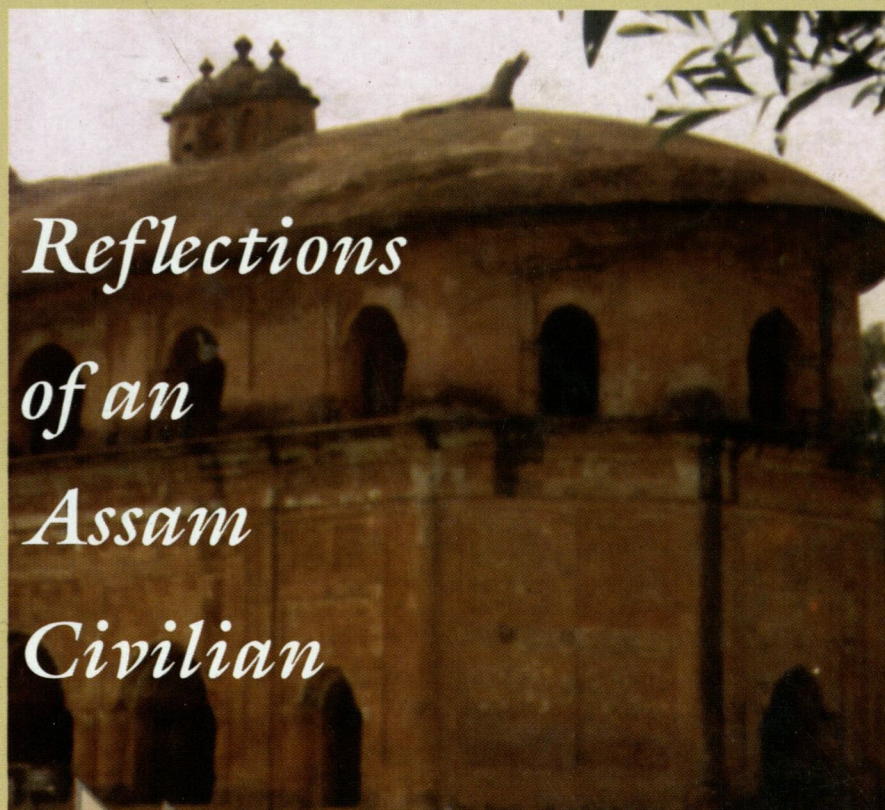


K SREEDHAR RAO

# Whither Governance



*Reflections  
of an  
Assam  
Civilian*

Civil servants of India come in various sizes, shapes and shades. There are those who try to be civil and serve the people. There are others who regard themselves as masters. There are also a good number who, while being properly civil and competent public servants, manage to be masters of the variety of situations in which they find themselves placed. The author of this book, Sreedhar Rao, belongs to this select breed: in recounting his rich and varied experiences, he shows how it is possible to steadfastly adhere to principles without compromise and act fearlessly even in trying circumstances.

The leitmotif that runs through this account is the need to maintain the highest standards of governance in the country, without which all efforts to achieve our social and economic goals, or tackle the serious and complex challenges facing the nation in the sphere of national security, cannot yield satisfactory results. For achieving excellence in standards of governance, the civil service, properly oriented and motivated, based on merit and achievement, is a sine qua non. So is the harmonious relationship between the political executive and the civil service, each respecting the role of the other.

The book also deals with the current concerns relating to internal security focusing pointed attention on the turbulent North-East. The need to get out of the vicious cycle of lack of progress leading to disillusionment begetting violence and insurgency, and this in turn, destroying all prospects of progress, has been brought out in bold relief.

The author, who belonged to the Assam cadre of the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), has held various responsibilities—in the states of Assam and Sikkim, in the ministries of Government of India, and in the mission in Australia. He rose to the rank of Secretary in the Government of India and retired as Chief Secretary, Sikkim.

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**K. Sreedhar Rao** holds a Master's degree in Economics from the University of Madras, and has undergone courses in the London School of Economics, the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, etc. As an IAS officer of the Assam cadre,

he has handled with distinction a variety of problems in a number of areas of responsibility. The most important of these was the war in 1972 that led to the creation of Bangladesh when, in his capacity as Deputy Commissioner of a sensitive border district when he had to, among other things, look after some two lakh refugees; the 'foreigners' agitation' in Assam starting from 1979; the 'ULFA problem' and other related issues of internal security. He has also served in the Government of India, holding positions in the Ministries of Commerce, Defence, Welfare, and in the Cabinet Secretariat. He has had two tenures in Sikkim—as Development Commissioner and as Chief Secretary—during which period he initiated a large number of progressive measures for the all-round development of Sikkim.

Sreedhar Rao has travelled widely both within and outside the country. Reading a variety of literature is his main hobby with a special interest in military history. He lives in Bangalore with his wife, playing tennis as often as possible.

**WHITHER GOVERNANCE**  
**Reflections of an**  
**Assam Civilian**

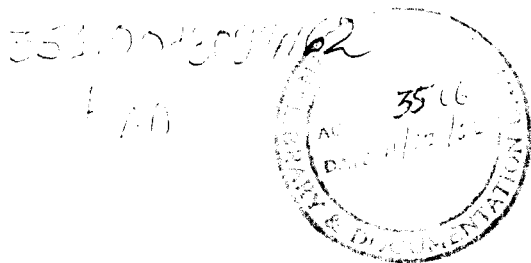


**K. SREEDHAR RAO**

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## INTRODUCTION

Not many of the officers who have served in the North-East of India have deemed it proper to put down their experiences in writing. An effort of this nature by officers with first hand knowledge of the area would have eminently served the cause of understanding of this turbulent region by the people in general and, particularly by those who have an interest in the governance of these remoter, strategically significant areas. The North-East even today represents to the average Indian, lands that are too distant too complicated, violent and possibly ungovernable, faced with insuperable problems which nobody seems to be serious about solving. That the North-East is a part of the country with unsurpassed natural beauty, with a rich unique cultural heritage and abundant natural resources, inhabited by a people who are basically gentle and decent, who given the right policies can progress as fast as the rest of the country, is known only in a few quarters. That there are very deep cultural linkages built up over centuries between the North-East and the rest of India, that Manipur represents the eastern most extension of the great Indian-Hindu civilization, within the political boundaries of India, that Islam has left its mark on the area (there is even a one fourth Mecca in a place called HAJO in Assam) are all facts which are seldom highlighted.

N.K. Rustomji, no doubt, has written about this area in his 'Enchanted Frontiers', having served as an ICS officer in this region, but his work does not deal with the social and economic issues, which have bedeviled the area leading to the current separatist and insurgent activities. K.M.L. Chabra, an IAS officer of the Tamil Nadu cadre, who in the Home Ministry had dealt with Assam, has covered some of the issues. I believe B.P. Singh has also made a significant contribution to knowledge of the area.

To my mind working in the North-East is an experience beyond compare where you have to face extraordinary challenges calling for the fullest utilization of all faculties on a continuous basis. Those who serve in other states have no doubt their own crop of problems but they can legitimately be classified as 'normal' problems, whereas in the North-East the 'unexpected' seems to be almost always round the corner, and to face such eventualities you have to innovate and experiment without the usual bureaucratic 'precedents' to fall back upon. Even at a young age one had to rely solely on one's own judgement and right or wrong you had to take decisions on the spot, with there being so little scope or time to refer the matter to your superiors. The buck definitely stopped on top of your table and indeed on top of your head.

I have had the privilege of serving in Assam, Meghalaya and Sikkim, not to mention my fairly long stints in the ministry of Commerce, Defence, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Ministry of Welfare in the Government of India. Very few officers in the country would have gone through the kind of experiences I have had to encounter during my career spanning the period from 1963 to 1999. Examples of these are the Bangladesh liberation War of 1971 when I was Deputy Commissioner in Cachar of Assam, a communally sensitive border district, the prolonged agitation, as it turned out to be, by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) called the 'Anti Foreigner Agitation' and the insurgency situation involving the United Liberation Front of Assam and the Bodo Security Force. My tenure in Sikkim as Development Commissioner and Chief Secretary exposed me to a unique civilization and an exemplary way of life, once again vastly adding to the richness and quality of memorable experiences.

My intention in writing this book is to add to the knowledge relating to these farflung areas based on my personal experiences and to analyze the causes for the current situation in these parts. I have had the opportunity of dealing with these issues while holding various offices in the area as also during my tenure in the Cabinet Secretariat, witnessing the steady growth of fissiparous tendencies and the equally steady decline in the willingness as well as the ability of the state to tackle the problems, leading to the present situation where there is visible all round disillusionment with the institutions of state and little or no hope for peace or prosperity for the region in the near future. It

is my conviction, however, that given adequate imagination and determination the problems of the area can be successfully tackled and the region enabled to contribute its mite towards nation building as much as any other part of the country. It will be my endeavour to discuss, in good measure, the possibilities in this regard.

The other major concern is the decline in efficiency of institutions of governance in this country the rusting of the legendary steel frame as it were, and the consequent tendency towards the emergence of alternative mechanisms outside the pale of the Constitution, which have taken root primarily because they seem to offer a speedier, if not more effective, system for the people to resort to. An enquiry as to why such a phenomenon has taken place is, to my mind, a worthwhile exercise. Further, the serious adverse consequences for the nation's internal and external security caused by this decline, especially at a time when the nature of such threats and causes thereof are undergoing significant changes, need to be carefully assessed. The vast changes that are sweeping the world in terms of globalisation, opening up of markets, increased trade and financial flows and the new challenges that these developments pose, increasing the necessity of strengthening institutional mechanisms, also need to be adequately reflected upon.

This book is an attempt to draw pointed attention to all these concerns.