

A young man with a serious expression, wearing a patterned headband, is aiming a rifle. The background is dark and blurry, suggesting an outdoor setting.

SAJAL NAG

CONTESTING MARGINALITY

Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North-East India



MANOHAR

Over the years, north-east India has become synonymous with secessionism, insurgency, violence and turbulence. Gateway for the migratory waves from South-East and East Asia, the region is inhabited by a number of tribal communities—some relatively advanced while others proto-historic. The years under the British caused upheaval in their socio-cultural life. They experienced momentous changes in every aspect of their life from food to faith, dress to discourses. But the 'abrupt' withdrawal of the British compelled these 'apolitical' people to be drawn into bourgeois political system. Neither sure of their true identity, nor the nation state they would like to belong to; confused by the prevalent nationalist discourses and frightened by the prospect of being submerged by a numerical majority, they faced a massive existential crisis.

The present study is about this crisis and how such a crisis led these communities to organize and equip themselves, debate and decide their future course of action and confront the colonial and post-colonial Indian States and the process through which this confrontation led to the growth of secessionism and insurgency. This book details the entire process from the pre-British period to date during which the movement itself underwent several crises and metamorphoses and as a result some struggles crumbled while others still carry on the revolt.

Although a number of bestsellers are available on the subject, this is the first serious academic work written by a professional historian.

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Prologue

In the summer of 1989 I, as a college teacher, attended a workshop on the Indian National Movement sponsored by the Indian Council of Historical Research at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. The monotonous and mundane atmosphere of the gathering suddenly livened up when one of my Mizo colleagues interrupted one of the lectures and said that the entire workshop was all about the anti-British movements that took place in Indian mainland. It did not include the century-long fight of the Nagas or Mizos against the British. He threw another shocker when he said that as far as he and his people were concerned the Mizo National Front (MNF) movement was their national movement and freedom struggle, which should be included in the curriculum. The resource-person, an eminent historian, replied that though he sympathized with his stand on the subject, since the Government of India wouldn't permit he was not in a position to include the so-called Mizo national movement in the syllabi. Moreover, as far as the historian and the Government of India were concerned the MNF movement was a secessionist movement—an insurgency.

INTERACTION OF DISCOURSES

Although the matter ended there and the course was concluded smoothly, the interaction, between my Mizo colleague and the speaker was profoundly reflective. It revealed a discourse pattern. The positions taken by the two individuals were representative of the two parties involved: the Indian State and its representatives on the one hand, and aggrieved communities on the other. The present work is about this discourse—this confrontation. What is considered as the nationalist movement and freedom struggle by the struggling Nagas, Mizos or the Meitheis is explained away in terms of 'secessionism' and 'insurgency' by the Indian State. One is reminded of a similar discourse between the colonial state and the Indian nationalists in

pre-independence India wherein the latter declared themselves a 'nation' while the former denied the existence of any Indian nation. This dynamic force of history makes this discourse important. It would be futile to go into the details of the usual pattern of arguments: whether Nagaland or Mizoram really belongs to India or whether the movements were nationalist in character or not because history has proved time and again that national boundaries are not sacrosanct nor is the permanence of nation states guaranteed. Yesterday's terrorists are today's martyrs. Similarly if the Mizo 'secessionism' was a fact, the cessation of this movement is also a fact. The Mizo 'insurgents' of yesterday are not less Indian today than any other Indian. It is this aspect of the unpredictable fluidity of history, so profoundly proved by the events in Eastern as well as Central Europe in the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century, that makes history so immensely mystical and lively. Our object is to study this facet of the Naga, Mizo and Meithei movements *vis-a-vis* the Indian State from a contemporary historical perspective without bothering about predicting its future course.

But what needs to be emphasized here is that the so-called 'secessionism' is not unique to north-east India, or India as is believed.¹ In fact most of the post-colonial states and even the so-called modern nation states in Europe, Africa and America have faced such crises.

SEPARATISM AND SECESSIONISM IN INDIA

A separatist movement was visible in India as early as 1906. In fact, barely two decades after the foundation of the Indian National Congress as the representative political organization of all sections of Indians, a counter political organization was born in the form of the Muslim League (1906), which was followed by the emergence of the All India Hindu Mahasabha (1915) and Akali Dal (1920) representing Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs respectively. These developments posed a serious threat to the concept of Indian nation itself as all three components of it, e.g. the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs claimed to be separate nations by themselves. Initially these demands for separate nationhood were brushed aside as 'insignificant' but its real strength was visible in the 1940s, when Muslims demanded Pakistan, Sikhs demanded Sikhistan and the Hindus wanted hegemony in Hindustan. The situation worsened at the imminence of British withdrawal from India. There was a move to carve out of India an independent United Bengal, Paktunistan in North Western Frontier Province, and Gorkhasthan in the Darjeeling District of Bengal. The

Princely States of Bhopal, Hyderabad, Travancore-Cochin, Junagadh, Manipur, the tribal areas of Naga Hills, Mizo Hills and Khasi Hills in north-east India desired independence and self-rule. While Pakistan was conceded, some of the other separatist-turned-secessionist moves were suppressed and 'integration' was achieved. One of the areas where the 'integrationist' attempt had failed was in the Naga Hills. The Nagas declared themselves independent on 14 August 1947. Soon after, the Meitheis decried the merger and demanded independence from India. A number of insurgent organizations beginning with the United National Liberation Front to the People's Liberation Army were active in the north-east. The merger of Kashmir with India was also decried by certain sections. The newly created Pakistan found that without Kashmir their state was 'moth-eaten' and invaded and occupied part of Kashmir. Since then secessionist demands continued to be voiced all along the 1950s. In 1953 Sheikh Abdullah himself was arrested on charges of 'subversion'. There were underground activities headed by Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front and Kashmir Liberation Army whose objective was to get 'Kashmir liberated from Indian occupation'. The 1980s saw a revival of secessionism in Punjab following the dismissal of the Akalis from office (1980). The movement started with a demand for autonomy on the basis of Anandpur Sahib Resolution and ended with the demand for independence and establishment of Khalistan. The insurgency and terrorism unleashed in Punjab since then, was unprecedented.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (DMK) also raised a banner of revolt against the hegemony of the casteist-Hindi belt.² Following the attempt to introduce Hindi as the national language and the dismissal of the DMK Government in Tamil Nadu in 1976, the DMK activists campaigned for severance of ties with India and establishment of an independent Dravidastan in south India.

In March 1966, the Mizos under the leadership of the MNF followed suit and revolted. The Tripura National Volunteer began their secessionist campaign in June 1980 and the United Liberation Front of Assam in 1981. Among these only Mizoram seemed to have quietened after the Accord with the Centre in 1986 and settled down to peace for the time being.

OTHER POST-COLONIAL SOCIETIES

These secessionist tendencies are similar to those in other post-colonial states where separatist movements have been endemic too. The creation of Pakistan out of India was not the final division. Soon

East Pakistan (Bangladesh) seceded from it and the Sindhis have been fighting a battle of separation from the Punjabi dominated Pakistan. Bangladesh too has not been free from separatism, with the Chakmas as the insurgency group. There is a violent Tamil Secessionist Movement in Sri Lanka. In the African continent the Ibos have been fighting to secede from Nigeria. The Yoruba and Housa-Fulani are the other aggrieved communities in Nigeria; there is a Buganda challenge in Uganda. The Moros are fighting in the Philippines, and so are the Chins in Myanmar, the Bangalas in Zaire, Kurds in Iraq and the Meos in Thailand. There is a Muslim insurgency in Lebanon, and that of Black and Anayanza and Sudan. Besides, there is also the long drawn struggle of the Tibetans against China, the Palestinians against Israel. Even the old nation states are no exception to this. The Irish battle against British colonialism is perhaps one of the oldest. The Scots and Welsh are equally vociferous about autonomy. There are also movements such as the Basque Nationalist Movement in Spain, the Quebec Movement in Canada, and the separatist movements of the Shans in Myanmar and Eritreans in Ethiopia. The artificial creation of multinational states through conquests, agreements, negotiations and superpower manipulation has also failed against the resurgence of ethnic aspirations. The multinationalism of Russia has already fallen to pieces and has not solved the conflict between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the Serbs, Croats and the Muslims of Bosnia Herzegovina—all erstwhile constituents of the Yuogoslav nation—and has virtually turned into a civil war. The Czechs and Slovaks have split Czechoslovakia into two nations. This is not the end of separatist movements, there are more in the pipeline. The Kikuyu dominance in Kenya, and that of the Javanese in Indonesia, have faced serious challenges. The cracks in the relationship between the Zulus, Sotho and Xhosa in Africa is increasingly manifesting itself. The contradictory interests of the African National Congress and the Zulu-Inkata party has already jeopardized the South African nationalist unity. The unification of Germany has only reinforced the growth of Neo-Nazism and contempt for Asians. In India itself there is a Hindu resurgence while the Naga and Meithei struggle continue to challenge the might of the Indian State.

While there are scholarly studies abroad on these 'Secessionist' or Insurgency Movements, in India it is only the journalists who have been interested in the subject. Consequently, students of nationalism, secessionism and insurgency have very little material at hand that can be taken seriously.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

North-east India faces not just political, economic and cultural marginalization but even historiographical marginalization. A study on British India has pointed out that secessionism thrived in the areas which were late in becoming a part of the British Empire in India. Even the specific areas have been mentioned, but not the north-east, though it fits the argument.³ If as an authority this scholar is forgiven considering his European nationality, our national and so-called 'history from below' also excluded the north-east, in narrating certain crucial phases of Indian history like the State Peoples' movement in Manipur or Mizo People's movement to merge with India in opposition to a section of its leaders.⁴ As for the studies on secessionism they follow a pattern which is typical to north-east India. It is the historiographical pedigree that has set the pattern and is unquestioningly followed. Worse, this historiography, which was shaped by the colonial school, has only reinforced the arguments of the insurgents themselves. While the rest of India has moved ahead to reach the concept and ideology of peoples' history, north-east Indian historiography is still chained to its colonial framework set by Edward Gait's *History of Assam* (1905).

The secessionists justify their movements by saying that the Naga Hills, Mizo Hills, Manipur or even Assam were never a part of India till the British conquered them. The students of the history of north-east India are taught that each was an independent political unit in the pre-colonial period, and that it had maintained its 'splendid isolation'.⁵ It is never discussed as to what was 'splendid' about this isolation, nor is it explained that the 'independence of Assam' in the pre-colonial times was not an isolated phenomenon. The entire medieval world, including India was characterized by such regionalism where autonomous units thrived. Nation, and nation states are only a modern phenomenon. Multiplicity of regional kingdoms and feudal chiefdoms, fragmentation of empire, appearance and disappearance of regional powers, regionalism and insularity in vision and political action are characteristic of the medieval times. It is a significant failure of the regional historiography to highlight the fact that Assam could not have been an exception to these medieval characteristics. Similarly tribals and subalterns are treated equally shabbily by some of the 'doyens' of this historiography. For example, a three-volume work on the Anglo-Tribal relationship in north-east India has been titled *Problems of the Hill Tribes: North East Frontier*.⁶

The laboriously collected data from India and abroad presented in these volumes depict the 'tribals' as the 'problem' which justified their being conquered by the British. No attempt has been made to appreciate the heroic resistance offered by small tribal groups like the Nagas or Lushais against a modern military power like the British. Instead the emphasis is on how the tribes created problems for the British by committing raids, plunders and kidnapping in British territory. The grip of colonial historiography is so evident in this work that instead of presenting the tribal side of the picture, British policy has been projected—dividing its course into phases such as peace-mission, punitive expedition, and non-intervention, period of indecision, forward policy, etc. No attempt has been made in this study to use folk history, oral historiography in the absence of documentary evidence to present the tribal point of view. A comparison of these early historical works with the original official imperialist documents of Alexander Mackenzie,⁷ Pemberton,⁸ Butler, Mills,⁹ Woodthorpe,¹⁰ Needham¹¹ or Robert Reid¹² will perhaps not reveal much difference between the two. Such was the stronghold of colonial historiography of the northeast. It is striking that it didn't loosen its grip over historians. For example, since S.K. Bhuyan published his study, *Anglo-Assamese Relations* there has been an enormous interest in studying British relationship with various tribes of the north-east. As a result of S.K. Bhuyan's¹³ study the following historians among others, worked in the tribals of this region: H.K. Barpujari on Anglo-Tribal relations, S.K. Barpujari on Anglo-Naga relations,¹⁴ J.B. Bhattacharjee on Anglo-Garo relations,¹⁵ S. Chatterjee on Anglo-Lushai relations,¹⁶ Helen Giri¹⁷ and Hamlet Bareh on Anglo-Khasi relation,¹⁸ Laxmi Devi on Ahom-tribal relation,¹⁹ and Milton Sangma on Anglo-Garo²⁰ relations. Even as late as 1989, research works on the north-east maintained the stance that the tribals of this region lived in complete political isolation. A critic discovered a strange insularity in the historiography of north-east India in the sense that it never tried to view its history against the background of developments in India as a whole.²¹ He also found that there is a discernible lack of interest or information about north-east India outside the north-east.²² So much so that an Indian History Congress volume categorized a paper on the northeast as 'non-Indian'.²³ It has also been pointed out that the British had no intention of conquering these tribes as it would not gain much economically by such a conquest²⁴ as these hills were 'not a land of flowing milk and honey, no glittering outcrops to raise thoughts of

mineral wealth, no telling indications of reservoirs of endless oil'.²⁵ Such a view overlooks the fact that imperialism is its own justification. There need not always be an 'economic' motive for a conquest. The following is a representative example from a history written in the imperialist tradition.

At least in 1866, it was resolved to take possession of the Angami country and reclaim its inhabitants from savagery. . . . The object in view was to protect the low land from the incursions of the Nagas. It was not desired to extend British rule into the interior, but when a footing in the hills had once been obtained, further territorial expansion became almost inevitable.²⁶

There was a more direct version too.

It should be first premised that for the annexation of their territory, the Nagas themselves are responsible. The cost of administration of the district is out of all proportion to the revenue that is obtained, and we only occupied the hills after a bitter experience, extending over many years, which clearly showed that annexation was the only way of preventing raids upon our villages. . . . It was impossible for any civilized power to acquiesce in the perpetual harrying of its border folk.²⁷

The naivette of the regional historiography of north-east India is reflected in the contention that the annexation of the Naga or Mizo Hills was a historical accident. It only carries forward the colonial argument that the British had no intentions of conquering these hills which were not only devoid of any natural resources but proved to be a liability to the them; it is only the 'barbarism' of the tribes which forced their conquest. Colonialism had not only conquered India, it had conquered Indian minds too. While the mainstream historiography had been able to by and large decolonize itself, the regional counterpart could not yet do so. The absence of motives, plans, strategies, benefits in the conquest of Naga-Mizo Hills was seen as a legitimization of the colonial argument. It not only refuses to acknowledge the reality of 'conquests' but undermines the nature and strength of imperialism itself. The story of the conquest of the Naga/Mizo tribes lasting about a century, which imperialism described as 'one long sickening story of open insults and defiance, bold outrages and cold blooded murders on the one side and long-suffering forbearance, forgiveness, concession and unlooked favours on the other',²⁸ goes a long way to prove this.

In fact, an appropriate phrase to describe this historiographical

situation would be missing 'the wood for the trees'. The fact that the hills were occupied and devastated was overlooked and the emphasis was on whether the British had any motive for the conquest or not. Did the British ever publicize or profess their intentions at any stage of their conquering spree in India? Similarly, imperialist concepts such as non-intervention, non-interference and non-regularizations were uncritically accepted without inquiring into their epistemological background or imperial legitimization.²⁹ It is said that the Inner Line Regulation Act was a device to safeguard the identity of the tribals, though their identity was never discussed in the *Inner Line Regulation document*.³⁰ The primary motive, as shown later, was to restrict the European planters from occupying and converting tribal lands into tea plantations and secondly to stop Indian merchants from encroaching on the trades that were the monopoly of the tribals like collection of rubber, ivory, tribal salt and other forest products.³¹ These studies themselves have revealed that despite the claims of non-interference, the British did interfere with the life of the tribals. It is also said that the roots of the insurgency movements in north-east India lay in the fact that these tribes never participated in the nationalist movement and were isolated from the mainstream of Indian life. By doing so, this historiography only succeeded in reinforcing the ideas that colonial administrators had drilled into the minds of the tribals instead of examining or countering it.

There was this false propagation by the colonialists that to be considered a part of India one had to be either Hindu or Muslim or at least be influenced by them. It was never pointed out that the spread of Hindu culture in South-East Asia did not make them part of India. At the same time the advent of Islam has not only turned a large chunk of Indian population into Muslims but also rejuvenated Indian culture and civilization. So was the case with Christianity which arrived in India as early as AD 52, much before it did in some of the Christian States themselves and enriched Indian heritage. It is not true that Christianity came only with colonialism. In fact if the Nagas or Lushais had escaped these influences, it only proves the diversity and strength of Indian civilization. What is also to be remembered is that Hinduism spread in most far-flung areas of India not only because the monarchs of these regional kingdoms embraced it personally but adopted it as the State religion to legitimize their rule. Assam, Manipur and Tripura are classic examples of it. The tribals under discussion were yet to develop any such kingship, which could facilitate such Hinduization.

What is also a striking failure of the regional historiography was to point out that British rhetoric about the tribals of north-east India being non-Indian was a phenomenon of the 1940s, except for the two memoranda submitted to the Simon Commission in 1928 again by British Officials themselves. After the declaration of British withdrawal in the face of growing hostility from Indians, there was an increasing apprehension in the minds of the tribals about their future amidst people who, they were told were aliens. With the Plan Balkan on, the British perhaps wanted to retain as much of India as possible under their suzerainty as colonies. The 'tamed' tribals were an easy target. Picking up on the legitimate fears of the tribals, some of these imperialist administrators mooted a plan of creating a Crown-Colony Protectorate or a Trust Territory comprising the tribal areas which would be a British colony. Robert Reid, the Assam Governor (1937-42), L.S. Amery the Secretary of State for India and Myanmar, and Reginald Coupland, an Oxford professor were some of those involved in this conspiracy. They were inspired by the thesis put forward by J.H. Hutton, N.E. Parry and A.G. McCall. It is in the light of this 'Crown-Colony' that the British viewed these tribes being different from other Indians and described them as non-Indian although until then they themselves had ruled the tribals as part of India. But the Labour Government in Britain which has inherited an economy devastated by the war, did not entertain the proposals of a Crown-Colony and wanted to be rid of India as early as possible. So not only did the Crown-Colony plan fizzle out, even the declared date of British withdrawal (June 1948) was advanced to August 1947. If the 'secessionists' today appropriate the rhetoric of the imperialists and put forward the same arguments, it is not that they are historical facts, but because they were never countered by nationalist historiography. The nationalists directed their attention elsewhere thereby imposing another false historiographical consciousness on the people. Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, polarized the idea that the tribals were anti-Indian because 'they (the tribals) never experienced the sensation of being in a country called India and they were hardly influenced by the struggle for freedom or other movements in India. Their chief experience of outsiders was that of British officers and Christian missionaries who generally tried to make them anti-Indian.'³²

The refusal to accord the Naga and Mizo anti-colonial movements—a bloody war which lasted little less than a century the status of being a part of the Indian freedom struggle was not only reflective of the 'elitist bias' of the Indian nationalist historiography but also

resulted in alienating the tribals. It is high time that the understanding of Indian freedom struggle underwent some changes in the north-east Indian historiography. And that Indian freedom struggle does not merely consist of the Gandhian movements. The Khasi war against the British (1829-33), the Jaintia rebellion (1860-2) or the Naga-Lushai (1832-98) fights against the British conquerors were as anti-colonial as the Gandhian movements. In fact, when the elites of the country were organizing the first session of the Indian National Congress the Nagas and Lushais were still fighting a life and death war against the mighty British Empire.

Regional history has a specialized role in raising the consciousness of its people. But in the process it should not become 'regionalist'. K.M. Panikkar's caution is most appropriate for regional historians in this context:

I would make one appeal to Indian Historians and that is, not lend themselves to the heresy of elevating regional glories as a result of their specialisation with certain period or certain areas. Every region of India has contributed to the evolution of the Indian people, every group added to our common heritage. Every part of India has its heroic period and forgetting this the historians have contributed to the false pride resulting from the glorified self-image of our different areas. This is the most dangerous development which one has especially to guard against.³³

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