

THE CHALLENGE OF
THE NORTHEAST

By the same Author
India and China
Holier than Thou (A Novel)

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THE CHALLENGE OF THE NORTHEAST



SUDHAKAR BHAT



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For My Daughter
SHEILA "DUTTI"

PREFACE

THE TITLE of this book is based on a phrase used by Jawaharlal Nehru in his foreword to Dr. Verrier Elwin's admirable little book, *A Philosophy for NEFA*.

Various administrative and political problems came to the fore as the scheme of reorganisation of the north-eastern region was put through. Moreover, the beautiful Sanskritic names, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, tempt one to take a close look.

Meghalaya and the Union Territory of Mizoram — as also Nagaland — are areas where Christians constitute the predominant religious groups. Although in Meghalaya, the Christian population is slightly less than half the total, Christians comprise the main religious segment.

That these separate administrative entities came into being without religion being projected to the forefront is a tribute to the people of the area as well as to the secularism of India as a whole. Those who are tempted to harp on Kashmir as a Muslim-majority state might do well to remember this fact — that India consists of Hindu, Muslim and Christian majority areas.

Nagaland has been omitted from the purview of this book because there are already a number of works on the subject.

SUDHAKAR BHAT

E-257 Greater Kailash II
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I

THE NORTHEAST IN FERMENT

WHILE THE world's attention was riveted on Bangladesh during the momentous fortnight from December 3, 1971, a development of far reaching consequence to the political stability and economic advance of the neighbouring region went practically unnoticed.

It is the reorganisation of the north-eastern region of India to create three new full-fledged States of the Indian Union and two Union Territories. In normal circumstances, this would have made newspaper headlines. But in the context of the fighting in nearby Bangladesh, the comprehensive bill giving effect to the scheme of reorganisation of north-eastern India received scant notice.

With the completion of the legislative and executive processes there are in north-eastern India five States — Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura — and two Union Territories — Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as the North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA) and Mizoram (the former Mizo district of Assam).

Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura, as also Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, were inaugurated by the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, in January 1972, just in time for the Republic Day celebrations.

The reorganisation of the north-eastern region, brought about without duress or bloodshed, and with the consent of all concerned, can be compared only to the integration of the States accomplished soon after independence.

The entire north-eastern region covers an area of approximately 253,000 square kilometres, which is a little more than eight per cent of the geographical area of India. Large tracts in the region are hilly and sparsely populated. They are relatively less developed and are inhabited to a large extent by people belonging to various tribal groups. The total population

of the area is less than 20 million, that is about three and a half per cent of the country's population. Of the 20 million one-fourth are tribals.

It is because of these diversities that there were in the region a number of administrative units and a variety of administrative arrangements. There were two full-fledged States (Assam and Nagaland); an Autonomous State (Meghalaya); two Union Territories (Manipur and Tripura); NEFA or the North-East Frontier Agency was constitutionally a part of Assam but was administered by the Government of India; Mikir and North Cachar Hills which are a part of Assam and administered under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution; and the Mizo District which was a problem by itself.

In these circumstances, the desired co-ordination among them for administrative, developmental and, above all, security purposes was difficult.

The decision to confer full statehood on Manipur and Tripura was taken partly for administrative reasons, and partly too because of the agitation by the Manipuris and Tripuris.

The Minister of State for Home Affairs, Krishna Chandra Pant, who piloted the scheme of re-organisation through Parliament, put it this way:

"For more reasons than one, the 1971 winter session of Parliament will be remembered as a momentous one. To the peoples of the north-eastern region, it was a history-making session when, setting aside all lengthy procedures, both the houses passed unanimously as many as five bills to bring into existence the new States of Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya, and the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. And today we see the translation into fact of those legislative measures — a successful fruition of the long-cherished dreams of nearly 20 million people."¹

Besides the five Bills, there were three constitutional amendments — the 22nd, 27th and 37th.

The basic objective of the reorganisation was to restructure the administrative arrangements in the region and provide adequate opportunities to the people of the different parts to associate

1. Feature article by Pant issued by Press Information Bureau, Govt. of India, 16 January, 1972.

themselves in the task of development. It also provides answers to the special problems of the emerging units and gives them a forum, the North-Eastern Council, in which the States and Union Territories can discuss and reach agreements on matters of common interest. The Council also has the added responsibility of formulating a regional plan for the balanced development of the north-eastern region as a whole.

The successful completion of the reorganisation scheme is the result of many months of patient but purposeful discussions among the chief ministers, political leaders, the governor and lieutenant-governors of the region. The process was time-consuming. But when the moment came for decisions, they were taken without much ado and with the consent of all. A word of tribute must go to the people and leaders of Assam; they bore the wrench of separation and truncation with a detachment and understanding that were noteworthy.

The terrain, the size of the administrative units, the general economic situation and the need for developing the region as a whole have made the maximum co-ordination essential. The region is strategically placed, with common frontiers with three foreign countries — China, Burma and Bangladesh.)

What the region needs is a programme of road building and the improvement of other transport facilities, power generation and industrialisation. This has to be for the region as a whole, though politically and administratively they constitute different units.

Apart from development, each of the units in the region has its special problem. In Manipur, it is one of devising a scheme of safeguards for the tribals. In Tripura too, certain measures to protect the tribal people are necessary, though they are dispersed and it is not easy to carve out any area and set up bodies such as the district councils of Manipur. The fifth schedule of the Constitution applies to Tripura, and the State Government might suggest appropriate measures for the development of the tribal people in particular.

In Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) there was an Agency Council consisting of the Member of Parliament from that area and representatives of Panchayati Raj bodies. This has been converted into a Pradesh Council, enabling it to function as a deliberative and advisory body somewhat on the lines of the

Metropolitan Council in Delhi. A few members of this Council act as counsellors to advise the Administrator.

Shillong, which had virtually been partitioned for the purpose of being the joint capital of Assam and Meghalaya, has now been completely integrated in Meghalaya. Three wards of Shillong Municipality and the Shillong Cantonment had not earlier been included in Meghalaya. This small area, about a mile and a half square, was a sort of enclave within Meghalaya. Though most of the offices of the Government of Assam were in that part of Shillong, the city as a whole has now become a part of Meghalaya, while Assam will build a new capital in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh have one seat each in the Rajya Sabha. The reorganisation of the north-eastern region has involved the fresh delimitation of constituencies. Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura have two seats each in the Lok Sabha, while Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh have one seat each. Each of the three new States — Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura — have 60 seats each in their respective legislative assemblies; this is the minimum prescribed under Article 170(1) of the Constitution. The number of seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly has been reduced from 126 to 114, as nine Assembly constituencies fall in Meghalaya and three in Mizoram. Provision has been made for a legislature in Mizoram too.

The entire region has a common High Court and a common Bar Council. Since litigants and others in Manipur, Tripura and elsewhere might find it difficult to go to Gauhati, the seat of the High Court, provision has been made for a division bench to sit at places other than Gauhati. Permanent benches may also be constituted at other places if circumstances warrant this.