Bhai Bhai* coined by late Prime Minister Nehru and echoed by Mao Tse-Tung did not bear expected fruit. India-China war in 1962 disillusioned people on both sides of the Himalayas. It is upto the political analyst to tell us whether the then Chinese leadership was on the wrong or the Indian leadership was on the wrong. But the fact remains that the 1962 war between India and China embittered the relation between the two countries for many many years. Now time has come for both the countries to work very hard to heal the wounds caused due to war in the past. In the interest of the South East Asia region China and India must come closer and all sorts of confrontations between the countries should be replaced by friendship. Friendship has to be cultivated by both the countries. For the simple reason that if one country cultivates it but the other country takes advantage of it. There is every likelihood that the attitude of the former may be interpreted as a sign of timidity. But any country can take initiative in this direction. In a sense it is imperative on the part of India to take initiative and cultivate friendship with its neighbours. Friendship is not a sign of weakness and timidity but is indicative of strength and stamina.

It is outdated idea that the defence of a country or a region depends solely on military strength. It may be pointed out in this connection that military superiority and militarisation of a country or a region simply creates further tension and conflict in the long run and does not solve any problem at all. Moreover, in human world all the problems are highly interconnected. That is to say to understand one problem is to understand all others and to solve one problem one has to solve all other problems in a way. Defence of North East, as has been argued out depends, to a large extent upon internal security and internal security in turn depends upon a just socio-economic order. Like any other part of the country, the North-eastern region suffers from internal subjugation and exploitation. That is to say, even if the colonialists, have left the country long since internal colonialism still persists and manifests in various forms. It is a fact that the North-eastern region by and large is a tribal society and it is widely said and believed that tribals by nature are egalitarian. But as a matter of fact, the so

called equalitarianism is just a theme of the text books. It has no connection with what is known as the ground reality. The tribals in the North East are as good or as corrupt as their counterparts in other parts of the country corruption in public offices particularly relating to public funds is very high in the North East. This phenomena has thoroughly disillusioned the conscientious youth in the region. It is high time that the politicians and the bureaucrats working in the region reflect on this aspect of social evil. After all no country or region can survive purely on high sounding but empty slogans. The politicians and the bureaucrats must exhibit in their daily official activities that they are really honest and works for the people. Politics in majority of cases has proved to be a very lucrative job of all and North East is no exception to it. Central assistance comes pouring into the region but it has not made any visible impact on the common man. Thus unequal distribution of national assets has caused widespread resentment among the people and this is likely to affect internal security to a very great extent.

India has produced personalities like Buddha, Gandhi and many others but honesty and truthfulness are yet to be implemented in public life. Instances are not very rare in the country including the North East where even justice and the so called high level inquiry report could be purchased. Besides commodities, the so called big bosses and even in certain cases those who deal with dispensation of justice in this country too have a price tag on them. The common man gets bewildered at it. He starts suspecting and doubting everybody around him. It is not that the non-tribals exploit and subjugate the unfortunate tribals in the North East but the well placed tribals do not hesitate to exploit their fellow tribal brethren. This trend is very much in vogue in the North-eastern region. The so called openness in administration is absolutely absent. In fact, the high ranking tribal officers have been using the non-tribal officers have been using the non-tribal officers to exploit and subjugate the innocent tribals. It would not be outside of the mark to cite certain concrete instances in support of this nefarious trend prevalent in the region. His Excellency Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the President of India and the visitor of North

Eastern Hill University visited Shillong in 2002. Two tribal research scholars from the region wanted to submit a memorandum to His Excellency in his capacity as the Visitor of NEHU bringing to his notice the fact of their harassment by the NEHU Vice-Chancellor in collaboration of some non-tribal teachers on submission of Ph.D. thesis. The scholars approached the State Government and completed all formalities two weeks before the arrival of the President in Shillong. But just on eleventh hour the highest official of the Government of Meghalaya in connivance with the Vice-Chancellor NEHU did not allow the research scholars to meet the President and submit their memorandum though there was no criminal record nor any Police report against the scholars. In this case, the Vice-Chancellor was a tribal the government official was a tribal and the two research scholars were also tribals. One wonders as to where has the proverbial egalitarianism among tribals gone! But the Vice-Chancellor in order to take revenge, collaborated with the State Government official and saw to it that the research scholars do not meet the President of India. This is one of innumerable cases where tribals are being exploited even by their fellow tribals. As a result, educated young men get alienated and at the earliest opportunity take to guns.

Secessionism has often raised its head in North East. Late A.Z. Phizo was the first to articulate it. As a matter of fact, the late Naga leader did not use the concept secession. According to him, the Indian Government had forcibly occupied Nagaland and they must vacate it. The Mizos under the leadership of late Laldenga also demanded secession but in due course the Mizo problem was solved. Today, there are stray groups in Assam, Manipur, Tripura as well as Meghalaya who demand secession. It is heartening to note that the peace talk held recently between the Prime Minister and the leaders of the NSCN(IM) groups in New Delhi is very significant and if the Naga problem is solved it will go a long way finding out solution to secessionist move in the entire North East. It may be noted here that the demand for secession by some groups in North East has disturbed internal security and in turn it has affected defence of the region.

Historically speaking, no national boundary is sacrosanct. As a matter of fact, such lines are being drawn and redrawn from time to time. The subcontinent was divided into India and Bangladesh too was carved out of Pakistan. The Soviet Union disintegrated to form separate units. These instances are not cited to justify further division of the country and side with the secessionist demand. Rather these instances are cited so that we including our leaders learn lesson from the historical past. It is true that India like many other countries of the world was never a political unit in the hoary past. In pre-Buddhist period India consisted of sixteen separate republics. The First King who tried to integrate different units, into one country in the past was Chandragupta Maurya. The Turko-Afghans and the Moghuls tried to integrate it for their own purposes but soon it disintegrated. The Britishers too tried to integrate though for their own gains. After the British left and India became a democracy the demand for secession and integration have to be viewed from a fresh angle. The ideas of conquest and conquer including Master and Servant are things of the past though unfortunately in certain literature relating to Government of India and its citizens, the expressions 'Master' and 'Servant' still occur. It is high time that such expressions that smack of colonialism and slavishness must be deleted forthwith from any rule book on Indian Government and its citizen. In a democracy there is a mutual need of the Wits. One cannot grow and develop without the other and all the units are equal partners in the same joint venture. Though ideally speaking every group even for that matter an individual should be left free to decide his/her own fate. Self-determination at ideal level is the natural right of the individual and the group and no other external agency should interfere with it. This view leads to an extreme form of individualism and if accepted and the groups in isolation are likely to be completely extinguished. The Aristotelian model which lays equal emphasis both on the individual and the society is well grounded. That is to say, individual and groups need each other for their growth and self-development. Now the question is which groups and which individuals are to be chosen and on what basis for the purpose of

living together? The historical connectivity and enlightened self-interest possibly constitute the two criteria for exercise of such a choice. Seen in this light, the people of the North-eastern part of the country have had close links with India rather than with any other neighbouring country for thousands of years.

Moreover, after more than five decades of independence, the socio-cultural tie has been strengthened to a very great extent. In fact interaction and unity in economic, political and judicial front is being forged day by day. What is lacking is what is known as emotional integration and this is most important which cements and sustains people together as a nation even if they belong to diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. There is not a single way of achieving what is known as emotional integration. In fact, there are ways. Further, it is the larger group who has to take initiative and create cordial atmosphere so that mutual suspicion and doubts removed. It is only through discussion and parleys and not through violence that problems could be solved. Violence breeds violence though the *Bhagvat Geeta* advocates use of violence as the last resort when all democratic methods and alternative conflict resolution institutions fail in protecting righteousness (*Dharma*). But in India we have not yet reached that stage of no return to use violence for resolution of conflict.

It is true that Indian states has become very oppressive, callous and apathetic towards its people corruption, nepotism and favouritism have reached all time high. The so called "Guardians" of society, i.e., the politicians, bureaucrats including even some fragments of judiciary have not been able to generate confidence among the people. A democratic polity cannot survive and hold people together if its three pillars, namely the Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary are not manned by upright the honest people. Not only the defence of the country including that of the North East will be in jeopardy but the polity is likely to disintegrate with increase of dishonesty and malpractice in public life. In the dim past, Plato the philosopher could visualise in clear and categorical terms the causes of degeneration of society. That is why he pleaded for high level of honesty, probity and integrity in public life.

It is an outdated idea that the defence of the country or a region solely depends upon its military strength. It may be pointed out in this connection that military superiority and militarisation of a country or a region simply creates further tension and conflict in the long run and does not solve any problem at all. Moreover, in human world all the problems are highly interconnected. That is to say, to understand one situation is to understand all others and to solve one problem is to solve all other problems. Defence of North East as has been argued out to a large extent depends upon internal security and internal security in turn depends upon a just socio-economic order. Like any other part of the country, the North-eastern region suffers from internal subjugation and exploitation. This is to say, even if the colonialists have left the country long since, internal colonialism still persists and manifests in various forms. To save the situation an all out effort should be made without further delay to improve the socio-economic conditions in the North East so that the ground of demand for secession is removed root and branch. Improvement in the internal situation will surely go a long way befriending the neighbouring countries of the North East. However, the motto should be "Friendship but not Confrontation".