T. Raatan

HISTORY RELIGION AND CULTURE OF NORTH EAST INDIA

North East Indian States have been in limelight since Indian Independence. North East Region is situated in - between the two great traditions of the India Asia and Mongoloid Asia. The region comprises of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The present study comprehensively and in lucid style discusses the history, culture and religion of all the Seven Sisters. To be more precise, it deals with history, places of historical importance, the people, culture, religion, customs and traditions, festivals, arts and crafts of each state of the North East India including Sikkim. The book will be of vital use to the tourist, tour operators, students of Indian History and Culture of the North East India.

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Introduction

The North East India comprises the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. They form part of the East Himalayan region which extends from Sikkim eastwards and embraces the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal. The location of the region is strategically important as it has international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Tibet.

The area is characterised by rich bio-diversity, heavy precipitation and high seismicity. It is endowed with forest wealth and is ideally suited to produce a whole range of plantation crops, spices, fruits and vegetables and flowers and herbs. The rich natural beauty, serenity and exotic flora and fauna of the area are invaluable resources for the development of eco-tourism. Total area of the region is about 2,55,168 sq. km.

The region has a high concentration of tribal population. The states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are mostly inhabited by a number of native tribes. Each tribe has its own distinct tradition of art, culture, dance, music and life styles. The numerous

fairs and festivals celebrated by these communities and their friendly nature are irresistible attractions for the visitors.

The North East is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in India. Each of the states that form this part of India has its own culture and tradition. Assam occupies the lush lowlands of the Brahmaputra Valley and is the most densely populated. Arunachal Pradesh occupies the densely forested and sparsely populated foothills of the Himalayas, and is one of the major tourist attractions because of its Buddhist influence. Meghalaya, with its pine clad hills and lakes, is famous as the wettest region of the world. Nagaland has a rich war history that attracts tourists. The other three states-Manipur, known as the 'land of jewels', Mizoram and Tripura make up a fascinating area consisting of green valleys, lush hills with variety of flora and fauna.

There are about 220 languages spoken in these states, belonging mainly to three language families, namely Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Austric. The Indo-Aryan represented mainly by Asamiya and Bangla, Austro-Asiatic represented mainly by Khasi and the Sino-Tibetan family of languages is represented by the Tibeto-Burman and the Siamese-Chinese sub families also there are languages of the Tea-Tribes. However, the majority of languages spoken here belong to the former and the latter is represented by a few Thai languages like Khamyang, Khamti, Aiton, Phakyal and Turung. It is worthwhile to mention here that Ahom a language belonging to this Thai group, has over the years merged with Asamiya.

There is a hypothesis that the Tibeto-Burman tribes came through Burma and entered the hills and valleys of the North Eastern India in about 1000 B.C. They gradually encroached upon the Austric settlers who have been in these parts since 2000 to 2500 B.C. and forced most of them to take refuge in the mountainous area. That was how the Khasis thrived in their mountainous homes high

on the hills of Meghalaya. However, the maximum concentration of the Tibeto-Burman speakers is found in the North Eastern part of the country in comparison to any other part of the country. The North Eastern part of India is bounded by Bhutan, Tibet, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Cultural Plurality and Identity Crisis

The Northeast Indian region is situated between the two great traditions of the Indic Asia and the Mongoloid Asia. This geographical-cultural condition of "in-between-ness" is an important factor for the crisis of identity. It was only since the British period that the entire region came to be associated with India politically. Many leaders of the present day "underground outfits" of the region may argue that the political integration of the region to India was done without the approval of the people themselves. The lack of cultural relatedness, especially of the "tribal" culture, weakens the new political association, and the racial and cultural difference, thus, came to play vital role in defining the self-identity.

While the northeasterners are politically Indian, they are racially and culturally Mongoloid. The consciousness of the two differing identities is pulling the people and shakes the political loyalty. The situation is worsened by the complex nature of Indic culture with which they have beenout of political necessity-associated. The problem of acceptance on the part of Indic culture with its caste-ridden social system, and the problem of identification on the part of the Northeasterners because of the underlying cultural difference underpins the identity problem.

When one talks about cultural plurality in India, since it shares little or no commonality in its traditional culture with the rest of India, the case of the "tribal" people in Northeast India is especially acute.

To address the identity crisis in the region, one has to bear in mind the cultural plurality of the Northeast in general and the sharp difference between the people

assimilated into Indic culture and the unassimilated "tribal" people in particular. Out of constant interactions, cultures influenced each other and developed commonalities. While the Indic-sanskritic culture of India is as a foreign culture for a large part of the regions, there are also areas where it has been at home for centuries. The assimilation of people into the Indic culture became a defining factor for what is "tribal" and "non-tribal" in the identity of the people of the region today.

What Ananda Bhagabati calls the distinctive "geo-ethnic character"of the Northeast is helpful in clarifying the multicultural nature and the cultural differences between the people.

About three quarters of the region is covered by hilly terrain and one quarter is made up of the four plain areas of Assam's Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, the Tripura plains, and the Manipur plateau. Those in the thinly-populated hill areas are the people we now call "tribals," and in the fertile plains and plateau are mainly the "non-tribal" people who comprises more than 80 per cent of the total population.

In recognising the cultural foreignness of the "tribal" people of the hill regions, we should have in mind that the sanskritisation of the plain areas have been going on for centuries. Until the coming of the British rule in the early nineteenth century, the entire region was never linked politically with any major Indian political power, the cultural link of some plain areas with the Indic culture dates back centuries.

The Mahabharata already mentioned Assam as Pragjyotisha, and a reference to Kamrupa-Pragjyotisha is also found in the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra. R. N. Mosahary believes that "the Aryan intrusion" in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam should have begun as early as one or two centuries before Christ.

The sanskritisation or Aryanisation of the indigenous people of Assam, the bulk of which are of mongoloid

race, reached its climax in the sixteenth century when Hinduism became the most dominant religion and the sanskritic Assamese replaced the native language. The Tipras, the indigenous people of Tripura, close kin of the Cachari-Bodos of Assam, are also Hindus from time immemorial. In the case of the Meiteis of Manipur, although there are claims of Hindu influence as early as the seventh century, the large-scale spread of Vaisnava Hinduism of Chaitanya school began only at the end of the seventeenth century.

Around 1705, the Rajah of Manipur officially adopted Hinduism as the state's religion. Unlike in Assam, the Meiteis retain their native Tibeto-Burman language and do not follow a number of traditional Hindu practices such as child marriage, the inhibitions of divorce and widow re-marriage, and the supremacy of Brahmin as well as caste hierarchy. Thus, the level of assimilation of the people into Hindu religion and Indic culture differs from people to people or tribe to tribe.

Whereas the Hindu-Assamese who are relatively inculturated Hindus with some indigenous festivals and practices of their own became sanskritised to the level where the people lost their native language and adopted many imported practices, the Meitei-Hindus retain many more indigenous practices and traditions within their adopted religion.

The Hinduisation of the region was limited to the plain areas as the Indic culture never reach the hill regions. Until the imposition of the British rule in the nineteenth century after the treaty of Yandabo, the hills were isolated and were preserved from the onslaught of sanskritisation. Their cultural foreignness to the Indic cultural system clearly marks off the hill "tribes" from the rest of Indians.

Role of British Rule in Ethnic Conflicts

Continuing terrorist actions and violent demonstrations over the last five decades have turned India's

Northeast into a dangerous place. Large-scale introduction of narcotics and arms from neighbouring Myanmar (Burma) and China has made this strategically crucial area a potential theatre of violent secessionist movements.

Imbued with the British ideology of encouraging ethnic, sub-ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities—as opposed to the identity of a citizen of a sovereign nation-state—both New Delhi and the residents of Northeast India are marching recklessly along the very path prescribed by the British raj in 1862, when they laid down the law of apartheid to isolate "the tribals." While it is not clear how long this fateful road lasts; there is little doubt what awaits them at the end.

Since India's independence in 1947, Northeast India has been split up into smaller and smaller states and autonomous regions. The divisions were made to accommodate the wishes of tribes and ethnic groups which want to assert their sub-national identity and obtain an area where the diktat of their little coterie is recognized. New Delhi has yet to comprehend that its policy of accepting and institutionalizing the superficial identities of these ethnic, linguistic, and tribal groups has ensured more demands for even smaller states. It has also virtually eliminated any plan to make these areas economically powerful, and the people scientifically and technologically advanced.

A situation has now arisen in which New Delhi's promised carrot of economic development evokes little enthusiasm in the Northeast. Money from New Delhi for "development" serves to appease the "greed" of a handful and to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, fresh separatist movements bring the area closer to the precipice.

Assam has been cut up into many states since Britain's exit. The autonomous regions of Karbi Anglong, Bodo Autonomous Region, and Meghalaya were all part of pre-independence Assam. Citing the influx of Bengali Muslims

since the 1947 formation of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1971, the locals demand the ouster of these "foreigners" from their soil.

Two violent movements in Assam, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the Bodo Security Force (BdSF), are now practically demanding "ethnic cleansing" in their respective areas. To fund their movements, both the ULFA and the BdSF have been trafficking heroin and other narcotics, and indulging in killing sprees against other ethnic groups and against Delhi's law-and-order machinery. Both these groups have also developed close links with other major guerrilla-terrorist groups operating in the area, including the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isac-Muivah) and the People's Liberation Army in Manipur.

Unlike most other areas of the Northeast, Assam was better integrated with mainstream India prior to independence; Assam participated in the national independence movement and contributed much to India's intellectual and cultural wealth. Today, however, instead of encouraging its sons and daughters to train themselves in science and technology, and entrepreneurship, Assam has engulfed itself in mindless bloodletting.

In 1972, Meghalaya was carved out of Assam through a peaceful process. Unfortunately, peace did not last long in this "abode of the clouds." In 1979, the first violent demonstration against "foreigners" resulted in a number of deaths and arson. The "foreigners" in this case were Bengalis, Marwaris, Biharis, and Nepalis, many of whom had settled in Meghalaya decades ago. By 1990, firebrand groups such as the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo People (FKJGP) and the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) came to the fore, ostensibly to uphold the rights of the "hill people" from Khasi, Jaintia, and the Garo hills. Violence erupted in 1979, 1987, 1989, and 1990. The last violent terrorist acts were in 1992.

Similar "anti-foreigner" movements have sprouted up

across the Northeast, from Arunachal Pradesh in the east and north, to Sikkim in the west, and Mizoram and Tripura in the south. Along the Myanmar border, the states of Nagaland and Manipur remain unstable and extremely porous.

The root cause of the problem is the conditions set in place by British rule in the Northeast since 1826 and the formation of East Pakistan in 1947. New Delhi's inability to integrate the region stems from its failure to recognize that the British raj had converted Northeast India into a human zoo, where each tribe was allowed to roam free within its "own territory," but was not allowed to cross the boundaries set forth by their British masters and establish contact with the rest of India.

The British came into the area in the 1820s, following the Burmese conquest of Manipur and parts of Assam. The area had become unstable in the later part of the eighteenth century following the over-extension of the Ahom kingdom, a Burmese-based kingdom that reached into Assam. The instability caused by the weakening of the Ahom kingdom prompted the Burmese to move westward to secure their flanks. But the Burmese action also helped to bring in the British. The British East India Company was lying in wait to see the Ahom kingdom disintegrate.

The Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26 ended with the British emerging victorious. By the peace treaty signed at Yandabo on Feb. 24, 1826, the British annexed the whole of lower Assam and parts of upper Assam. The Treaty of Yandabo provided the British with the foothold they needed to annex Northeast India, launched further campaigns to capture Burma's vital coastal areas, and gain complete control of the territory from the Andaman Sea to the mouth of the Irrawaddy River.

The British claimed that their occupation of the northeast region was required to protect the plains of Assam from the "tribal outrages and depredations and to

maintain law and order in the sub-mountainous regions". British historians campaigning on behalf of two ex-viceroys, Lord Minto and Lord Curzon, assert that the defence of the British Empire in the northeast frontier was no less important than the northwest frontier, the scene of the so-called Great Game between Britain and Czarist Russia.

But the tribal territories in the northeastern borderland cover 700 miles of the Indian frontier. These tribal belts, from 70 to 100 miles deep, are almost impenetrable by any force from the north, e.g., China. The Indo-Burmese border, though crossed by the conquering Ahoms to capture Upper Kamarupa in upper Assam in 1228, was mountainous and heavily forested. There is little doubt that the British were not concerned about the enemy; crossing such difficult and hostile terrain was simply not possible for either Russia or China.

But for the British East India Company, gaining control in the northeast of India aided in gaining access to southern China's natural wealth. Significantly, in the Treaty of Yandabo it was mentioned that the British East India Company would have access through upper Burma to chart out a direct trade route between India and China through Assam. As early as 1826, a member of the Governor General's Council said: "We may expect to open new roads for commerce with Yunan and other southwestern provinces of the celestial empire through Assam and Manipore."

The annexation of Assam was also designed to "fix" the situation in Bhutan, Sikkim (an independent kingdom till 1975 before it merged with India), Nepal, and Tibet. The British role in Tibet, as reflected in Francis Younghusband's armed invasion of Tibet during 1901-04, the subsequent invasion of Tibet by the Manchu dynasty rulers for the first time in 1910, the fleeing of the 13th dalai lama, and the subsequent influence exerted by the British over the Tibetan and Mongolian lamas, will be

treated in future EIR reports. But it should be noted that the accession and isolation of Northeast India was designed to infiltrate Tibet, as part of London's greater geopolitical plan to upset China.

In 1838, the East India Company assumed charge of the government of Assam, in order to enhance trade and commerce, and sacked the Ahom king, who had been its "protected prince" since 1826. In the early years, the company had often run into trouble with the tribals, and clashes between the two were routinely reported.

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 Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA) a secluded area had been advocated long before. Section 2 of the regulation empowered the company "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 therein." Thus, the British policy of apartheid in Northeast India was implemented in the tribal area of the District of Lakhimpur in September 1875, and in the District of Darrang in March 1876.

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 obtainable from the Deputy Commissioners of districts. 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-civilized 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 might designate. The regulation was subsequently extended to cover wider areas in the Northeast.

The British plan to cordon off the Northeast tribals

was part of their policy of setting up a multicultural human zoo during 1850s under the premiership of Henry Temple, the third Viscount Palmerston.

The apartheid program eliminated the Northeast Frontier Agency from the political map of India and segregated the tribal population from Assam, as the British had done in southern Africa and would do later in Sudan. By 1875, British intentions became clear even to those Englishmen who believed that Mother England's intervention in India, and the Northeast in particular, was to improve the conditions of the heathens. Apartheid also helped the British to function freely in this closed environment. Soon enough, the British Crown introduced two other features—proselytization of Christianity among the tribal population and recruiting units of the Frontier Constabulary. The Land of the Nagas was identified as "virgin soil" for planting Christianity. "Among a people so thoroughly primitive, and so independent of religious profession, we might reasonably expect missionary zeal would be most successful," according to the 1875 document, as quoted in the Descriptive Account of Assam, by William Robinson and Angus Hamilton. Missionaries were encouraged to open government-aided schools in the Naga Hills.

Between 1891 and 1901, the number of native Christians increased 128 per cent. The chief proselytizers were the Welsh Presbyterians, headquartered in Khasi and the Jaintia Hills. British Baptists were given the franchise of the Mizo (Lushai) and Naga Hills, and the Baptist mission was set up in 1836. Along with this peaceful religious proselytizing, the strength of the Frontier Constabulary was increased. During Ahom rule, only nine companies of police were used to keep the bordering tribes under control, but under the new regime each company was raised to battalion strength.

By the time the nineteenth century came to an end, the British were deeply involved in the "Great Game." At

this point, Northeast India became the theatre of a new gambit. The British plan was to set up a buffer state between China-Central Asia-Russia, and British India. The British split Bengal and joined part of it to sparsely populated Assam, in order to form a Muslim-majority state as the western flank of the buffer state.

The ill-effects of the partition of 1905 began to show up in subsequent years. There was a large-scale migration of people from Bengal into Assam. The Census Report of 1931 says: "Probably the most important event in the province during the last 25 years—an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization—has been the invasion of hordes of land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal and in particular Mymensingh."

Under this British set-up, enormous animosity was fostered between the Bengalis and the Assamese, as the "tribals" now had reason to harden their stance against the "plains people." In the 1911 census, the Muslim population of the Assam Valley was only 355,320. This number had grown to 1,305,902 by 1941, according to the Census Report, the last taken by the British. A large number of violent incidents in Assam and Meghalaya in recent years are directly related to this settlement issue, and tensions have been further exacerbated by a large wave of Muslim migrants fleeing into Assam from instability in neighbouring Bangladesh.

The ultimate apartheid in the Northeast came with the partition of India and the formation of East Pakistan, which in 1971 became the independent nation of Bangladesh. With the partition of Bengal, Northeast India became practically isolated, connected to the mainland through a narrow corridor running between Nepal and Bangladesh.

Growth of Separatist Movements

The North-Eastern region of India is faced with insurgencies or separatist movements from over 50 groups. Although each conflict has its own roots and antecedents, the issues raised include language and ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, control over local resources, access to water, and widespread feeling of exploitation and alienation. The region has witnessed more violence in the last 50 years than any other part of the country. According to reliable estimates, fatalities caused by insurgency in the North-East have gradually increased from about 400 in 1992 to four times that amount in 2002. Besides loss of human life, hundreds of thousands and more are internally displaced, forced to live in unhygienic and makeshift camps and, as a consequence, hundreds of them lose their lives due to disease and lack of basic life amenities.

The state of Nagaland bears the scars of the region's long-drawn history of insurgency, which served as a precursor and a model for other constituent states of the region. The Naga tribes are divided by state and national boundaries. The principal Naga militant group today, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), demands a united homeland, Nagalim, and claims a territory six times the size of present-day Nagaland, including most of Manipur, as well as parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Myanmar. A.Z. Phizo, the founder of the Naga insurgency, opened the Myanmar front to the insurgency in the 1950s. Phizo's group gradually established links with Chinese and Pakistani leaderships also. Tribal divisions within the Naga insurgency that surfaced in the 1960s continue to plague the movement even today.

Assamese nationalism was first articulated in 1979 as a protest against immigration from West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Indian government's efforts to settle the problem, notably through the Assam Accord of 1985,

proved unsuccessful. The United Liberation Front for Asom (ULFA), which demands secession, citing the economic exploitation of Assam has been the most prominent insurgent group in recent years. It represents Assamese-speaking Hindu descendants of the Ahoms, but has also made overtures to other groups. While the ULFA has lost some of its credibility and influence, it continues to be a major source of violence and instability.

The Bodos are the largest plains tribals of Assam, and their movement is a struggle for indigenous rights and tribal empowerment in a majority of non-tribal state. In 1987, they were mobilised to demand the creation of a separate state of "Bodoland", based on the historical precedent of forming new states out of Assam. The Bodos have a pattern of ethnic cleansing that is missing from the ULFA, and India's response to their insurgency has been predominantly military.

The spin-off effect of continued Naga insurgency has been witnessed in the adjacent Mizoram. At its peak, insurgency in Mizoram even surpassed Nagaland in sheer intensity. That is why Aizawl retains the dubious distinction of being the only town in independent India to have been staffed by the air force. The Mizo insurgency lasted for over 30 bitter years of fighting from bases in Burma and maintaining links with Pakistan. The Mizo leader, Laldenga, signed an accord with the central government in 1986, effectively ending the insurgency through dialogue and emerging as the Chief Minister in the newly pacified state. In the latest development package to the North-East, Mizoram has been given a $38-million "peace bonus".

Organised tribal insurgency in Tripura began with the emergence of erstwhile Tripura National Volunteer (TNV) in 1978 and has been continuing since then with only one and half years' peaceful interregnum. Having signed a tripartite peace accord with the government of Tripura, the TNV insurgents laid down arms *en masse* in 1988. The

state passed through a relatively peaceful period till May 1990 when the All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) was formed. In September 1991 the currently outlawed National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) made its appearance. The ATTF group, widely believed to have been sponsored by political elements aligned with the then opposition, carried on operations by selectively killing leaders and workers of Congress and Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS), who were ruling the state then. The NLFT, on the other hand, continued their hit and run operations targeting unarmed civilians as well as security forces after a number of former TNV commanders who had availed themselves of all rehabilitation benefits, joined the outfit.

The background of Tripura's insurgency problem lies in the deep resentment among tribals over the demographic imbalance in the state manifested in the majority status of non-tribal Bengalis as a result of influx of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) and to perception of threat to their identity, culture and tradition. But it may be mentioned here that the present insurgency is a legacy of the past in that Tripura witnessed its first organised insurgency in the late 1940s. This came to an end over a period of time, but the legacy of bloodshed continued. However, what needs to be underlined is that in the North-East region, insurgent outfits fighting for independent homelands have for long received assistance from the neighbouring countries. Such assistance range from supply of arms and ammunition and other logistical support to provision of safe haven and sanctuary for camping and training facilities. There have been on record statements on the floor of the Indian parliament of the irrefutable role of foreign powers in fermenting trouble in the region.