



ASSAM

FROM ACCORD TO ULFa

VIBHUTI SINGH SHEKHAWAT

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This book represents sincere effort to understand and analyse the post-Assam Accord situation in that trouble-torn state which during the entire 20th century passed through many agonisingly painful experiences owing to inter-ethnic and ethno-linguistic disputes and discords, leading to uncalled for blood-letting. In this book I have tried to analytically scan the various provisions contained in the historic Assam Accord and the events that followed its signing. Whereas it is a fact that almost all the Accords signed by the late Rajiv Gandhi, failed to bring about lasting peace, yet unlike the Punjab Accord which was not arrived at after negotiating with the real party to the dispute—the militants, the Assam Accord had the advantage of being signed between the Government of India and the real disputants i.e., the agitation leaders. Despite this it failed to produce lasting peace, amity and accord and in fact, has led to further embitterment, agony and alienation. What accounts for the emergence of ULFa and its demand for the creating of an independent Assam is a very serious matter which requires deep delving and heart searching. Was the Accord faulty or its implementation tardy? Why was the accord repudiated and rejected by the very people who were once in the vanguard of the struggle against the aliens in Assam? Is ULFa the offshoot of this accord or only an aberration? These and related questions have been examined objectively and dispassionately.

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1

ASSAM – AN ETHNO-CULTURAL MOSAIC

No study of Assam can be complete and comprehensive unless it takes into account some of the salient features of the land and its people. The region's geographical location and its aerial propinquity with countries of south-eastern Asia have tended to create an identity-crisis.

The land of "seven sisters" is inhabited by people who form a complex ethno-cultural mosaic. Though inhabited by people who are basically God-fearing, peaceful and innocent, recent happenings have kept this region in media focus. The last few decades have focused attention on this region. The cultural, ethnical and linguistic simmerings became active political stirrings and those involved in them began flaunting an ideology of secessionism particularly in areas inhabited by the Nagas, the Mizos and other distraught tribes that began talking in terms of separation from India. This eventually facilitated the formation of separate states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh from the erstwhile composite state of Assam which underwent several successive aerial amputations and configurations which altered the very contour of this area.

In his excellent book "Borderlands", D. And F. Kuhn says "By a borderland we mean an area far from the centre of political, economic and social power in its own country, an area also close to someone else's political and cultural boundary. Adjoining a borderland one finds people of other faiths or

racess and often different political and social systems as (a borderland) is cut off from the centre of power in its own country, not just by physical distance but also failure of communication. The failure is two ways. The city men who rule the nation from western-veneered capital cannot hide their sense of superiority toward the people of the outlying regions The border-lander for his part cannot hide his suspicion of the "foreigner" Between the two layers there is little understanding or sense of belonging to the same national community".¹

Thus ruled by bureaucracy from distant New Delhi having a Euro-centric value bias, the simple tribals of this region are slowly but steadily and even inexorably thrown into the vortex of an alien ideology of secessionism, deftly propagated in the name of ethnic unity and geographical contiguity. Slogans such as Tai Ahour resting on a passionate exhortation of unity of Mongolian races inhabiting this region are calculated to keep the pot of secessionist sentiments boiling.

J.C. Johari has rightly pointed out :

"Above all, India being a country with great diversity has witnessed the rise of regionalism in some of her parts in a way that it has assumed the shape of infra-nationalism that sometimes touches on the verge of secessionism. The case of the north-eastern region of the country may be referred to in this connection."²

Pattern of Linguistic Diversity

What divides the people of this region into tiny cultural segments is a wide variety of languages and dialects. Out of 1,650 languages and dialects identified in India, nearly one-third are spoken in the north-eastern India alone as is shown in Table 1.1.

The isolated existence of these people aroused in them sentiments of separatism and an instinct of alienation. After independence Assam underwent several areal amputations because the various ethnic groups resented the Assamese efforts to assimilate them by imposing their own language over them. This was not acceptable to the diverse races of

TABLE 1.1
Area And Number Of Tribes And Dialects Spoken In
Various Parts

<i>Units</i>	<i>Area (Sq. Kms.)</i>	<i>Number of Tribes</i>	<i>Number of dialects</i>
Assam	78,556	23	192
Mizoram	21,067	–	–
Meghalaya	22,476	–	–
Arunachal	83,578	24	168
Nagaland	16,527	14	47
Manipur	22,356	28	87
Tripura	10,477	19	112
India			1652

Source: Adopted from Mohanlal Sharma, in A.D. Pant and Shiva K. Gupta (Ed.). *Multi-ethnicity and National Integration*, (Allahabad: Vohra Publishers, 1985), p. 152.

Assam. Nagaland first broke loose from the original Assam, followed by Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Now there is demand for Udayachal and Bodoland. The hill tribes of Karbi Anglong district are becoming restive to break away from Assam. For the residual Assamese, chafing under the loss of Assamese territory, a sense of deprivation caused and reinforced by each areal amputation, attended by a spate of ethnic violence, wanton looting and acts of arson, leading to interminable negotiations to safeguard the juridical identity of an integrated Assam, the entire scenario is one of disaffection, despondence and alienation.

The people of these areas are a witness to full scale armed rebellion, bloody struggle, unremitting guerrilla warfare and internecine inter-tribal fratricidal battles. They raised the demand for secession and began perceiving Indians as colonisers. Time, however, is a great healer and now they appear to have realised the folly of their parochial sentiments and ethnic myopia and barring a lunatic fringe of time serving alien agents, people by and large have decided to cast their lot with the rest of the countrymen as Indians. Conscious efforts on the part of the leaders and the government have

brought a majority of them into the national mainstream. Care now must be taken to ensure that regional urges and aspirations are not dismissed in a cavalier fashion without being properly understood and examined. G. Rama Reddy and B.A.V. Sharma have aptly opined:

“As a historical factor in Indian polity, regionalism has been treated differently by different scholars under different compulsions..... Viewed from the Centre, the peripheral forces always tend to assume threatening and dangerous proportions. It is only through a peripheral perspective that the real implications and significance of regionalism could be assessed properly.”³

Thus, it would be more conducive to the national integration, if one takes into account regional differentiation and susceptibilities. If the tribals inhabiting the region strive for the protection and promotion of their ethnic urges and aspirations, they should not be misunderstood and dubbed as secessionists. It is not the politics of ethnic regionalism which carries with it a pejorative of separatism but the politicization of regional issues by self-seeking politicians that has tarnished

TABLE 1.2
Comparative Statement of Decadal Population

<i>Political Units</i>	<i>Decadal Growth Rate</i>			<i>Population Density</i>	
	1971-81	1961-71	1951-61	1981 Per Sq. Km. (in lakhs)	
Assam	36.09	34.95	34.98	199.00	254
Meghalaya	31.25	31.50	27.03	13.3	59
Nagaland	49.73	39.88	14.07	7.7	47
Mizoram	46.75	24.93	35.61	11.9	23
Arunachal	34.34	38.91	N.A.	6.3	7
Manipur	33.65	37.53	35.04	14.3	64
Tripura	32.37	36.38	78.71	20.6	196
All India	24.75	24.80	21.51	-	-

Source: Adopted from Mohanlal Sharma, op.cit., p. 154.

ethno-regionalism of this region. The case of Assam is a glaring example of this distrust and neglect by the New Delhi based authorities which accounts for continued disenchantment of locals with the central authority. One may, therefore, suggest that the regional machinery must continually guard itself against becoming egocentric in its attitude and conduct.⁴ Continued and unremitting ethno-centrism is counter-productive.

In Assam, every district has registered growth in population between 1971 and 1991 as per census Report, 1991 in table 1.3 below:

TABLE 1.3
Extract of Statement Distribution of Population
Region-Wise, 1971-1991 Census Report

Ser No	State/District	Census Year	Muslims			Hindus		
			Population	Percentage to total Population	Percentage increase 1971-1991	Population	Percentage to total population	Percentage increase 1971-1991
	Assam	1991	6,373,204	28.43	+77.42	15,047,293	67.13	+41.89
		1971	3,592,124	24.56	"	10,604,618	72.51	"
1.	Dhubri	1991	9,38,789	70.45	+71.13	3,82,817	28.73	+29.24
		1971	5,48,575	64.46	"	296,817	28.73	+29.24
2.	Kokrajhar	1991	154,801	19.33	+100.83	531,477	66.38	+54.09
		1971	77,079	17.02	"	344,916	76.15	"
3.	Bongaigaon	1991	264,393	"	+94.11	516,830	64.00	+50.93
		1971	136,207	27.77	"	342,427	69.82	"
4.	Goalpara	1991	335,275	"	+86.23	266,499	39.89	+22.67
		1971	180,036	41.53	"	217,241	50.11	"
5.	Barpeta	1991	776,974	"	+64.84	557,929	40.26	+12.64
		1971	471,344	48.65	"	495,327	51.12	"
6.	Nalbari	1991	202,653	19.94	+92.78	787,485	77.48	+38.11
		1971	105,121	15.44	"	570,204	83.74	"
7.	Kamrup	1991	467,544	23.38	+88.98	1,486,526	74.32	+58.92
		1971	247,410	20.50	"	935,399	77.50	"
8.	Darrang	1991	415,323	"	+108.10	786,332	60.54	+34.00
		1971	199,574	23.91	"	586,800	70.31	"
9.	Sonitpur	1991	189,859	13.33	+130.30	1,142,228	80.20	+46.58
		1971	82,262	9.07	"	779,228	85.97	"

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10. Lakhimpur	1991	109,010	14.51	+108.39	598,946	79.70	+46.42
	1971	52,311	10.88	"	409,054	85.07	"
11. Dhemaji	1991	7,114	1.49	+427.74	449,492	93.87	+96.90
	1971	1,348	0.58	"	228,290	98.93	"
12. Marigaon	1991	289,835	"	+69.42	348,989	54.56	+38.69
	1971	171,074	40.36	"	251,641	59.36	"
13. Nagapm	1991	893,322	"	+81.91	979,395	51.73	+31.19
	1971	491,082	39.24	"	746,532	59.64	"
14. Solaghat	1991	58,859	7.11	+117.43	713,131	86.11	+49.22
	1971	27,070	5.17	"	477,902	91.25	"
15. Jorhat	1991	37,651	4.32	+48.04	815,320	93.59	+32.33
	1971	25,433	3.89	"	616,578	91.08	"
16. Sibsagar	1991	69,260	7.63	+59.01	810,445	89.26	+35.99
	1971	43,557	6.65	"	595,955	91.08	"
17. Dibrugarh	1991	46,814	4.49	+69.00	951,763	91.30	+35.40
	1971	27,700	3.66	"	702,919	92.90	"
18. Tinsukia	1991	30,095	3.13	+88.45	867,825	90.18	+44.39
	1971	15,970	2.44	"	60,013	91.83	"
19. Karbi Anglong	1991	10,421	1.57	+111.42	562,102	84.82	+64.16
	1971	4,929	1.30	"	342,418	90.27	"
20. North Cachar	1991	3,340	2.21	+409.92	109,959	72.92	+87.70
	1971	655	0.86	"	58,581	77.03	"
21. Karimganj	1991	406,706	49.17	+57.93	414,731	50.15	+29.20
	1971	257,522	44.24	"	320,997	55.14	"
22. Hailakandi	1991	246,016	54.79	+55.56	196,269	43.71	+34.34
	1971	158,150	51.40	"	146,100	47.48	"
23. Cachar	1991	419,150	34.49	+56.57	770,803	63.42	+43.03
	1971	267,715	32.51	"	538,898	65.44	"

Socio-cultural Profile

The demographic and socio-economic setting also reinforces political desquiet in this turbulent region. Table 1.2 shows the population density and its abnormal growth in the whole of north-eastern India.

The details given in Table 1.2 indicate that the growth rate of population in this region is higher than the all India average. Assam registered a growth of 36.09 per cent in the same period as against the all India figure of 24.75 per cent which is 11.34 per cent more than the all India average. The influx of outsiders and aliens appears to be the main cause of this steep rise. The Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims, contributed substantially to this hike in population of illegal

immigrants. The decadal growth in Assam between 1991 and 2001 is 18.85.

The conflict between the indigenous and immigrants led to violent actions and periodic insurgencies. Moreover, the differences in life style of the immigrants is a cause of social tension. The structural cleavages between various population segments was also sharpened by the differential in the literacy status, level of urbanisation, religious sentiments and linguistic feelings.

The most surprising feature of this region is that despite general backwardness, some of the hilly areas have recorded higher literacy rates, thanks to the efforts of the Christian missionaries. However, there is a poor progress of urbanisation in all the areas. This is shown in Table 1.4.

TABLE 1.4
A Comparative View of Literacy and Urbanisation

<i>States</i>	<i>Literacy</i>		<i>Urbanisation</i>
	1971	1981	1971
Assam	28.6	N.A.	8.4
Meghalaya	28.4	33.2	13.0
Nagaland	27.3	42.0	9.9
Manipur	32.8	42.0	13.3
Tripura	30.9	41.6	7.8
Mizoram	50.9	-	11.6
Arunachal	11.3	-	3.5
All India	29.5	36.2	19.9

Source: Mohanlal Sharma, op. cit., p. 156.

One can attempt another table to show literacy percentage in Char Areas in Table 1.5.

Religion did not emerge as a cementing factor in this area. Hinduism dominated the plains, but in the hilly areas, local tribal faith prevailed till Christianity became the dominant religion in these tribal tracts. This has added an inflammable dimension to an ethnic issue. Like religion, language also continues to be a source of diversity in this area. Although Assamese and Bengali are spoken by the majority of people as their mother tongues, yet in each state there are sizeable linguistic minority pockets, which cause inter-community

TABLE 1.5
Literacy Rates in Char Areas of Assam, 1992-93

<i>Name of districts where chars are located</i>	<i>Percentage of literacy for char inhabitants</i>	<i>Percentage %</i>
Barpeta	12.90	8
Darrang	10.12	8
Kamrup	16.85	8
Nalbari	7.90	9
Bongaigaon	12.58	8
Goalpara	8.38	9
Dhubri	19.06	8
Morigaon	8.02	9
Nowgong	9.44	9
Dhemaji	14.44	8
Lakhimpur	14.01	8
Sonitpur	12.63	8
Tinsukia	14.20	8
Jorhat	31.90	6

tensions. Even today in the truncated Assam, many tribal groups are clamouring for separate statehood in the name of ethnicity and language. In Table 1.6, composition of people of different faiths is attempted.

TABLE 1.6
Religious Composition of the Population

<i>Political Units</i>	<i>(1971 in percentage)</i>				
	<i>Hindu</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Christian</i>	<i>Local Tribal faith</i>	<i>Total population (Number in lakhs)</i>
Assam	71.0	24.0	4.5	N.A.	146.25
Manipur	59.0	6.6	26.0	8.1	10.73
Meghalaya	18.5	2.6	47.0	31.6	10.12
Nagaland	114.0	0.6	66.8	20.9	5.16
Tripura	89.6	6.7	1.0	Neg.	15.56
Arunachal	220.0	0.2	0.8	93.6	4.68
Mizoram	6.4	0.6	86.1	0.1	3.32
All India	82.7	11.2	2.6	0.4	5481.60

Source: Mohanlal Sharma, op. cit., p. 157.

The Muslim presence in Assam legislature is shown in Table 1.7.

TABLE 1.7
Muslim Legislators in the Assam Legislative Assembly, 1952-1991

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Muslim Legislators</i>	<i>Total Seats</i>	<i>% of Muslim Legislators</i>
1952-56	12	108	11
1957-62	14	108	13
1962-67	14	108	13
1967-72	20	126	16
1972-78	21	126	20
1978-83	26	126	21
1983-85	29	126	23
1985-91	22	126	17
1991-	24	126	19

Source : Computed from "Presiding Officers' and Members of Assam Legislative Assembly (A Chronicle)", 1937-1992 Government of Assam.

Perceived Sense of Economic Deprivation

The entire north-eastern region is a late starter in the march to economic development. The Britishers did not promote indigenous entrepreneurship. They only exploited the local resources—timber, tea and oil for their measly gains. In the words of Amlendu Guha:

"The big push in the government and the British sectors failed to induce a commensurate growth of the indigenous private sector. What was developing with an amazing tempo was the British owned and British managed part of the economy, with labour and middle management services almost entirely recruited from the Indian provinces."⁵

After the departure of English colonial masters their place was taken by non-Assamese Indians such as the ubiquitous Marwaries from Rajasthan, transport barons from Punjab,

bureaucrats of Bengali origin and manual labourers from Bihar which left the local Assamese high and dry.

Upto a point the influence of outsiders was tolerated as Assam was sparsely populated, but with the rapid rise in population, the Assamese began to protest. The Assamese felt that his land was being treated as a colonial hinterland by the outsiders who became dominant in services, ascendent in trade and pre-eminent in other occupations.

While Assam has plentiful of natural resources, investment in industries and agriculture is meagre. The people of this area complain that the centre is not paying attention to their poor lot and sufficient economic aid and assistance is not being provided to them. Time and again, they have ventilated their grievances in non-violent ways but have failed to elicit any response. To cap it, the increasing unemployment among the educated has further worsened the already volatile situation.

Ethno-Political Awakening and the Birth of New Elite

By the turn of the 19th century, the British brought the entire north-eastern region under one single authority after their conquest of Brahmaputra Valley from the Burmese in 1826. The British introduced new educational curriculum and created the political institutions, which awakened a new sense of identity among the locals, the end of East India Company's rule further helped the Assamese in coming out of their isolation. Like the rest of people in India, they also plunged headlong in the national movement and the entire region was in a ferment. In this, the role of Christian missionaries deserves special mention. The Christian missionaries not only introduced an organised religion, but also opened new avenues of education in the hill region. "Adoption of western symbols", says A. Guha, "had both types of impact in unifying at local level and differentiating at national level."⁶

This created a new elite, which was conscious of its new identity and mission in the movement. This awakening helped in the growth and flowering of a number of sabhas at local level, which were acutely aware of their role in national movement. The Assam Association was formed in 1882. To

begin with, it supported the Indian National Congress and later on merged into it in 1920.

The hilly areas also witnessed the emergence of new political organisations. The Khasi National Durbar in 1923, the Khasi States' Federation in 1934, the Naga Hills District Council in 1915, Naga National Council in 1946 and the Mizo Union in 1946 were formed. Though late in their formation, these political organisations, acting under the influence of the traditional chiefs, played a stellar role in imparting political consciousness. In the case of Mizo and Khasi Hill areas where education had made rapid advances and gave birth to a new elite, a new identity consciousness developed which at a later stage, developed into an urge for separate statehood. But during the British period, these groups championed the cause of independence of the entire country. The first consequence of this awakening was the generation of consciousness among the locals regarding the threat from alien rulers and as well as outsiders from within the sub-continent. As *Yonuo* has observed:

“Around the close of the 19th century, various issues came in handy for wider diffusion of regional identity. They felt deeply concerned about the influx of middle class educated Bengalis who were feared to outshine the former in the competition for public services, and also in the political field because of better skill and increasing number. Even within the provincial council of the new province of East Bengal and Assam, the handful of members from the region had practically no role to play. All these experiences led to the slogan ‘sons of the soil’.”

But as A. Guha notes, “It was basically a defensive nationalism.”⁷ However, “the sense of distinct identity, to an extreme point developed among the Nagas.”⁸ In the memorandum to the Simon Commission, the Naga Club, Kohima, strongly put forth this as under:

“We, the undersigned Nagas of the Naga Club, who are the only persons who can voice for our people, have heard with great regret that our Naga Hills are included within the reformed scheme of India without our knowledge. But as the administration of our Hills continued to be in the hands of British

officers, we did not consider it necessary to raise any protest in the past. Now we learn that you have come to India as representatives of the British Government to enquire into the working of the system of Government and the growth of education and we beg to submit below our view with the prayer that our hills may be withdrawn from the reformed scheme and placed outside reforms but directly under the British Government.”⁹

Thus, the Nagas were always conscious of their rights.

Components of New Ethnicity

The identity of the hill people is a complex multiple of diverse languages, religion and cultural plurality cemented by a common Mongolian ethnicity. They all belong to this common Mongolian racial stock. This is in sharp contrast to the Assamese attitude of hegemony in the hill regions. Having suffered at the hands of the Bengalis, the Assamese wanted to bring diverse tribes under their own control through the imposition of their own language. This the tribals will not accept and that accounts for their suspicion of Assamese intents and their consequent alienation. This intended Assamization of tribals led to their complete isolation which was further reinforced by the Inner Line system which was dexterously devised by the imperialist masters to exclude the tribal people from the mainstream of India’s political life and to preserve them as museum specimens of an aborigin race. This was also intended to promote ‘discord’ between these tribes and the rest of the country.

National Identity And Separatist Consciousness

A noteworthy feature of Assamese situation was the parallel growth of nationalism and separatism. While the plains people of Brahmaputra and Surma Valley, under the spell of nationalism were seeking larger fraternities and joined the national movement, the hill people remained cut off and isolated and began nurturing dreams of independent existence. “Under the constant shadow of Bengali-Assamese conflict, the growth of nationalism in 19th century Assam was a two-

track process. People were increasingly turning as much to the great nationalism at the All India level as to the little nationalisms at the linguistic regional level.”¹⁰ The Assamese elite began attending Congress sessions and in 1921, the Congress party set up its branch in Assam. With the ‘nationalization’ of Assam Association and its renaming as Pradesh Congress,¹³ the Assamese opened the doors for closer collaboration with national movement. But this was not an unmixed success and there were moments of distrust and disbelief in the national leadership. Two different trends of Indian nationalism and Assamese sub-nationalism began to grow simultaneously. While the activities of Indian National Congress were confined to plains of Assam, in the hill areas, separatist tendencies became noticeable indicating the nature of emerging aggressive regionalism.

In the first phase, from 1950-1960, the tribals stressed their separate identity, not always out of conviction, but to use separatism as a bargaining counter for obtaining political mileage. Under the dynamic leadership of maveric Z.A. Phizo, the Nagas began nurturing a dream of an independent Nagaland.

The urge for separatism among Nagas also spread to other hill areas and first major expression took place in Khasi and Jaintia, Garo and Mizo districts in mid fifties and in the Mikir and North Kachar districts in the sixties. In 1952, Capt. Williamson Sangma, as the Chief Executive member of the Garo Hills District Council, moved a resolution which praised leadership of the Chief Minister and declared that the hills and the plains sections must remain united. But two years later, Sangma held a conference of Executive Committee of the Autonomous District Councils of Hill Areas in Shillong in June, 1954 to consider the formation of a separate state. The conference unanimously demanded a separate state for all the hill districts. For some time, following the elections of 1954, Chief Minister B.P. Chaliha, tried to persuade prominent hill leaders like Sangma to join the ministry but as time went on, the demand for separate state for all hilly areas started gaining fresh momentum and in 1962, separate state was conceded to

the Nagas which was followed by Mizoram and Meghalaya in 1971, and Arunachal Pradesh in 1972.

The Nagas kept constant refrain of separatism on grounds of their politico-historical traditions, the Christian religion and Mongolian ethnicity. Similar arguments were advanced by the Khasis, the Garos, and others also to extract political concessions. They felt that their distinct socio-cultural identity will get lost and retard their development prospects. The memorandum submitted to the States Reorganisation Commission by the hill leaders in 1954, contained similar arguments. These were reiterated when the 'hill-state' movement gained further momentum and representation were made to Jawaharlal Nehru and to the Pataskar Commission. The declaration of Assamese as state language was vigorously opposed by the Mizos who perceived in this move a potential threat to their identity.

Inter-elite Discord and Problem of Sub-nationalism

The problem of ethnic entities based on racial, religious and politico-historical differences got accentuated in the wake of increasing conflicts between the political leaders at various levels because of conflict of interests and resulting distrust of one another. Capt. W. Sangma organised the hill leaders conferences of 1954 and 1960 and criticised plains leaders but four years later, he became appreciative of the state leadership hailing from the plains. He staged the volte-face because the state administration did not accept the recommendations of the Garo District Council of which Sangma was the Chief Executive member and he felt marginalised by this step. He, therefore, began, praising the plains leaders in order to come closer to them. Similarly, Khasi hill leader, Nicholas Roy, committed a somersault when he found the state Congress leaders were trying to undermine his position. Noting these and other cases, Mohan Lal Sharma concludes:

“Frequent interference of the T.A.D. (Tribal Area Department) in the internal affairs of the district councils caused misgivings among the tribals. The TAD did not follow a rational principle. Such cases were reported from Mizoram also. Therein, the Assam

State Congress leadership would try to bypass the Mizo Union, the dominant party of the area till the mid-sixties, and even embarrass and weaken it by encouraging the MNF as a rival to it. This proved counter productive. This forced the Mizo Union to compete with the MNF by taking recourse to populist chauvinistic slogans in place of its earlier adherence to moderate progressive policies."¹²

In addition to these political factors, some economic factors also contributed to the conflicts among hill leaders which encouraged competitive secessionism among them. These were the questions of land reforms and problem of unemployment. In the hilly areas, some sort of feudal system prevailed and the feudals got scared by the demands for the land reforms. Hence, to counteract it, they raised the demand for autonomy. On account of the continued influx of outsiders, job prospects for the indigenous people depressed and outsiders were perceived as their enemies. This partly explains the fragmented nature of the north-eastern political movement asking for local autonomy. Anti-migrant movement in Assam was fuelled by Assamese xenophobia against the Bengalis which manifests itself in a feeling of hatred against all outsiders.

In view of these divisive trends, one is confronted with the emerging federal dilemma of reconciling the conflicting claims of state autonomy with national integration. It is open to reason whether in a plural society, marked by diversities of varied dimensions, it is at all possible to talk of reconciliation and reproachment among diverse segments of the population. The problem is further accentuated by the fact that not all hill people are content with greater autonomy. Several of them are demanding complete independence.

Regional consciousness in hill areas manifests itself in subnationalism bordering on secessionism. Small wonder if S.R. Maheshwari considers regionalism a threat to national integration. He said, "It is highly necessary that we must discard once and for all the notion of regionalism as being somewhat unpatriotic or posing a threat to national integrity." This is an overstatement and an exaggeration. It is not regionalism *per se* which is dangerous but leadership's failure

to recognise that in a plural society, diversity is a political reality which can be ignored only at the cost of national peril. It is the fact of diversity from within, not diversity from without that needs to be understood. The best way to counter fissiparous tendencies is to give legal recognition to myriad diversities. Any step to stifle diversities would contain its own nemesis and prove counter-productive. India has remained united despite diversity for centuries, and diversity, far from weakening, has only strengthened and enriched national unity. To borrow a wise observation from Jawaharlal Nehru:

“India is a geographical and economic entity, a cultural unity amidst diversity, a bundle of contradictions held together by strong but invisible threads. Overwhelmed again and again, her spirit was never conquered. About her, there is the elusive quality of legend of long ago; some enchantment seems to have held her mind. She is a myth and an idea, a dream and a vision, and very real and present and pervasive.... none of her children can forget her wherever strange fate befalls them. For she is part of them in her greatness as well as her failings, and they are mirrored in those deep eyes of hers that have seen so much of life’s passion and joy and folly, and looked down into wisdom’s well.”¹⁴

The reason for this optimism is obvious. India has always tried to integrate, not assimilate minorities. Nothing would endanger Indian unity more than this loose talk of assimilation. Assimilation leads to the obliteration of differences and diversities whereas integration unites different segments without destroying their separate identities. Hence, one should make an attempt at intergroup integration and not assimilation. The different segments of a society should be permitted to retain their distinctiveness in the same manner as different shades maintain their identities in a rainbow. To quote Rasheedudin Khan, “Cohesion but not fusion, unity but not uniformity, reconciliation but not assimilation, solidarity but not regimentation of the discrete segments of the people constituting a political community/ state is our answer to the problem of disintegration.”¹⁵

Indian society is a cultural mosaic of people speaking

different languages, having diverse cultural traditions and subscribing to different faiths. Nikhil Chakravarty is right when he says:

“Without the capacity to be sensitive to different colours and shades of the mosaic of the rich culture that India’s continuing civilisation has handed down to us, no leadership can really help to maintain national integration.”¹⁶

The proper approach to national integration should be to allow the regional sentiments to develop to the fullest. If states grow stronger, the Centre too will be strengthened. For this, one must take steps to create a national consciousness and a sense of belonging to the country in the hearts of the people. As Gajendragadhker says, “Those who believe in national integration must be committed to the task of creating new India of tomorrow.”¹⁷

History teaches us that whenever Centre was weak, centrifugal forces raise their heads and disintegrated the nation. One must understand the Roman saying the Historic *Magister Vitas*, which means ‘history teaches us to live.’ If that is so, why must one refuse to learn from history. One should, therefore, take lesson from history to co-exist with one’s fellow beings of diverse faith, religion and ethnicity in order to maintain national unity. Jawaharlal Nehru was right when he said, “I know there is India, but I want to know where are the Indians.”¹⁸ He was obviously right because Indian nationalism despite half a century after independence has still not acquired the meaning and connotation that is expected of it because of the parochial nature of some people. To quote Jawaharlal Nehru again.

“We should not be parochial, narrowminded, provincial and caste-minded, because we have a great mission to perform. Let us as citizens of the Republic of India, stand up straight with straight backs, and look up at the skies, keeping our feet firmly planted on the ground and hoping about this synthesis, this integration of the Indian people. Political integration has already taken place but what I am after is something much deeper than that an emotional integration of the Indian people that might be welded into one, and made into one strong national unit,

maintaining at the same time all our wonderful diversity to be regimented and taken away, but we must be wary of losing ourselves in petty quarrels.”¹⁹

Geography And Demography

The north-eastern region is divisible in three clear geographical segments viz., the Assam valley, Purvanchal and Meghalaya-Mikir region. Commenting upon the geographical location of Assam valley, K.V. Rao says, “The Assam valley or the Brahmaputra valley (25°44'-27°55' NORTH-EASTERN and 89°41'-60°02'E) is a well demarcated physical unit within the girdle formed by the Eastern Himalayas, Patkai and Naga Hills and the Garo-Khasi-Jaintia and Mikir Hills. It is about 720 km in length and 80 km in breadth. It covers an area of about 56,274 km. The valley includes the administrative districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Dibrugarh, Kamrup and Goalpara of the State of Assam. It is bounded by Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan in the North, Bangladesh in the West, Meghalaya in the South, Nagaland in the South-East and the Tirap division in Arunachal Pradesh in the East.”²⁰

In the same way, Purvanchal region also admits of similar, though not identical territorial boundaries. To quote K.V. Rao again, “The Purvanchal region (21°57'-28°23' N and 91°13'-97°25'E) covering an area of about 94,800 km consists of Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Mizo Hills and Cachar district along with a fifth of Haflong Tahsil of Assam State and a part of NEFA. Its maximum length is about 755 km. It is surrounded by Bangladesh in the South-West, Burma in the South-East and China in the North-East.”²¹

So also Meghalaya-Mikir region admits of its own distinctiveness as K.V. Rao has put it, “The Meghalaya-Mikir region (25°05'-26°41' and 89°47'-93°36' E) comprises the Garo Hills, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the outlying Mikir Hills. The region from Dhaniri in the east to Singimari river on the west is about 400 km with an average width of about 40 km, covering about 35,391 km. It includes the State of Meghalaya, Mikir Hills and a portion of North Cachar Hills. It is bordered

on the north by Goalpara district and Kamrup district, on the west by the south-western part of Goalpara district and a part of Rangpur district (Bangladesh) on the south by the district of Sylhet and Mymensing and on the east by Sibsagar district.”²²

Thus the Assam valley has very important strategic location in terms of defence of the nation. It is bounded by Bhutan and Bangladesh in the northern and western flanks respectively and is none too far from Nepal. Indeed, the only railway line that connects Assam to the rest of India, passes through what is called the Siliguri Neck which is small strip of land between Bhutan and Bangladesh and is close to Nepal and hence hypothetically, if on exhortation from the neighbouring super power China, states like Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan make a common cause and join together to block the entry of Indians through this narrow passage near the Himalayan foot hills, the entire north-eastern region comprising of seven sisters viz., Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura would be severed from the Indian mainland in one foul stroke and thus pose a very serious threat to the territorial integrity of the Indian union. Since the people of these seven states too are inhabited by people belonging to the Mongolian stock, have historical links with the people from South-East Asia and China whose border they frequently cross in order to indulge in an illegal border trade, a long separation of this region through either conquest or coercion from the mainland can spell disaster. Hence the entire region is one of great strategic significance to India because of its location. The region's geographical propinquity with the south-eastern Asian countries and its ethnic roots make it vulnerable to foreign propaganda which is incessantly exhorting them to rebel against India and secede from it. As it is, there is no dearth of secessionist sentiments in this region and many people owing to sentiments of pan-Mongoloid unity and affiliation, talk of secession as a solution. People openly say that as the crow flies, Hanoi is nearer to them than New Delhi. Religious feelings also buttress separatist consciousness. The three

Christian majority states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have many malcontents among them who speak of a Christian Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram versus Hindu India and induce them to secede from the soil. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) still harbours the designs of an independent greater Nagaland comprising of the present territory of the state of Nagaland and some parts of Manipur. Secessionist slogans were also raised in Assam and Mizoram in the past and the state of Manipur continues to be in the grip of secessionist fever. Chafing under Indian rule, Manipur secessionists also talk about an independent Manipur. Back to Sanamahi or original faith (other than Hinduism to which they are wedded today) is the constant refrain of Manipuri rebels and insurgents, many among whom were trained in Lhasa in the art and technique of guerrilla warfare. They are receiving a liberal supply of modern fire-arms through illicit drug trafficking. The entire region, therefore, is in the grip of secessionist ideology. Be it the rebels in Assam (ULFa), Nagaland (NSCN), Tripura (Tripura National Volunteers) or Mizoram (Mizo National Front), all talk of secession as a solution. The only placid water in an otherwise turbulent ocean is in the state of Arunachal Pradesh on which China lays claims and the state of Meghalaya. But how long these states shall remain untouched by secessionist sentiments is a moot point which requires deep-delving and serious study. As of now discontent is simmering in Arunachal Pradesh because of the heavy influx of Chakma refugees from Bangladesh via Tripura and Meghalaya has banned on November 16, 2000, two militant outfits viz., Achik National Volunteers Council and Hynniewtrep National Volunteers Council. The former wants to carve out an independent state of Garoland out of Meghalaya, whereas the latter has yet to concretise its plans. Its more militant outfit is Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation council. These outfits have their bases and training camps in Bangladesh.

The entire area is a mosaic of hills and mountains, plains and plateaus. Its physiographic division indicates that the north-eastern region consists of mountains and southern

region comprises of hill ranges. Assam valley is a plateau and Cachar region falls in the plains.

Climate

The temperature in Assam ranges from moderate in Assam valley to dry and sultry in the Gangetic plain. There are fogs, thunder-storms, high velocity winds and excessive heat. Fog occurs for seventy days in a year and thunderstorm for about 100 days in a calendar year. It records 11.4 cm., of rainfall in winter and 51.87 cm. in summer. The south-eastern monsoon becomes very acute in summer. During October-November the rainfall is roughly 15.2 cm. In Purvanchal region, rainfall varies between 100 to 300 cm., and the rest of the region gets a rainfall to tune the of 150 to 200 cm. The average rainfall in Cherrapunji is 12,033 mm and in Mawsynram is 13,923 mm. Both these places are in the state of Meghalaya and their rainfall average is the highest in the world.

Minerals

The state is rich in mineral wealth. Oil was discovered in Assam in the beginning of this century. In 1901, Digboi oil fields were discovered and in 1950 Naharkatia, Lakhowa, Rudrasagar, Teok and Galeky oil wells were sighted and commissioned. Natural gas too is found in abundance and Namrup fertiliser factory is run entirely on natural gas.

Forests

Assam has the largest forest cover in any Indian state, which runs into 43,75,169 acres in the Brahmaputra valley. Goalpara district has the distinction of having the highest acreage of reserved forests whereas Kamrup district stands first in the total acreage of forests such as general forests as well as reserved forests. Lakhimpur and Sibsagar district occupy third and fourth positions in terms of total forest acreage and yield of valuable timber wealth.

Rivers

The mighty Brahmaputra is the lifeline of this state. The

Brahmaputra valley which is 450 miles in length and 60 miles in width receives irrigational and navigational facilities from this river which has thirty-five major tributaries. Some of the tributaries are Subansiro, Bhareli, Dhansiri, Barnadi, Pagladia, Manas and Sankosh on the right side and Lohit, Dihang, Noa-Dhing, Burhi-Dhing, Disang, Kikhow, Jhanji, Kapil, Digaru, Kulsi, Singra, Janiram, Dudhani, and Krishnai on the left bank. Not all tributaries are just tributaries. Quite a few of them are full scale large rivers that permit round the year navigation. But during the rainy season, they inundate large areas with flood waters and prove to be great scourge for the people. These rivers carry a tremendous volume of water which is still under-utilised. That is why river Brahmaputra continues to be the blessing as well as scourge both.

Economy

Agriculture is the mainstay of the bulk of the people in Assam. It has three crops—summer crop, winter crop and plantation crop. Assam alone accounts for half of the total tea produced in India which is a source of precious foreign exchange.

Next to tea is jute which is a cash crop. Cotton also is grown in abundance apart from Muga-Eri and Pat. It also produces a wide variety of fruits such as oranges, pineapples and wood-apples which are exported to neighbouring West Bengal and other states of India.

Wild Life

Assam is the sanctuary of a large variety and species of mammals, birds, reptiles and fishes. The most famous among the mammals are elephants, rhinoceros, bisons and deer. The one-horned rhino inhabiting the famous Kaziranga game sanctuary is an important tourist attraction. Manas is yet another famous games sanctuary. Kaziranga has been developed as a National Park.

Communication

Assam was very poor in terms of communication earlier

but now this is being rectified. Before partition, there was a direct rail link between Kolkata and Guwahati through East Bengal which became East Pakistan in 1947. This necessitated the construction of a longer route from Fakiragram to Siliguri via Himalayan foothills. Two bridges were built on river Ganga at Farraka and Mokhema to facilitate rail transportation. Today, Guwahati is connected by broad gauge rail network with most of the important cities in India and the famous Guwahati express, travelling between Guwahati-Howrah, Madras and Trivandrum covers the longest distance of 3,582 kilometers in India. Many other meter gauge routes are being converted to broad gauge and fresh rail lines are being constructed to improve communication. After the Chinese invasion of 1962, a separate authority was created known as Border Roads Department to construct new roads. In the Brahmaputra Valley, there are two trunk roads which connect large towns and important commercial centres of the state.

There are also some important waterways on the rivers Brahmaputra, Subansiri, Bharati, Pagladia, Manas, Burhi-Dihang, Disang, Dikhow and Dhansiri which provide round the year navigational facilities.

Religion

Assam has the second largest percentage of Muslims ranging upto 25% and the rate of Christian conversion is also very high. The tribals have their own archaic belief systems. Thus it is a home of various believers but this also provides an inflammable dimension to the problems confronting the state. The continued influx of illegal Muslim infiltrators from the across the neighbouring Bangladesh has already bedevilled relations between India and Bangladesh. Besides it is altering the demographic character of Assam. The Assamese call these infiltrators land-grabbers and presently the entire Assamese politics is centred around these immigrants.

Christianity normally should pose no serious threat to India but in north-eastern region the conversion pattern is a bit different from elsewhere in the country. In the rest of India,

the Christians have fully identified themselves with their motherland and they are no different from other Indians but in Assam and other hill states, the Christian converts suffer from an identity crisis and quite a few feel isolated and alienated owing to the activity of foreign espionage agencies which keep sending their personnel in the garb of missionaries to foment intrigues and disaffection among the converts and this is the most disturbing aspect of conversion in north-eastern hill states. Very often the converted Christians of hill regions refuse to establish their Indian identity and maintain that they belong to their states and not to India as such which causes tension and alienation both.

Non-Assamese Exploiters

The Assamese are the victims of many faceted plunder by a large variety of non-Assamese Indians such as Bengali Hindus who have cornered all white-collar jobs, the Bengali Muslims who are traditionally land grabbers, the ubiquitous Marwaris who have captured almost the entire trade and commerce, the Punjabi transport barons who are monopolising the transport sector, the Bihari plantation labourers who control all tea plantations, the Bihari plainsmen operating cycle-rikshaws and Namdhari Sikhs doing scavengers jobs, not to speak of stray Nepalese serving as wayside petty vendors and shopkeepers. The irony and agony of Assam is that Assam is for grab for everyone except the original inhabitants whether the Bodos or Assamese of Ahom origin and this makes an average Assamese apprehensive of outsiders. It also accounts for his xenophobia against them, particularly the Bengalis—both Hindus as well as Muslims.

Ethnic Enclaves

The north-eastern India is a veritable museum of nationalities. However in the country, one comes across a bewildering variety of tribes that inhabit this region. Even the tribes are further divided into hill tribes and plains tribes. Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh are completely tribal states. In Assam also two districts are

completely tribal. Tripura and Manipur have a share of 60% and 80% tribals respectively.

Each tribe is autonomous socially and has its own customs and rituals and they speak a variety of languages and dialects.

Linguistic Multiplicity

As stated earlier, apart from tribal diversity, there is also a great multiplicity of languages and dialects spoken in this area. In Arunachal Pradesh alone as many as 168 languages and dialects are spoken. The corresponding figures for Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram is 192, Manipur 87, Tripura 112 and Nagaland 95.

It may be mentioned in passing that even in one tribe, sometimes different groups and clans speak different languages. In Nagaland, sometimes even Naga neighbours do not understand each other's language. Long time back, the All India Radio began broadcasting in a language called Nagamese for this region but the experiment was not a success because that was not the universal lingua franca of either the Nagas or other tribals of the region.

Conclusion

Assam is thus a land of fabulous diversities in terms of ethnicity, language, culture, social structure and economic life. Being a border state and home of various tribes, it requires very sensitive treatment which so far has not been accorded to it and government's policy of ad hocism is playing ducks and drakes with the people of this state.

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