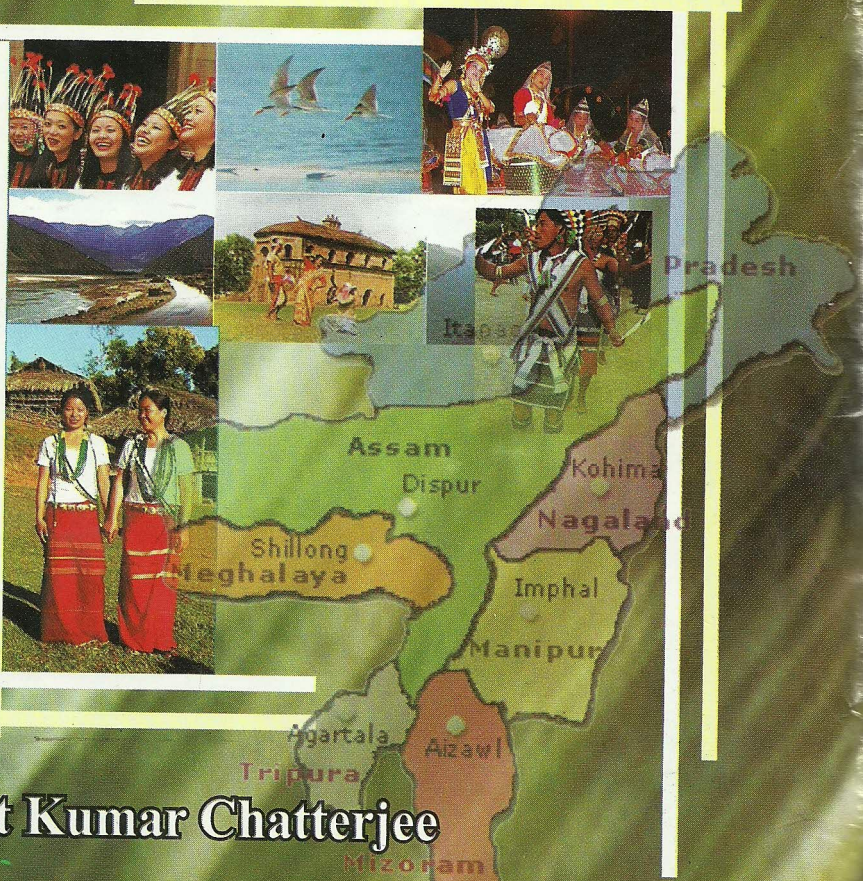
NORTH-EAST INDIA

DISPERSION AND DISCONTENT

Historical, Cultural and Socio-Political Perspectives



Sarajit Kumar Chatterjee

NORTH-EAST INDIA: DISPERSION AND DISCONTENT

HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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VOLUME ONE

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Dedicated

To

Dr. Manis Kumar Raha

my friend and motivator

Preface

India's North East is a fascinating study, specially in the context of identity, ethnicity and integration. This region is unique for its diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, culture and heritage. Each of the seven States of Arunchal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura has its unique culture, heritage and societal norms, so different from each other. Each of the approximately 400 ethnic groups in this region, however big or small, is conscious of its identity and desires to maintain and safeguard its separate and distinct identity.

The diverse ethnic groups inhabiting the North-Eastern States used to cherish a spirit of heroic resistance and freedom against any foreign rule or aggression even during the British rule, and they do continually more so in the post-independence period. Integration, so far as this region is concerned, has provoked resistance which came in many forms, ranging from armed opposition to secession.

The idea for a centralised Indian State gained the support of the key Indian leaders in a March 1948 Conference. Convened in the backdrop of Gandhi's assassination, the trauma of Partition and an India tormented by the pulls and pressures of conflicting interest groups, they thought that a strong Centre would help India weather the challenges of freedom and would mitigate the tendency towards disintegration. Even when they were thinking for integration of the nascent Indian nation, the voice of secession was heard from the furthest corner of the North East. Insurgent and secessionist activities still continue in one form or the other in his or that State in the North East.

The North East has had a troubled history since 1947. The region has been hurt by an image problem, caused by violence against the non-tribal settlers and the armed insurrections. The insurgent violence has turned this region virtually into a battlefield.

A question often asked by any well-meaning citizen of the country is why and how this insurgent condition continues in spite of massive development expenditure in these important strategically sensistive areas bordered by Bangladesh, Myanmar, China/Tibet and Bhutan. They are quite confused, even intrigued, at the continuance of the disruptive activities in this region for so many years since independence.

This study attempts at focussing our attention on the North East as a whole, from the days of remove antiquity to the first decade of the twentyfirst century, in order to understand the North East in its correct perspective.

I am immensely grateful to my friend Dr. M.K. Raha for giving me access to his rich library. He was kind enough to go through the drafts at various stages. His suggestions only enhanced the quality of the book. But for his help, guidance and encouragement a study of this magnitude would not have been possible.

I am also grateful to Dr. Palash Ch. Coomar, Joint Director, Census Operations, Dr. Amitava Sarkar of the Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, Dr. Debashis Basu, Anthropological Survey of India, Shillong, Dr. N.K. Das, Deputy Director, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, and Dr. R.K. Saha, ex-Superintending Anthropologist, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, Neelotpal Bhattacharya of INSPIRA Software and Shri Rabindranath Saha of Salt Lake, for their help and cooperation.

I am also thankful to my friends and well-wishers who helped me in various ways in completing this project. I refrain from thanking them individually for obvious reasons.

I am extremely grateful to Shri Jitendra Singh of the Abhijeet Publications for bringing out this book in time.

Sarajit Kumar Chatterjee

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Introduction

I

North-East India comprises the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It covers an area of 255,144 sq. km., which is roughly 7.7 per cent of India's total land surface. This strategically important region is surrounded by four foreign countries—Bangladesh, Myanmar, Tibet (China) and Bhutan. This land-locked region is connected with the rest of India through a narrow stretch of plains known as the Siliguri Corridor. This region supports nearly 383 million people, according to the 2001 Census. They together constitute about 3.72 per cent of the total population of the country. Within the North-East, however, the bulk of the population, as high as roughly 70 per cent, live in Assam alone.

North-East India, which is the sentinel of the Indian continent, is the homeland of a number of social and ethnic groups. The ethnic history of the region is extremely complicated. It is the meeting place of various ethnic and linguistic groups, i.e., Austric, Indo-Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burman and Aryan, who entered into this area during different historic and pre-historic periods from all directions. The population of the North-East is characterised by an enormous diversity, which this region acquired along with the inflow of varied groups of immigrants over several millennium. Nevertheless, it was the last two centuries or so that provided the region with its most alien features. Important similarities in their means of livelihood notwithstanding, today no other region of India is

ethnically and culturally as diverse as the North-East.

Their economy was mostly based on swidden cultivation. Hunting, fishing, gathering, grazing, cattle-rearing, elephant-catching, basket-making, weaving etc. were the other means of avocation. This area is rich in lime, coal and other minerals. The country's oldest oil refinery is located at Digboi. But by far the most important factor in the growing prosperity and commercial importance of the area has been the remarkable expansion of the tea industry.

Industry was highly developed during the pre-British period. There are references to weavers, spinners, gold-smiths, potters and workers in ivory, bamboo, wood, hide and cane. According to Muhammadan historians the people were very skilful in weaving embroidered silk cloths. They made their boxes, trays, stools and chairs by carving them out of a single block of wood.

Assam enjoyed a high reputation as producer of silk of fine texture. They manufactured three principal varieties of silk, called *Pat, Endi,* and *Muga.* Assam Silk, specially *Muga* was very much in demand in Europe, and it formed the staple of trade of East India Company during the 18th and the early 19th centuries.[1]

Another important industry of the Ahom period was gold-washing and manufacture of jewellery. Gold was washed from the sand of the Brahmaputra. Many people were engaged in gold-washing. After the occupation of the country by the Britishers the pursuit of the precious metal was experimented upon but ultimately given up as being expensive and unprofitable. From very early times this area was noted for her textiles and various valuable forest and mineral products. The trade with the neighbouring inland provinces was mainly carried by river transport.

About three-fourths of this region is hilly terrain. The plains are formed by the Brahmaputra, the Barak and the Imphal valleys. While the hills are inhabited mostly by the Mongoloid tribal people, the plains are populated mostly by the non-tribal people of Caucasoid origin. Because of prolonged interaction with the neighbouring Mongoloid populations through inter-marriages and assimilation, Mongoloid features are not uncommon among them.

The main features of the religious beliefs and practices are generally commonly held by the tribal communities. The Census Superintendent of Assam in 1891, E.A. Gait writes:

> The first thing that strikes an inquirer into the religious beliefs of the hill tribes of this frontier is the extraordinary

> uniformity of the principle which underlines them all, and which they have in common not only with each other and with the north Turanian tribes, but also with the Dravidians of southern India. There can be no greater mistake than to assume that each tribe has its own individual beliefs, differing widely from those of others and circumscribed by the narrow tribal limits. The facts are quite the reverse and the religion of these tribes—shamanism, animism, nature worship, or whatever name may be applied to it—is everywhere practically the same. There are differences of practice or detail rather than of fundamental principles, and are far less important than those which divide the Saktas from the Vaishnavas, the Uni rians from the members of the Salvation Army.[2]

The tribal societies in North-East India are basically of two types—matriarchal and patriarchal. The hallmark of a matriarchal society is that matriliny permeates the whole society--descent is matrilineal, inheritance is through the females, residence after marriage is matrilocal, clan affiliation is determined through the mother and the paternal line is almost ignored in their kinship system. The social structure of the Garo, Khasi, Pnar and the Jaintia is matriarchal in nature. The other tribal societies are patriarchal. In a patriarchal society, descent is counted through the male line, in all cases. So membership of a clan passes from father to the children. Residence after marriage is generally patrilocal, inheritance and succession is in the male line.

In the tribal society, the clans are exogamous but the tribes are endogamous. Marriage within the same clan is strictly forbidden under the unwritten customary code of most of the tribes of North East India. Normally marriage is restricted within the tribe. Marrying the mother's brother's daughter is considered to be the ideal form of marriage. The socially accepted form of marriage is monogamy. However, polygyny is not uncommon to some tribes. Payment of bride-price is particularly common in the patriarchal society. In a matriarchal society the groom stays with the bride's parents and therefore the question of payment of bride-price does not arise.

There are quite a number of festivals celebrated during the year among which cultivation and harvest are important. The cultivation festival marks the end of sowing and growing of all seeds and paddy of a year and propitiation of crops' god for good

harvest whereas the harvest festival is celebrated at the end of the year and the commencement of the new year. In the festival, religious rites are also performed to depart or wash off the evil things a man does in the year. These two festivals which last for 5 or 10 days are different from tribe to tribe. The people are very fond of dance and songs though the liking varies from one tribe to another. Manipuri dance and Bihu dance have attained a world-wide fame.

The tribal societies in the North-East are well-known for their decentralised and democratic government. They have had well-developed self-governing independent institutions from time immemorial. The lowest unit of their political organisation is the village community as a whole acting in the form of a village council. All the village councils have certain features in common. They all derive their authority from ancient times and they are the expression of the will and power of the whole people.

The functions of the village councils are three-fold—judicial, administrative and developmental. On the judicial side the councils settle the disputes within the village boundaries. Even serious crimes against tribal societies have been and are being settled, generally on the satisfaction of all concerned. Probably, to the tribal mind, this is the most important of the council's functions.

On the administrative side, the councils look after the maintenance of the water supply, footpaths and bridges, opening of new footpaths and construction of bridges across the rivers which are difficult to cross and see to the sanitation of the village. The dates of communal hunting and fishing; village festivals, religious ceremonies, taboo observance etc. are fixed and announced by them.

Similarly, with regard to development, this depends largely on the extent to which the local officials have worked through the local councils in planning all the manysided work of developing the country.

The people composing the council are the accepted leaders of the village who may occupy the post by inheritance or being the elected representatives of the villagers. The form of government may be different. These may be modest hereditary kings, or elected chieftains assisted by a council of elected elders or an oligarchy of old and influential men.

The largest number of tribal communities live in this part of the country, most of whom have been designated as Scheduled Tribes in Independent India. The number of tribes/groups of tribes

recognised as Scheduled Tribes of this region is 134 and their number will be 298 if all the tribes/sub-tribes mentioned under the same serial number are counted as separate tribes. This number will further increase if the tribes/sub-tribes put under the generic names like 'Naga,' 'Mizo', 'Kuki', etc. are specifically delineated. There are ongoing movements for recognition of some other communities as Scheduled Tribes. Taking all these facts into consideration, the number of tribal communities living in this region will be more than 400.

However, all these tribal communities are not of homogeneous one, but a medley of different races divided into numerous tribes, sub-tribes and clans, different in origin, myths and traditions, distinct in language/dialect, diverse in physique, character, culture, manners and customs, dress, eating habits and traditional socio-political organisations depending upon the peripheral geographical locality, although basically they are more or less the same having much in common affiliations, common heritage, religion, values, norms, common idea of liberty and decencies. But they were, often as we find them even today, at loggerheads with one another and with the outsiders as well.

The ethnic communities were in constant fear and suspicion of hostile neighbours because of the intermittent head-hunting and feuding among themselves. Whatever might have been the reason for the prevalence of the practice of head-hunting, it is a fact that the age-old practice resulted in the creation of a number of enemy villages to each and every such head-hunter villages leaving a few friendly villages. This necessitated each village to safeguard their people for which they had to evolve several measures within their means. All the tribes who once had practised head-hunting "have evolved two common features namely, the chieftainship and village endogamy."[3]

II

The annexation of this region by the Britishers, started from the twenties of the nineteenth century, was done gradually and obviously not very peacefully. Before its annexation by the British, the various ethnic communities of this region, especially those living in the hills lived in isolated and segregated habitat owing to the difficulties of impassable mountains. The colonial rulers took advantage of this prevailing situation and did not like to disturb the isolated condition of the tribal habitat. In most of the cases,

the policy they adopted for the tribal population was the policy of isolation. Their approach towards the tribals of our country "was to keep them isolated in order to prevent any contact with the Indian general masses."[4] They deliberately adopted this policy of keeping the tribals in isolation and of not interfering in the tribal matters because they wanted to create a barrier between them and the rest of the country so that they were kept far away immuned from the freedom movement that was going on in the remaining part of the country. Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam in 1921, 1926, 1934, and 1946 but failed to contact many of the tribal communities of the excluded areas on account of restrictions imposed by the British Government through the machination of the Inner Line System. As a result, these tribal communities were not even aware of the fact that the Indian National Congress was fighting for the independence of India including its North-Eastern region as well.

The lesson of the First War of Independence of 1857 learnt by the British administrators was anyhow to keep the people 'divided' on whatever pretext it could be—be it religion, region, caste, language, ethnicity and so on and so forth. The practical application of the 'Divide and Rule' policy in this region made it possible to contain easily the rebellions against British aggression and domination unleashed by the tribal communities here and there in isolation because there was no central authority to coordinate these sporadic movements. The British policy compelled the various tribal communities who were already segregated and isolated for historical reasons to remain isolated and segregated from one another as well as from the rest of the country. Thus, they were denied of the scope, as Ghurye says, "to advance on the road of progress either by integration with the plains Hindus or otherwise."[5]

The policy of isolation had inflicted harmful effect since it generated suspicion and discord between some tribal communities and the rest of the India in the post-Independence era. There is considerable truth in what Rev. Michael Scott had said while espousing the Naga cause:

> It was Britain's imperial policy which kept Nagaland isolated from India and from contact with the people and political movements of India so that there was very little exchange of ideas or mutual understanding of the people and their society when India became independent. On the other hand, many of the missionaries who were allowed there seem to have conveyed a peculiar form of religion

> based more on the verbal infallibility of the Bible and a social and political ethics more compatible with a violent form of nationalism than Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament.[6]

The colonial rulers saw to it that the existing cleavages and chasms between the tribal and the non-tribal communities and the tribal communities *inter se* were further widened. The policy formulated during their rule was mainly aimed at regulatory functions, such as maintenance of law and order and collection of revenues. They treated the tribal people differently from the rest in order to fulfil their colonial interest. Elwin, who once advocated the "National Park Theory" for the tribal people, also admitted that

> the British Government (was) inclined, on the whole, to leave the tribesmen alone partly because the task of administration, especially in the wild border areas, was difficult and unrewarding, partly from a desire to quarantine the tribes from possible political infection and partly because a number of officers held the view that the people were better and happier as they were.[7]

Even on the eve of the transfer of power to the Indians the British Government strangely thought that the backward tribes were probably better off in the princely states than in the British Indian provinces as the more primitive conditions of the states were congenial to them. In other words as if, as K.S. Singh says, "prevalence or continuance of primitive conditions was better for a tribal than change and development."[8]

The decision to isolate the tribals came about in 1873 through the promulgation of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation. However, the policy of declaring the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh, a secluded area had been advocated long before. Section 2 of the Regulation empowered the Governor-General "to prescribe and from time to time alter by notification, a line to be called the Inner Line and to prohibit any subject living outside the area from living or moving thereon." Thus, the British policy of apartheid in North-East India was implemented in the tribal areas of the District of Lakhimpur in September, 1875, in the District of Darrang in March, 1876, in the District of Sibsagar in June, 1876, in the District of Cachar in June 1878 and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in June, 1879.

Civil officers could extend their administrative jurisdiction no further than the Inner Line, and the Governor-General-in-Council prohibited all British subjects from crossing the Inner Line without a pass obtained from the Deputy Commissioner of the concerned district.

Then in 1880, the Frontier Tract Regulation was enacted which stated that it was expedient "to provide for the removal of certain frontier tracts in Assam inhabited or frequented by barbarous or semi-civilised tribes from the operation of enactments in force therein." It was stated that the regulation would extend to such frontier tracts in Assam as the Governor-General-in-Council may designate. The regulation was subsequently extended to cover wider areas in the North-East.

Earlier, on the suggestion of Sir George Campbell, Lt. Governor of Bengal, the Government of India, on the 6th February, 1874, the districts which formed the province of Assam, with the exception of Sylhet and of tracts subsequently acquired, were separated from the Government of Bengal and formed into a Chief Commissionership. On the 12th September of the same year Sylhet was incorporated in the new province. The province of Assam then embraced the areas now included within the States of Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, which in course of time became separate States in Independent India.

The North-Eastern Frontier Tract came into existence in 1914 comprising the following administrative divisions, as suggested by Major-General Bower, and accepted by the Government with some modifications: (i) Central and Eastern Section, (ii) Western Section, and (iii) Lakhimpur Frontier Tract. The first two divisions were placed under the charge of political officers and the third unit under the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur District. The headquarters of Central and Eastern Section was at Sadiya and that of Western Section at Charduar. The political officer of Central and Eastern Section was to look after the administration of Siang, Lohit, Tirap and Patkai areas.

In 1919, the Central and Eastern Section was renamed as Sadiya Frontier Tract and the Western Section as Balipara Frontier Tract. This arrangement continued till 1937 when consequent upon the enactment of the Government of India Act, 1935, these Frontier Tracts as also the Naga Tribal Area (later known as Tuensang Frontier Division) were declared as Excluded Areas.

In 1943, Tirap Frontier Tract was created by taking out certain areas from the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract and the Sadiya Frontier

Tract. The headquarters of Tirap Frontier Tract was set up at Margherita.

In 1954, the North East Frontier Areas (Administration) Regulation, 1954 (Regulation No. 1 of 1954) was passed. Under this Regulation, the administrative units were reconstituted and boundaries readjusted.[9]

When, conceding to the demands of the Naga People's Convention, a new administrative unit called the Naga Tuensang Area under the administrative control of the Ministry of External Affairs was constituted on December 1, 1957 under an Act of Parliament, the predominantly Naga-inhabited Tuensang Frontier Division of the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) became a part of this unit. This unit came to be known as Nagaland consequent on its elevation as a full-fledged State of the Indian Union on December 1, 1963. Special provisions with respect to Tuensang area were incorporated in Article 371A of the Constitution, which also became effective from December 1, 1963. The remaining areas continued to be administered by NEFA. Though NEFA was constitutionally a part of the State of Assam, but it was administered by the Governor of Assam on behalf of the President of India, being assisted by an Advisor. On January 21, 1972 NEFA attained the status of Union Territory and was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh. The Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh became a full-fledged State on February 20, 1987.

During British rule special laws were applicable to what were called 'backward areas' situated in the various provinces of British India including Assam, inhabited by primitive and tribal population following their traditional agricultural and social customs and their own animistic and tribal faith.[10] At first individual laws were enacted applicable to particular areas, which, among other things, prescribed simple and elastic forms of judicial and administrative procedures. The Scheduled Districts Act, enacted in 1874, appears to have been the first measure adopted to deal with these areas as a class. This Act was made applicable to the province of Assam also. This Act enabled the executive to extend any enactment in force in any part of British India to a "Scheduled District" with such modifications as might be considered necessary. In other words, the executive had power to exclude these areas from the normal operation of ordinary law and give them such protection as they might need.

The Backward Areas covered by the Scheduled Districts Act

of 1874 were put into the "Backward Tracts" of India by the Governor-General acting under Section 52(2) of the Government of India Act, 1919. A system of modified exclusion was applied to these areas, the reserved half of the dyarchical government being vested with power to apply, or to refrain from applying, any new provincial enactment.[11] While the hill tribes of Assam were constitutionally a part of Assam, the Government of Assam was denied a direct voice in the administration and governance of the Hills.

More stringent measures were taken by the British Government through the Government of India Act of 1935 when the tribal and backward areas were brought under the Excluded or Partially Excluded Areas. The Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Order issued on March 3, 1936 declared the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas. The total extent of excluded areas was about 18,600 sq. miles in Assam and 10,000 sq. miles in the rest of India. In Assam, the North-East Frontier Tracts, the Naga Hills District, the Lushai Hills District and the North Cachar Hills sub-division of the Cachar District were declared Excluded Areas whereas the Garo Hills District, the Mikir Hills (in Nowgong and Sibsagar Districts) and the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, other than the Shillong Municipality and Cantonment were declared as Partially Excluded Areas. The Excluded Areas were placed under the personal rule of the Governor acting in his discretion. In respect of Partially Excluded Areas the Governor exercised a special responsibility with regard to the administration of these areas and he had the power in his individual judgment to overrule his ministers if he thought fit to do so. No act of the Federal or Provincial Legislatures would apply to any of these areas but the Governor had the authority to apply such Acts with such modifications as he considered necessary.

The object was to retain British control over backward tribes and not to impose on them parliamentary institutions and the ordinary civil and criminal laws meant for more civilised communities.[12]

This policy of protecting the tribals through the constitutional expedient of an excluded or partially excluded area evoked protests from the politically conscious Indians and was strongly resented by them. It was interpreted as a desire to drive a wedge between the tribals and the non-tribals and thus weaken national unity and undermine the freedom struggle.

The policy of 'isolation' introduced by the British in the hill areas of North-Eastern India had important consequences in the tribal areas in that it helped to foster a separate tribal identity for the hill people of Assam. "The policy of exclusivism has of course tended to create a feeling of separateness," observed the Bordoloi Committee.[13] It is interesting to note that, as Chakravarty says,

> the degree of isolation also determined the form of separatist movement. The Nagas who were fully excluded from the general administration of India turned militant, seeking to achieve an independent Nagaland. (The same is true for the Mizos). The Garo-Khasi-Jaintia hill peoples were partially excluded. The separatist movement in that area was less intense and it remained always non-violent. The aim of the Garos, Khasis and the Jaintias was to achieve a separate political identity outside Assam.[14]

III

While the colonial rulers since the inception of its rule in this region actively pursued a policy of keeping the hills out of any political and ideological influence from the plains through various administrative and regulatory measures and was quite successful in increasingly isolating the tribals from the other people physically and emotionally and raising a barrier of separatism and exclusivism between the hill and the plains people, they, at the same time, encouraged the Christian missionaries to move into the tribal areas with two definite objectives—firstly, to undertake welfare and humanitarian works and secondly, which possibly was more important for the colonial rulers, to convert people to Christianity. "It must be remembered", as a perspective observer puts it, "that either Hinduism or Buddhism may have established itself with the occasional support of the interested local rulers, had the mountains obstructing access were not there as an effective check on their spread".[15]

David Scott, the Governor-General's Agent for the North-Eastern Frontier, advocated for extending help, even financial help, to the Christian missionaries for proselytisation of the tribal population. He wrote to W.B. Bayley, Secretary to Government on April 27, 1825 thus:

> In reply to a Commission that I sent to my Agent in London for one or more Missionaries of the sort suited to convert

> the Garos, I have been referred to the Bishop of Calcutta by the person, probably a friend of his, whom my brother consulted. Would Government have any objection to my applying to the Bishop on the subject? I am satisfied that nothing permanently good can be obtained by other means, and that if we do not interfere on behalf of the poor Garos they will soon become Hindoos or half-Hindoos, retaining and acquiring many of the bad parts of both their present and improved creeds. I would greatly prefer two or more Moravian Missionaries of the old school who along with religion would teach the useful arts. If Government would ensure them subsistence only in the case of success or of my death, I would willingly take upon myself the expense in the first instance, and £ 300 per annum would suffice. Of success I have no more doubt than that, if allowed, you could make Christians of the Hindoo boys; and the great error of the Missionaries appears to me that of directing their attention to polished natives instead of rude tribes who are still in that state of national childhood which enables the stranger priest to enact the schoolmaster and to teach them what he likes. There are many instances of success in cases of the latter description in modern times, but not one by fair means in those of the former since the age of miracles or very near it.

To this the Secretary replied semi-officially, approving generally. "The Government could not however give salary to the people who might be employed in their capacity of Missionaries, but they might call them schoolmasters, and give assistance in that shape".[16]

The tribal areas were of special interest to the Christian Missionaries for evangelization. The heathen was the missionary target, and of all people in India the untouchables and the aboriginals were believed to be the most heathen. As the Hill tribes were considered heathen, fierce warriors, a potential threat who frequently raided British facilities they subjugated them, gave them partial autonomy and set about to civilise them through Christianity for which the colonial rulers actively encouraged the Christian missionaries to set up churches and take up evangelical work in the hill areas, except the North-East Frontier Tract.

The American, Norwegian, Welsh, Spanish and Italian Christian missionaries came in quite a few numbers and settled in the inaccessible and dangerous places in the mountains, forests and

plains to preach the message of God, to heal the sufferings and to educate the people. The British government assisted by the Christian missionaries introduced western system of education to bring the tribes in touch with modern civilization and to use the educated class as a link between the ruler and the ruled.

Extensive use of English in school curricula was a decisive contribution to acculturation of the tribal communities. Though vernacular was used for the propagation of the Gospel and primary education, English was the only language for higher education. English served as the *lingua franca* for communication among the educated elements of all tribes and helped the development of pan-tribal solidarity.

The early effects of the missionary work in the tribal societies of North-Eastern India were the weakening of the traditional social sanctions, the general alienation of the newly converted Christians from the community, and the inculcation of disrespect for traditional cultures. The missionary evangelization created cleavages within the tribal societies by ideologically and institutionally alienating the converts from their traditional communal life. By their physical presence missionaries were important agents in the acculturation process. Their western living standards in the isolated mission stations, their clothes and other gadgets were significant in the acculturation process of the tribal people.[17] The Christian missionaries also whipped up the inveterate prejudices against the Hindus, describing them as inimical to animism and Christianity.[18]

The evil effect of conversion on Indian national life was condemned by our leaders in no uncertain terms. They were more worried about the de-nationalisation effect of this new religion. In a paper entitled "The foreign missionary danger", Elwin highlighted "the rapid pace of conversion of tribes end the danger of the conversion within a few years of the entire aboriginal population in to a querulous, anti-national, aggressive" minority community, "with none of the old virtues and few of the new, which will be a thorn in the side of the future Government of India"; and he advocated the prohibition of proselytization as in many other free countries.[19] He wrote:

> Change of religion is actually harmful to the aborigines. It destroys tribal unity, strips the people of age-long moral sanctions, separates them from the mass of their fellow countrymen and in many cases leads to decadence that is

> as pathetic as it is deplorable, the methods employed are questionable. There is economic exploitation, exploitation of ignorance end social exploitation. Therefore missionaries should be withdrawn from tribal areas.[20]

The influence and activities of the Christian missionaries have, no doubt, brought tremendous changes in the life style and consumption pattern of the tribals of the North-East. It was under the inveterate influence and edifice of the church that the Nagas, Mizos, Garos, Khasis and other tribes began to abandon their rude primitive animistic ways of life, giving place, among other things, to political consciousness to achieve the destiny of a modern self-government under the British patronage. But the primary goal of the missionaries was conversion. As Srinivas says:

> The opening of schools, hospitals and other welfare agencies by the missionaries in areas where Harijans and tribals live, appear to the Hindus as only baits in the trap of conversion. The linking up of humanitarianism with proselytization has made the former suspect. Even very liberal, westernized Hindus feel this way.[21]

Under the influence of the Christian missionaries and education imparted by them, the nascent tribal intelligentsia developed a new culture and a personality sharply different from those of the rest of India. Thus, a section of the newly-educated tribal elites questioned their integration even in 1947 when the insulated hill tribals became a part of Independent India. It is in this context the question of independence and secession of the Nagas, and later or the Mizos emerged. An observer points out:

> The Nagas, Kukis, Mizos, Khasis and some other tribes were reluctant to join the Indian Union in the beginning after the partition of the Indian sub-continent took place. The reasons of their apathy towards India were the British policy of exclusion of Naga areas from the mainstream of Indian life, discretionary powers given to the Governor regarding applicability of laws, the impact of Christianity, the difference between Hinduised Assamese Manipuri life and Christianised animistic Naga life and their fear of Hindu rule as once apprehended by Winston Churchill. In spite of their own efforts at creating a hill united state called Indo-Burman land, the idea receded quickly into thin air. The Garo-Khasis chose to remain in India whereas

the extreme Nagas and Mizos stood sworn for independent states.[12]

IV

Much water has flown down the Brahmaputra since India attained independence and significant changes, political and social, have taken place in the entire North-Eastern region in the process of which it broke up into seven full fledged States, thus enabling the highlanders to govern themselves within the framework of the Constitution.

Another important development was the spectacular spread of Christianity in the hills of North-East India since the middle of the nineteenth century. While the areas now included in Mizoram could achieve the distinction of being a overwhelmingly Christian majority area in the 1951 census, Nagaland and Meghalaya became Christian majority areas in the 1961 and 1981 census, respectively. Christian population also increased substantially in the remaining States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Tripura.

The hill people were extremely suspicious of outsiders, particularly non-tribals, and felt that they were greatly in need of protection against their encroachment and exploitation. The unrestricted intercourse which formerly existed between the British subjects in the North-East and the tribes living across the frontier frequently led to quarrels and sometimes to serious disturbances, even gruesome murders. This at times involved the British government in troublesome disputes with the frontier tribes in their vicinity. In order to extricate itself from these embarrassing difficulties the Inner Line Regulation was introduced by the British administration. But this Regulation also created a barrier between the hill people and the people living in the plains of Assam and outside it. This Regulation stood in the way of emotional and physical integration of the area with the remaining part of the country. But the irony is that this Regulation is still in force in the States of Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

There is, however, a basic difference in the administration of the Inner Line System now in vogue. In pre-independence India it was enforced to prevent the people from going out of the Inner Line so that the Government of the day was not embroiled in unnecessary conflict with the tribes over the safety and security of its subjects going into those areas. The main idea was the physical protection of the British subjects. Now this system ensures that

none could get entry into the areas encircled by the Inner Line Permit System. In the earlier regime it was to control the 'exit' of people, now it is to control the 'entry' of the people with a view to regulating the inflow of people into the areas protected by the Inner Line Permit system. These three States are like islands within the vast sea of areas known to the outsiders as India which are protected by a stiff barrier enforced by the Inner Line System. The British Government had a reason to take recourse to this policy. But one fails to understand as to the ostensible reasons for the continuance of the same policy in free India except, perhaps, inculcating among a section of people a spirit of seclusion, isolation and exclusivism and admitting, indirectly, that they are separate from the rest of India. We talk of integrity and unity of the nation but take steps which are inimical to nation-building efforts. Can these people be blamed if they still harbour a feeling of separateness from the rest of India?

Historically, the principal characteristic of the administrative philosophy in North-East India has been the separate administrative organizations for the hills and the plains. The Government of India Act, 1935 classified excluded and partially excluded areas for the administration of the secluded backward areas. The Framers of the Constitution also accepted that philosophy and instead of excluded and partially excluded areas created autonomous districts in the hills with wide-ranging powers vested in the district councils for the administration and development of these areas under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Gradually, the area of operation of the Sixth Schedule was extended to the plains of Assam and even beyond Assam and the power of the autonomous district councils also increased.

The policy of the British Administrators of creating a barrier around the tribal-dominated areas in the North-East firstly, by introducing the Inner Line Regulation in 1873 and secondly, by including areas within the "excluded and partially excluded areas" in 1935, no doubt generated a feeling of separatism and exclusivism amongst the different tribal communities inhabiting these area. This feeling of separatism exacerbated in Independent India. Not only the Inner Line Regulation remained in force thus isolating them from the remaining part of the country, but a special type of administration at the grassroots level supposed to suit the specific needs of the tribals living in the hilly areas was introduced by the Sixth Schedule, in lieu of the "excluded and partially excluded areas" of the 30s. The continuation of the British policy of keeping

the tribals secluded and isolated no doubt strengthened the hands of the separatist and divisive forces which manifested in the creation of new States and internecine quarrels and feuds among the tribal communities.

The Sixth Schedule model of administration could not, however, ensure the territorial integrity of the North-East, specially Assam. All the Sixth Schedule areas barring those in the present-day Assam, have bean made full-fledged States. The new units which came about were not formed with single ethnic groups but with a conglomeration of such groups. Within a single unit a plurality of groups existed with independent/divisive institutional systems. They were not at the same level of development, some due to certain historical reasons had progressed further than the others. It was only natural that in the new power structure the advanced tribes would occupy a relatively stronger position than the rest as far as the access to resources is concerned. The consequence was that a subjective feeling of deprivation in relation to the developed tribes started spreading roots among the non-dominant ethnic groups, though, in reality, it was the well-off section of the dominant tribes who were benefited from the political and economic transformation of the units. This feeling of deprivation and discontent has been expressed in different ways and they all point towards the emerging ethnicity and a few have passed onwards from the state of unrest to the state of full-fledged ethnic movements.[23]

The aspiration of the different tribes, big or small, to preserve their distinct identity is at the root of the ethnic movements among the tribal communities since the dawn of independence. The emerging ethnicity is not only reflected in the inter-relationship of the major groups but similar signs of tension is manifest among the minor tribes also. Whenever tribal groups have felt deprived ethnicity had emerged. In fact, asserts Danda,

> almost everywhere the identifiable ethnic, social or cultural formations have registered a demand for recognition of their respective identities delineated in cultural terms. In fact in many such cases the initial assertion for recognition of identity, over the periods of time and due to exposure to differential circumstances, got transformed to the demand for fulfilment of socio-political aspirations.[24]

In the North-East the creation of so many States mainly on ethno-linguistic considerations has in no way eased the situation.

On the other hand, demands for further vivisection of these States, even independence are often raised by the dominant tribal communities, detrimental to the interests of the other tribal communities living in that area. The disintegration of the North-East got a fillip with the creation of new States and of new autonomous district councils with wider powers and with the conferment of special constitutional rights specially to the Nagas of Nagaland and to the Mizos of Mizoram by amending the Constitution.

In the seven States of the North-East the following Regulation and Constitutional provisions are still in force:

Arunachal Pradesh	(Inner Line Regulation, Article 371H),
Assam	(Sixth Schedule, Article 371B),
Manipur	(Article 371C),
Meghalaya	(Sixth Schedule),
Mizoram	(Inner Line Regulation, Sixth Schedule, Article 371G),
Nagaland	(Inner Line Regulation, Article 371A),
Tripura	(Sixth Schedule).

Notwithstanding these provisions, one of which is more than 130 years old, divisive forces are very much active in this region.

For too long, North-East India has been known as a "sensitive area". Naga "hostiles", the "outlawed" Mizos, the TNV "rebels", Assamese "chauvinism", the invisible "foreign hand", and the more known Chinese perfidy and their 1962 aggression, have all contributed to create an impression in the rest of India that the North-East is mired in intractable problems.

V

The multi-racial, multi-linguistic, even multi-religious character of the region brings in its train a plethora of problems. The problems of the region are indeed intriguing, ranging from social, cultural, political and economic to ethnic, religious and linguistic. The increasing magnitude of such problems have made the North-East a sensitive area where a spark is enough to put the entire area to flame.

Attempts have been made in the past to solve the problems of social tension in North-East India. But indications are there that the social tensions are increasingly leading to social conflicts. The rising problems of poverty, unemployment, and privatisation of land ownership has led to a sharp stratification in the tribal societies.

The privileged section has remained very much indifferent to the real problems of the masses. Ethnicity has become a sort of a double-edged sword because on the one hand it helps in the demands for greater autonomy and power for a few and on the other hand it prevents organisation of people on any other lines but that of itself.

The new generation of educated tribal youths "veered more and more to the ideology of ethnicity that was emerging as a global phenomenon threatening the break-up of large multi-ethnic states".[25] The Nagas have taken ethnicity as the hallmark of national identity.[26]

At the dawn of independence a sort of pan-tribalism had emerged with the formation of organisations like the Eastern Indian Tribal Union (EITU) in 1954 and the All Peoples Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) in 1960 but once autonomy was granted to the hill regions either in the form of a full-fledged State or autonomous district/regional councils there started a fierce competition for control over both the political and economic resources among the units or the tribes living within each unit. More so, as an observer says, "because of the high proportion of aid received from the central government."[27]

Contemporary India, particularly since independence, experienced the development of periodic stress from various parts of the country. Proportionately the bulk of the movements has been found concentrated in the North-Eastern region of the country. It is indicative of the extra-sensitivity of the region as a whole. In this connection the following observation may be found relevant:

> Tribal movements in the North-East are entirely different from those elsewhere in the country and stand in a category by themselves because of the unique geopolitical situation and historical background. Many tribes living on the international boundaries traditionally acted as bridge or buffer communities until the advent of colonialism and shared ethnic and cultural affinities with tribesmen across the frontiers. Developments across the frontiers have had a profound influence on the situation in the North-East. This region was also not completely integrated within the politico-economic system of colonialism; it remained relatively isolated from the cultural systems of the mainland and the political upheavals of the freedom struggle.[28]

Movements which are diametrically opposite to each other are very much evident in this region:

i) total independence, as wanted by the ULFA and the NDFB in Assam, some militant groups in Manipur and Nagaland;

ii) greater homeland encompassing the areas of adjacent districts, even States, like Greater Nagaland, Greater Mizoram, Greater Garoland, etc.;

iii) creation of Autonomous States as demanded by the Dimasas and the Karbis;

iv) creation of Autonomous Councils under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution—one comprising Tawang and West Kameng districts in western corner known as Mon region and another comprising Tirap and Changlang districts in the eastern corner known as Patkai region, both in the State of Arunachal Pradesh and another for the hill areas in the State of Manipur;

v) devolution of greater autonomy to the autonomous councils created under the State Act for the Lalung, the Mishing and the Rabha-Hajong plains tribes of Assam;

vi) creation of Autonomous Councils for the Reangs (Brus), the Hmars and the Paites in the State of Mizoram;

vii) extension of Inner Line Regulation to newer areas;

viii) detection and deportation of foreigners.

These demands, quite naturally, tended to lead to internecine violent incidents between the protagonists of these movements and those opposing them. The mutual distrust and suspicion which a tribal community harboured against the other tribal community when the British first brought these areas under its rule, still continues.

It will however, be naive to suggest that the various tribal communities and for that matter the tribals and the non-tribals of this region live in complete isolation and hostile conditions. Migration and the practice of inter-tribal marriage has kept the social boundaries of an ethnic group in a state of flux. Even at the dawn of independence "a great proportion of hill people now classed as plains tribals have gone a long way towards assimilation" "with the people of the plains of Assam", asserts the Bordoloi Committee.[29]

The primitive sections of the tribal communities and the ordinary peasants in villages share such features as worship of ancestral gods, a vague belief in Great God or Supreme Being,

feasting, dancing and noisy processions as prominent features of communal life, animal sacrifices and ritual offering, use of certain ritual objects such as red powdered grain, iron, peacock feathers and chains,[30] a belief in reincarnation and more vaguely in *karma*, etc. The spirit of hospitality and the liberty in food, drink and social life as well as thinking are remarkable characteristics in tribal and non-tribal societies of this region. The matriarchal predominance even in a patriarchal one has made the North-East really a place for the Mother Goddess since time immemorial.

At the present social context and political set-up except for a very few communities, none can however, live in complete isolation. Voluntarily or involuntarily, people operate in general democratic structure of the country through adult franchise. They interact with each other in economic terms, local market place being the primary meeting centre. Besides, there is another primordial factor which binds people together, that is religion. Since Christianity has become the religion of more or less the entire population of the three predominantly tribal States of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, it also plays a unifying role, cutting across ethnicity and regional affinity.

The primordial ties—of kinship, language, religion, region and custom now form the basis for separatist, irridentist and factional movements within the States as groups who share these ties bid for recognition. They assert claims to political power and to cultural rights as the price of civic unity that a modern nation requires. Even if we want we cannot simply wish away, as Singh says,

> the pluralistic character of our society, the many streams of culture, the cluster of communities with their distinct life-styles that make up the people of India, a pattern in which the communities known as tribes also seem to fit. Each has contributed to make, what India is, today. It is equally true that overarching this there has been a cultural ethos, a commonality of symbols and idioms for the vast majority of people, a sharing of ideals and dreams that India has come to represent through ages.[31]

After all, the basic identities by which Indians have felt themselves to be Indians are not political but cultural.

Since the annexation of the North-East by the British a lot of political changes have taken place. These changes have prepared the way for transition to the present political situation. The striking changes which have taken place are the abolition of the power of

the Chiefs, the introduction of the legal and political institutions, the direct participation of the people in the administration of the region and the political activism. The modern political system has made a dent into the traditional political system. The earlier form of localised political power is gradually being obliterated by the State.

In the recent years glaring changes have been observed in the political field. For example, Andre Beteille thinks that

> today the spirit of tribalism can be given expression through the process of organised politics. The demand for a tribal homeland and the growth of a political party to put it forward indicate the politicisation of tribal society.[32]

The consequences of politicisation are varied. The demands for statehood for Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya and in extreme cases of a "sovereign country" are some of the many consequences of politicisation.

Various communities here retained their identity, the consciousness of which has, if anything, been accentuated, particularly of those who have been guaranteed certain privileges, administrative and constitutional. Generally, these communities have not been swept off their feet by winds of changes but have gained in an awareness of their separate identity. "Identity here refers to ethnic identity. To the tribes it means almost the same thing as tribal identity."[33]

Many political parties, regional in character, have come up in this region to champion the cause of the particular ethnic group/ groups they seek to represent. Each of them has its own agenda for dispensation of justice and for the protection of economic, social and political rights, which may be at variance with each other. Political parties with national outlook are there but they, more-often-than-not, have to compromises their policies and programmes to keep pace with the policies orchestrated by the regional outfits.

This region has witnessed and is witnessing movements ranging from secessionist and independence to separatism and exclusivism. The intensity of these movements varied in degree—at times it was high and at other times it was low but the movements never died down. A number of Accords have been signed with a view to solving the raging problems of the region. Mention may be made of the following:

- Shillong Accord of November 11, 1975 for the solution of the 'Naga' problem;

- Assam Accord of August 15, 1985 for the solution of the "foreigners'" issue;
- Mizoram Accord of June 30, 1986 for the solution of the secessionist problem in Mizoram;
- TNV Accord of August 12, 1988 for a lasting solution of the insurgency problem in Tripura;
- Bodoland Accord of February 20, 1993 and again of February 10, 2003 for a durable solution of the Bodo issues.

It was hoped that these Accords would bring lasting peace in this region. But the barriers of mutual suspicion and fear are so deep-rooted that it would be unrealistic to think that these Accords could fully address the problems. As a matter of fact, these steps could neither bridge the inter-regional and inter-ethnic gaps nor stimulate the development of bonds of nationalism across ethnic diversities.

The diversities would be there but these should not be at the cost of the unity and integrity of the country as a whole. The Britishers might have believed that India's ethnic-religious faultline made it unsustainable as a nation. Much of their efforts were therefore aimed at deepening this faultline. It was expected of our national leaders to take steps to eliminate these chasms and cleavages in free India, if not in one go then at least gradually, and not, at any rate, to emulate the Britishers on this vital issue lock, stock and barrel. But our leaders faultered, prevaricated, and could not rise to the occasion. That is the reason why despite some amount of modernisation, urbanisation and industrialization, integration of the region as such with the national mainstream as also within its various components has remained as if the major concern of the nation.

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This study deals with the North East Region comprising the seven States of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh as a whole, from the days of remote antiquity to the first decade of the twentyfirst century, in order to understand the North East in its correct perspective.

It presents an overall picture of North East India and its diverse people; their religion, language, culture and tradition; different social institutions like family, kinship and marriage; youth dormitory; system of governance at the village level; social and economic structure and social stratification.

It also discusses at length the socio-economic and political changes that have taken place in this region under the impact of the various administrative, statutory and constitutional measures initiated during the pre- and post-independence periods as well as due to the activities of the Christian Missionaries.

It also delves deep into the various ethnic identity movements; ethnic animosity and inter-ethnic tensions; problems emanating from illegal migration and measures for controlling it; the secessionist movements in the North East with its ramifications; the scourge of corruption, drug-trafficking and arms-running; impact of urbanisation and globalisation; measures for the overall development of the region and also outlines a viable, vibrant prosperous North East in its own right sans militancy and sectarianism jeopardising the unity and integrity of the country.

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