

**DIALOGUE**  
**QUARTERLY**

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# DIALOGUE

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## Editorial Perspective

### Self-destructive Scholarship

The Indian scholarship in the field of social sciences and humanities has become self-destructive. This phenomena is visible both at national and the regional levels, but more so in the case of the North-East region. The failures of our academic community, often working in the 'denial mode,' are too glaring. The scholars are obsessed with the colonial constructs, such as race, isolation, core-fringe conflict; they focus on assumed grievances; deny or ignore the linkages, especially when pan-Indian. They generate fear-psychosis by repeated reminder and emphasis on factors such as Siliguri bottleneck.

Uncritical and blind acceptance of the views of the colonial scholars is the greatest weakness of our social scientists, especially the historians and the anthropologists. Bringing 'race' as a factor, in any and every kind of discourse, even about the biopic of a sports person, is also the outcome of the same malady. Culture and tradition illiteracy, among the academics, has increased leading to such trend. The obsession with race has promoted intra- and inter-region social distancing in the North-East India. The ethnic demands, to promote the interests of the few, have led to further balkanization of already balkanized region; violent incidents due to ethnic cleansing attempts are increasing. It needs emphasis that the negative role of the academics is also partly responsible for the malady.

So far, Bollywood has produced only two films on the sports persons of our country; one on Milkha Singh and the other on Mary Kom belonging to the Kom community, a Kuki-Chin tribe of Churachandpur district of Manipur. The lead actor of the biopic of the first film was a Muslim; that of the second was Priyanka Chopra a well-known actress. While none raised accusing finger on the selection of a Muslim for the role of a Sikh sports person, the biopic of the legendary boxer from Manipur did not go down well among the reviewers as Sentinel, Guwahati (September 6, 2014) reports. A write-up captioned *Race and*

*prejudice on celluloid* appearing in the *Hindu* (September 9, 2014), a newspaper of the left (communist or Marxist, whatever you call it) orientation, by a teacher of a university, dominated by the leftists, is full of baseless axiomatic general statements. A critical perusal of the paper provides an insight on the degraded status of Indian Social Sciences. His approach misses out the larger and real picture that Mary Kom is being celebrated and lauded all over the country irrespective of her features, religion and the region, she comes from. She is important for the country as the real story not Priyanka Chopra.

The paper-writer, A. Bimol Akoijam, a teacher at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, claims to be a political psychologist and social analyst. Critiquing the Bollywood film on the legendary pugilist, Akoijam has pointed out Bollywood's inability to cast an actor from a similar ethnic or cultural group for the role of Mary Kom, which according to him, speaks of an issue going beyond the 'cinema' to the 'race.' According to him, 'Bollywood's consumers will not accept somebody who does not have the typical 'Indian' look to play Mary Kom's role.' The question is: What is the basis of this broad and general statement? How does he know that? Is it based on the data collected by fieldwork? Can such general statements be taken as axiomatic? Are Indians really racists? Do they reciprocate when persons of the other States are mercilessly killed in Manipur and elsewhere in the North-East? Does Indian tradition support race? The answer to all these questions, obviously, is an emphatic 'No.'

Akoijam talks about typical 'Indian look;' he also mentions about the racial "othering" playing out sharply in the case of India's North-East. In reality, such racial distinction and "othering" is a myth created by colonial scholars and strengthened and made acceptable by the JNU type Communist scholarship. Distinct North-Eastern 'look' is nowhere to be found in the North-East, which even some of the colonial scholars, such as Hutton, deny. Hutton writes about the physical features of the people of Khonoma, the village of Naga rebel leader, Phizo:

"It would be impossible to give any general description of the type of Angami features, as it varies from village to village and even from house to house in a remarkable degree. The flattened nose and slightly oblique eye of a decidedly Mongolian type may be seen side by side with a straightness of eyes and nose that might be purely Aryan." (Hutton, Angami Nagas, 1969, reprint, p. 21)

What Hutton has written about the Nagas, is equally true in case of the Manipur. As Dun (*Gazetteer of Manipur*, p. 6, footnote) writes:

"There can be no reasonable doubt that a great Aryan wave of very pure blood passed through Manipur into Burma. Johnstone (*My Experience in Manipur and Naga Hills*, p. 280) and Phayre (*History of Burma*, p. 3) also attest to that fact. The ample proof that great Aryan wave, mentioned by Dun, did not pass without leaving its mark in Manipur, may be found in sharp Aryan features of many Meiteis, Tangkhul Nagas, Angami Nagas and the others, which I have personally witnessed. Even Phizo has sharp Aryan features.

The paper, published in a newspaper of left orientation by a teacher of a university dominated by the scholars of leftist and colonial tradition, is full of baseless axiomatic general statements; the paper-writer is thoroughly incapable of understanding India, its history, culture and the traditions. He even, I doubt, hardly understands Manipur, or even the history, religion and the culture of his own community, the Meiteis. Here, it needs mention that many scholars have the illusion that they know the North-East region, or even their community, simply due to their birth-linkages. The difficulty is that many of them are not prepared to accept their ignorance.

For Akoijam, North-East India is politico-geographically South Asia, but racially and culturally South East Asia. He quotes Yogendra Yadav in confirmation of his statement, as: if Yogendra Yadav is an authentic scholar knowing the North-East, or even cultural and religious India. Yogendra Yadav, and persons like Akoijam, should know that, in spite of the communication gap due to faulty colonial education, average illiterate India distinguishes between the Chinese and the North-Eastern Indians. The fact, which Akoijam and JNU type scholars must know in this case, is that the cultural and religious India in South East Asia preceded the history of Manipur. It is significant, and the fact cannot be ignored, that the statue of Lord Vishnu installed by Manipuri king, Khyamba (1467-1507) in the oldest existing temple of Manipur at Bishnupur came from Myanmar, and not from the West. Manipur was, and remains, a part of India Central-Asia religio-cultural continuum.

Akoijam, in his paper, mentions about Irom Sharmila's saga and the human tragedies of the protracted conflicts in India's North-East implicating the military; he points out that the same has no inspiration for Bollywood. The question is: has he asked the people of Manipur as to why have they voted for the party favouring the retention of AFSPA to power not once but thrice? Obviously, the people know better that they need army to protect them from the oppression of the rebel outfits. While Irom Sharmila's courage has to be admired and respected, she is

being let down by her own people. AFSPA discourse avoids the failure of the local administration and police to deal with the situation, which would obviate the presence and use of army and need for the AFSPA.

The myth of race is a colonial construct. Our tradition does not recognize it. Mahabharata (Sabha Parva: 52-13-17) declares Indo-Mongoloid (Kirata) people to be the *Kshatriyas* of good birth. Arya is not racial, but behavioural category; Nag Kanya Ulupi is *Arye*, Jayadratha is *Anarya*. *Mlechchha* (derived from Sanskrit, *mlich*, speak indistinctly) is linguistic category. Like race, colour of the skin is another European obsession, leading to misinterpretation of Indian tradition and history. They have invariably misinterpreted Indian tradition due to obsession of colour. Contrary to Colonial framework, a large number of the Aryan Gods and Rishis are dark coloured, rather than white complexioned; the colour of Shiva, the so-called Dravidian God, is white, and that of the Aryan God, Indra is greenish brown, rather than white. Vishnu is dark or dark blue; Rama is dark; Krishna has the colour comparable to that linseed flower and with the colour of the dark Tamal tree. The number of dark coloured rishis – Angiras Rishis, Kanva, Vyasa, etc. – and others –Drona, Arjuna, King Nala, etc. – is very large.

The history of India, especially of the medieval and British periods, is made out to be the history of the conquered people. Pre-medieval links are ignored. This is the reason that the history of the North-East or of South India is not properly included in the history of India. Indian historians, with the exception of Tapan Roy Chaudhury and Irfan Habib, did not care to study the history of North-East India as a part of the history of India. Even they have included the history of medieval period of Assam, only in the appendix of *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. I (1982). Needless to say that such lapses on the part of the historians has resulted into undesirable communication gap.

Edward Gait, in his *A History of Assam* (1994 reprint; pp. 11-14) has given a strange racist twist to the history of the region by misinterpreting the terms *Asura* and *Danava*. He ignored the fact that the *Devas*, *Asura* and *Danava* were step brothers, being the sons of Rishi Kashyapa. Again, *Ahuraghna*, *Vritraghna* and *Brahmaghna*, in *RigVeda*, is the same Indra; Vritra was *Asura* as well as a Brahmin. Gait linked river names of Assam with the Bodo word for water 'di', forgetting the fact that the word is cognate word of Sanskrit *toya*. Here it needs mention that the thread of the slogan like "Divide Assam fifty fifty may be searched in this colonial historical twist.

Some glaring unhealthy trend in the historiography of the North-East needs our urgent attention. Steps should be taken to rectify the colonial distortions, such as the one mentioned above. Most of our North-Eastern historians, be it S. K. Bhuyan, H. K. Barpujari, S. K. Barpujari, J. B. Bhattacharjee, Suhas Chatterjee, Helen Giri, Hamlet Bareh, Milton Sangma, etc., relied heavily on colonial sources; they followed the traditions of James Mill, Gait, Mackenzie, Shakespeare, etc.; they followed their technique, and carried their biases and outlook. H. K. Barpujari, contrary to the historical facts, talks of the isolation of the region. When peeping into the tradition, they often close their eyes. Forefathers of the Manipuri king, Garib Newaj and Kachari king Krishna Chandra were Hindus, they built Vishnu temple, yet even for North-Eastern historians they were neo-Hindus. Yuan Chuang found hundreds of Deva temples in Assam in seventh century AD. Yet Assamese scholars talk about the neo-Vaishnavism.

Talk about the migration. A scholar will often point towards the North and the East, forgetting the fact that even the clans of individual tribes point in all the four directions as the places of their origin. Limbus have 13 Kashi gotras and another 13 Lhasa gotras forming a composite tribe; the examples may be multiplied.

The country and the region have developed a lot after independence. There have also been multiple lapses needing correction. The political elite and the bureaucracy take corrective steps from time to time. But a section of the intelligentsia and the media has developed the habit of inventing grievances; they often repeat old grievances, forgetting the fact that much water has flown through Brahmaputra since the last five-six decades. Nehru's lapses are often mentioned, but his suggestion to build wall on Indo-East Pakistan border on the advice of B.N. Mallick (then DIB) to prevent illegal migration, and B.P. Chaliha, acting to the contrary on the advice of Moinul Haque Chaudhury, is rarely mentioned. Many a times, it is assumed without valid reason, what the others intend, as the view of N. Bishweshwar, the Meitei insurgent leader indicates:

"The Meitei, who joined the Indian Union on their own initiative, as they are devoted Hindus, has become a victim of India. The Meiteis are proud that they are more real Hindus and theirs is one of the more sacred origin of Hindu or Hinduism. If there suffering is the price of that, how can Hinduism survive in Manipur? In the eye of India, the Meiteis are a people from an undiscovered part of India, untouchable politically and economically. If this is the price of the Meiteis joining

India and of their excessive loyalty to the Indian leaders, how long will they remain within the Indian Union? Even in their own homeland—Manipur, the Meiteis have already been reduced to second class citizens. How can a Meitei in such circumstances join the national mainstream of India? How far the Meiteis are legitimate Indians in the context of equality, freedom and liberty? Why should the Meiteis be treated as colonial people? Why should the Meiteis be called people of flat noses and half open eyes who have no claim to survive? ...If Meiteis were not converted into Hinduism, instead adopted Christianity, just as the Naga, Mizo, or preferred to remain with their ancient past following and preserving rich heritage of their ancestors without any foreign and caste, certainly they would not have remained like defeated people on the verge of extinction. Today the Meiteis are facing a threat to their very existence. They have no motherland – neither Manipur nor India. Perhaps they have no other alternative but to build up a new home outside India's control. Should the Meiteis bid farewell to India and its Hinduism or should Indian leaders review and correct their mistakes.” (Rabijit Chaudhury, *The Administrator*, Vol. XXXIX, No.4, p. 71, quoted).

Such opinions are in wide circulation in Manipur, and elsewhere and need answers and remedial actions if based on real grievances. There is also the need of academic activism to clear much of the doubts and haziness created in the region.

The statement quoted above shows the misplaced anger, much of which is the result of the misgivings and misperceptions. A large number of our people have such misgivings and misperceptions and they are sulking. This helps in aggravating the sense of alienation, and in many cases the outward expression of the sense of alienation in the violence in the society. These ignore the public commitments of the Prime Minister and Home Minister of the country to preserve the territorial integrity of Manipur. Steps should be taken to resolve the crisis of perception. Genuine grievances of the people need immediate remedial action.

### **U.R. Ananthamurthy is no more**

Udupi Rajagopalacharya Ananthamurthy, a towering figure in the world of letters, was a member of the editorial board of this journal, the *Dialogue*. He passed away in Bangalore at the age of 82 on Friday, the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2014. His passing away is a great loss for the nation and all of us.

He was Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University in Kerala during late 1980s, Chairman of National Book Trust India in 1992, President of the Sahitya Academy in 1993 and a visiting professor of several Indian and foreign universities. As an eminent Kannada writer, he was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1998, Jnanpith award in 1994, and the State Rajyothsava award in 1984; he was nominated for the 2013 Man Booker International Prize.

Ananthamurthy published five novels, one play, eight short-story collections, three collections of poetry and eight books of essays. Many of his works have been translated into Indian and European languages. His novels *Samskara*, *Baraa*, *Avaste*, *Mouni* and *Diksha* were made into movies that won critical acclaim. He is considered one of the pioneers of the “Navya (new) movement” in the Kannada literary world. Ananthamurthy burst on the literary scene in 1965 with the controversial novel ‘*Samskara*’ that earned him the tag as a scathing critic of Brahminism, its superstitions and hypocrisies.

A multi-faceted personality with strong political views, and a follower of Dr. Lohia, Ananthamurthy dabbled in politics, contesting unsuccessfully the Lok Sabha and the State elections. He married a Christian lady, Esther, has two children, Sharat and Anuradha. We condole his death and pray for the peace of his soul.

## Assam: The Signs of a Failed State

**D. N. Bezboruah\***

One does not come to such damning conclusions flippantly or in haste. After all, to say that I live in a failed State constitutes a condemnation of myself as well since I am part of a so-called democratic system. But I have discussed the matter with a whole lot of people from different walks of life and they all agree that what we have of Assam today is just a failed State. A State or a country fails not just because the government has failed but rather because the people have failed themselves and their State or country. Quite obviously, the government must take the bulk of the responsibility for a failed State because all power is concentrated in the government in our brand of democracy. So when a State gets to be viewed as a failed State the government, and those who run it but fail to ensure good governance, must take the major share of blame. But the people too cannot escape responsibility for a failed State. I shall come to the issue of how the people fail their State and thereby fail themselves, but it is important to begin at the beginning.

In talking of failed countries, the first one that comes to mind is Haiti. I haven't been to Haiti and so I wouldn't know. The one failed country that I have been to is Pakistan. Perhaps the best way to decide whether one is talking of a failed country or whether such a country does have some dim prospects of coming back to life is whether one would think of visiting that country again even if someone paid for the trip. I haven't the shadow of a doubt in my mind that I would never want to visit Pakistan again.

How does one recognize a failed State or country? The first sign of a State having failed the people is that the administrative machinery

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\*The writer is the founding editor of the *Sentinel*, Guwahati and a former president of the Editors Guild of India.



works only for the politicians, bureaucrats, senior government official and the blue-eyed boys in both business and crime. If the State ceases to exist for the common man or if survival in the State is a constant agony of harassment unless one is prepared to pay bribes all the way, we know that we have brought upon ourselves a failed State with a lot of help from the government. Let us take a cursory glance at the State we live in to see how well or ill it functions. Our Chief Minister is also the Finance Minister and the Home Minister. Just think of the number of riots and communal clashes that periodically break out in the State and for the control of which the Chief Minister keeps asking the Centre for more grants. Or think of the kind of ethnic cleansing that periodically takes place in some parts of the State without the government being able to do anything about it for political considerations. Or think of the witch hunting that takes place in our State even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Or think of the total failure of the State government to save its territory from being nibbled by neighbouring States. Nagaland alone has illegally occupied over 66,000 hectares of Assam's territory over the years. Last month Naga militants drove out Assamese people from their hearths and homes and set fire to their homesteads. Several Assamese people were killed. And yet there was no presence of the Assam Police along the border. A very senior bureaucrat of the Assam government who had gone to the border area to study the situation weeks after the killings and the arson was held captive by Naga militants for half-an-hour before being released.

Think of a whole lot of government employees who do not get paid their salaries on the first of every month. And think of the many more employees and school teachers who have not received their arrears of salary for months or years together. No civilized government runs like this. We have a Power Minister who has been in office for a decade. Instead of there being any improvement in the power scenario, the available power in the State has suffered a decline in these 10 years. He has not been short of promises. But when it comes to delivering on his promises he has been a total failure. We have a Forest Minister who has managed to achieve a record of sorts in the number of rhinos killed during his tenure as Forest Minister. Never before have poachers of our game sanctuaries had such a rosy time as during the regime of this Forest Minister. And one does not need any great investigative powers to discover how easy it is to take truck loads of timber out of our forests by merely bribing the right persons.

Where is agriculture in this State if everything we eat has to come from other States? What does our Agriculture Minister have to say

about our being unable to sell the rice we produce to the Food Corporation of India? Why should the FCI discriminate against our farmers alone and why should our Agriculture Minister fail to pull up the FCI on behalf of our farmers. Much of the responsibility for the abnormal rise in prices of essential commodities in Assam will have to be taken by the Minister for Civil Supplies himself for having given a *carte blanche* to 19 traders of Guwahati who seem to have gone all out to punish consumers with exorbitant prices. Nor has he been able to reduce the number of middlemen in the vegetable trade since most of them are failed politicians who have not ceased to be members of the party. Take a look at our high infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rate and the level of malnutrition in our villages to get an idea of how efficiently the Health Department has been functioning. In the same way, look at the standard of education *at all levels* to get an idea of why students are rejecting education in Assam because of low standards and moving to other States for higher education. In any civilized democracy, a head of government who has had the good fortune to be in office for 13 years realizes his power to do good. He evaluates his ministers on their performance and sacks those who have not delivered. Going by these norms, the Chief Minister should have sacked his Power Minister, his Forest Minister, his Agriculture Minister and his Minister for Civil Supplies long ago. Can he do this? He can, though he *thinks* he cannot. And that is his tragedy—that he dare not exercise the power he has for the greatest good of the greatest number, and must go on placating incompetent ministers merely on the basis of their communal equations. In brief in Assam political expediency tramples over public good.

So what do we have because the Chief Minister will not exercise his powers due to his misplaced fears about what might happen if he were to sack any of his incompetent ministers? We have a failed State. Murder and rape have become common daily occurrences in a State that knew no serious crimes 30 or 40 years ago. We have a lot of bloodshed whether we are thinking of what happens at the personal level or the social level. With the number of murders and road accidents taking place every day, the most predominant colour of a failed State must be blood red. But a failed State cannot have just one colour. What about the other colours? We have the colour of deep grey that the sky takes on when we have perennial floods rather than what is needed for good crops. There is the bile green of disgust and frustration that affects all those who are unemployed despite having qualifications

bestowed by university degrees. We have an abundance of broken bridges over which little children must walk to school every day.

We must wake up to the realization that a failed State becomes possible because of its people. Many of us have failed to resist, protest or oppose the factors that push a State towards failure. We have persisted in our worship of mediocrity instead of striving towards excellence and not punishing the culprits during elections. However, our greatest undoing is our fear of the establishment. Before anything else, we need to shed our fear of the powers that be that we have ourselves put in place. What is much worse, however, is that most people working in government have endorsed the culture of easy money siphoned from public funds with the blessings of the government rather than a culture that calls for a livelihood that is sustained with work.

## NGT Ban and Meghalaya's Mining Scenario

**Patricia Mukhim\***

Meghalaya has been known for its coal and limestone mines right from the time of the British rule. Since coal in Meghalaya occurs in shallow seams, the British found it convenient to allow the locals to mine it in the way they saw fit, which was by digging a hole around the mines and venturing inside at a depth of about 20 feet and then proceeding horizontally across to get the coal out. It was the same with limestone. Geologists have maintained all along that mining of coal scientifically is not a viable proposition. After Meghalaya attained Statehood in 1972, coal exploration was taken up by the State Directorate of Mining and Geology and the Geological Institute of India to ascertain its commercial viability. Earlier coal was mined from the Sohra region of East Khasi

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\*The writer is editor, The Shillong Times and an eminent social activist, journalist and member of National Security advisory Board.

Hills. Later coal was found occurring in large parts of Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and Garo Hills. Late Prof. G.G. Swell who was the Lok Sabha MP in the 70's wrote to the then Union Minister for Mines that Meghalaya be allowed to proceed with what is now the most famous phrase – rat hole mining which he said was the traditional way of mining coal.

While coal mining is a multi-million dollar industry, this is not the only mineral occurring in Meghalaya. Limestone is another commercial mineral and at least ten cement producing companies have come up in Jaintia Hills where limestone occurs in abundance. However, limestone is also exported to Bangladesh from the limestone mines in Cherrapunjee, Mawlong, Ishamati, Shella, Komorrah and Borsora, in Khasi Hills District. In Jaintia Hills, Lakadong, Lumshnong and Nongkhlieh have become the hub for cement producing companies. Limestone also occurs in Darrang Era-Aning, Siju and Chokpot in the Garo Hills. Interestingly, the proven reserves of limestone which is 9515 million tonnes and the indicated reserves being 41559 million tonnes, inferred at 3986 and total of 15,100 million tonnes is much higher than the inferred reserves of limestone. The world's largest cement producer Lafarge is the prime buyer for limestone in the East Khasi Hills region. The Company has its cement producing plant at Chatak in Bangladesh called the Lafarge-Surma Company and transports limestone from Meghalaya via the 17 km conveyor belt since 2005.

One interesting fact about Lafarge is that the Company asserts that it has adhered to environmental norms stipulated by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and the State Forest Department. As per the environmental norms the Company is to replace 935 trees with 4 lakh trees within a period of 20 years. Lafarge has been mining limestone at its 935 hectare mine. In 2007, the Company had to stop mining activities pending environmental clearance from the Centre and because some local people had approached the Supreme Court to complain of environmental concerns. Mining was resumed in 2011, but not after the apex court had ordered Lafarge to compensate for the deforestation by paying an amount fixed by the Court and deployment of funds for environmental and other social purposes would be overseen by a Special Purpose Vehicle created at the behest of the Court. And the interesting part is that Lafarge has so far contributed Rs 64 crore to the SPV as part of its corporate social responsibility essentially for taking care of the environment.

But while Lafarge has been penalised by the Supreme Court what has been detected by the Comptroller and Auditor General in its report is that of the 16 mining leases given by the MoEF only Lafarge had obtained environmental clearance while the other Indian companies have not obtained the mandatory clearances as stipulated in the conditions set by the Controller of Mines while approving the mining plans.

In the coal mining sector however it is free for all. No mining leases are needed from the MoEF or the Controller of Mines because all such clearances are exempted since 'land belongs to the people,' and because rat hole mining is assumed to have lesser environmental degradation. The permission for mining coal via the rat hole method was allowed by the Energy Minister Mr Vasant Sathe in July 1987 vide his DO letter which says that when Meghalaya is ready for scientific mining of coal then it would do so under the aegis of the Meghalaya Mineral Development Agency and with guidance from Coal India Ltd.

The proven reserve for coal is 133.13 million tonnes which is far lesser than limestone. The inferred reserves are 443.35 million tonnes. Curiously there is no figure from the Directorate of Mines about the indicated reserves. But coal mining has caused far more environmental degradation by way of acid mine drainage (AMD). The AMD has poisoned at least three rivers in Jaintia Hills the Myntdu, Lunar and Lukha where marine life is totally extinguished. Rivers and water systems have no boundaries. AMD from the coal mines of Meghalaya have in fact polluted the rivers and water bodies in North Cachar Hills now known as Dima Hasao in Assam, bordering the Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya. It was the Dima Hasao Students Union and the Dimasa Students' Union which in fact approached the National Green Tribunal to take action against the unregulated coal mining activities in Meghalaya.

The dichotomy that arises between coal and limestone mining is that while the latter is expected to adhere to strict environmental norms the former is a free-for-all enterprise. The coal mine owners assert that they own the land and the mines as well and they have paid the royalty and therefore they have done their duty. Indeed the State Government has so far not extracted any environmental responsibility from the coal miners. Meghalaya falls under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Under this Schedule all land in Meghalaya including what is above and below it belongs to the clans, communities or individuals

and not to the State. Hence, coal has been mined in clan and community lands which have by subversive methods been converted into privately owned land. The environmental norms stipulate that coal cannot be mined in over 5 hectares of land without environmental clearance under the Forest Conservation Act. Hence all mines in Meghalaya are so tailored to escape this clause. Even though the mines are contiguous they are shown as owned by separate individuals. Hence mining has carried on for decades without any concern for the deforestation and above all the environmental degradation. Environmental activists have been vocal in pointing out this virtual plunder of the environment but with no results. The National Green Tribunal was set by an act of Parliament in 2012 precisely to address the environmental concerns and public interest litigations on environment which were all coming to the Supreme Court.

The damage to the environment due to coal mining is incalculable. For nearly 25 years trucks laden with coal passed through the city of Shillong causing not just large-scale pollution but also accidents galore. Meghalaya is perhaps the only State where trucks would pass through the heart of the city. Citizens were exasperated as there were daily traffic jams. There were several instances when school students even arrived late for their senior school leaving certificate exams and had to be given fresh question papers.

A research done by this writer in the coal mining areas of Jaintia Hills revealed that water sources were polluted and potable drinking water was no longer available. At Khliehriat, I questioned several households and was told that they had to walk long distances in the early morning to fetch drinking water. The well to do coal mine owners and others could buy water which sometimes came all the way from Shillong. When the new district of West Jaintia Hills with headquarters at Khliehriat was inaugurated in 2010, the new Deputy Commissioner had to bring water in tankers all the way from Shillong.

All these problems caused by unregulated mining with no environmental responsibility have been pointed out many times without number. This writer had even called upon groups like the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), Delhi to assist in making the problem more visible, so that some measures were taken to stop the relentless and destructive mining and to allow the environment some respite. Hence, when the NGT announced in April 14, 2014 that coal mining would be banned on account of the illegal manner in which the activity

is carried out, many environmental NGOs who had been fighting long and lonely battles often at great cost to their lives, all heaved a sigh of relief. In fact, these environmental NGOs from Meghalaya did not even have the courage to file complaints with the NGT for fear of being attacked by the coal mafia. It was the people of Dima Hasao who have been instrumental in bringing the ban.

The NGT hearings have elicited a lot of interest. The hearing that happened on June 9, 2014 last saw a packed court room and the premises of the Meghalaya High Court was crowded with people with an abiding interest in coal mining. There were only very few people in the courtroom who would have rejoiced at the NGT ruling of that day which was actually a reiteration of past orders except for the fact that the coal already mined would be allowed to be carted out. However, this would happen only after a Central team of MoEF and Central Pollution Board officials had made their inventories and assessed the quantum of coal already mined. Naturally the NGT ruling was projected adversely by the coal mafia and all those who derive their benefits from it such as those individuals and politicians owning illegal check gates and toll gates which are rampant in Meghalaya. Surprisingly there are vested interests in Assam as well who derive their profits from the coal mined in Meghalaya. It is a known fact that a certain former militant outfit from Assam had actually made infructuous the coal depot created by Meghalaya Government at Mawsmat, in Bynihat. This group which also runs other businesses has been marketing the Meghalaya coal which is deposited at depots in Assam as 'Assam coal.'

There are vested interests which are now saying that half of the population of Meghalaya is directly or indirectly benefited from coal mining. Such baseless assumptions not grounded on any research are doing the rounds and it is important that universities do a quick survey to ascertain the exact number of depressed people who have been relying on coal mining, so that the Government can come up with alternative livelihoods for them. The NGT has been scathing in its remarks against the coal mine owners. "You have made enough profits all these years and now you should plough some of that back to the environment and towards the health and well-being of the coal mine labourers," pronounced Justice Swatantra on June 9, 2014.

It is poetic justice and also natural justice that an activity which has caused so much devastation in its wake should have to stop at some

point of time. But the coal mining story in Meghalaya is one in which Article 21 of the Constitution has been flouted without any concern by flagging the Sixth Schedule as an overriding document. Questions are now being asked as to whether the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution which allows tribals rights over their land, cultures and natural resources should supersede the Constitution of India? These are tough questions as they relate to tribal rights within their areas of jurisdiction. But what happens when those very rights guaranteed by a Schedule of the Constitution clash with other rights within the same Constitution? These are issues that need greater debate because while coal mine owners don't seem to understand that the pollution they cause by mining on their own land is causing pollution to thousands of other people living around those mines and even beyond since water and air have no natural boundaries.

## Sharmila and the Catch-22 Paradox

**Pradip Phanjoubam\***

The last two weeks or so in Manipur must rank as one of those in which events overtake the capacity of a society to absorb and understand them. Just to name a few, there was the high drama over the release and the re-arrest of Irom Sharmila, the dismissal of the RIMS Director, Dr. S. Sekharjit and now the unfolding tragedy of police firing in Ukhrul which resulted in two dead and several injured, according to so far sketchy reports which have begun pouring into newsrooms in Imphal. Though none of them must go without a commentary, space limitation would restrict this column to focus on Sharmila which is today emerging as one of those curiously paradoxical and irresolvable cases. Moreover, the RIMS case and Ukhrul firing are too recent and unfinished to be with any fairness encapsulated within the length of a newspaper article.

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In the RIMS case, there is still a legal question as well, therefore the likelihood of a commentary amounting to the offence of “subjudice,” by undermining and attempting to influence the course of the adjudication process.

The Sharmila case – by this I mean not just the fact of Sharmila putting up such an epic and heroic resistance against a draconian law, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), but also the manner her protest is being received by supporters and detractors alike, is verging on the edge of absurdity – the kind of absurdity of the Catch-22 situation. If those of us who have read the 1961 Joseph Heller novel by the name still remember, this is a situation in which a problem is inherent in the very answer to the problem, therefore both the problem as well as the answer remain logical but frustratingly unresolved. In the novel set in the backdrop of the World War II, any American fighter pilot who thinks he has had enough of combat flying and wanted to be grounded could do so only if he applied formally that he has become insane. But if he did manage to fill up such a form and apply, it only proved he was not insane so could not leave his combat duties.

In explaining the Catch-22 paradox, the popular internet encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, has some very interesting and illustrative examples. One of them says it is like looking for your car key after locking it up inside the car, and another likens it to looking for the light switches in a room where the lights have been switched off. I like the second example, not for anything else than that it provides some room for hope. In groping blindly in the dark room, there is still an outside hope that you may stumble upon the switches and switch the lights on, unlike in the case of the car key locked up inside the car where the only way to get the key would in all probability be by breaking something.

It is very sad but nonetheless true that Sharmila’s case is becoming akin to this situation. In all the clamour for her freedom is also embedded such a paradox, for the same people who cry for her freedom also quite obviously want her to continue her heroic hunger strike and not end it in resignation. No marks for guessing, without spelling it out, and without actually meaning it, this freedom would in all certainty mean her death as well. It would be extremely selfish if anybody were to want this kind of martyrdom. As it is, without the need for dying, she is already uniquely a martyr beyond compare. Against the fearsome certainty of such a knowledge, all the sound and fury screamed out by many against the State home minister Gaikhangam’s statement that Sharmila was re-arrested so that she is not allowed to die, seem empty.

No dispute that the AFSPA must ultimately go, but the million dollar question is, while this draconian Act stubbornly remains, shouldn’t Sharmila live?

Indications are, the AFSPA is not just about to go. The recent rebuff by the new NDA government, of Justice Santosh Hegde’s report on the extra judicial killings in Manipur, is enough testimony. In its statement the Union government claimed there has not been any extra judicial killing by the security forces, and if there ever were to be any, this would not be tolerated at all. An apparatus of the Union judiciary clearly said extra judicial killings have been rampant in Manipur, and the Union executive simply denied this without substantiating, as if by an absolute official fiat. Earlier, another probe by a committee headed by Justice Jeevan Reddy which recommended in effect that the AFSPA be incorporated into the civil legislation, Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, UAPA, so as to make actions under it accountable to the civil justice system, was simply shelved by the NDA government without an official word. In the current heightened tension on the India and Pakistan border as well as the unfolding cold war between India and China in the Northeast India sector of the border known at the McMahon Line, it is unlikely that the Union government would do anything that is deemed possible of hurting the Indian Army’s morale. We also know very well by now that the erstwhile UPA government headed by Manmohan Singh did earnestly want at one stage to “humanise” AFSPA (in the former PM’s own words), which is why the Jeevan Reddy committee was instituted in the first place, but the committee’s recommendations were not even tabled in Parliament because the Army objected to it.

This is the nature of the problem. Let us be honest. We know even the State government is quite powerless in resolving the problem. In Manipur, it is probably true that many in the government want the continuance of the AFSPA, but in neighbouring Nagaland, where Assembly resolutions have been passed for the lifting of the Act from the State, and where the militant groups there are in a peace parley with the Union government, the AFSPA nonetheless continues. Lest I am misread, let me be apologetic and reassert that my question here is not at all about supporting the continuance of AFSPA. It is about not allowing the icon of the resistance against it, from Sharmila, to die, at least not for anybody’s need to have a martyr out of the issue.

At this moment though, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which she is free and alive. Even if she remains in prison, it is difficult to see

her coming through this ordeal alive. Here I am reminded of a lecture in Calcutta by a well known intellectual, Ranabir Sammadar, of the Calcutta Research Group, where he argued why the idea of ultimate resistance and redemption is so closely parented with the idea of death. Even by the example of history, this seems to be the case. Jesus Christ's resistance is just the most prominent example. By a strange coincidence, perhaps with the presence of a Manipuri (me) as the cue, in a discussion over tea after his lecture, Sammadar reminded me of Sharmila's resistance and the way it is headed, in an effort to make his rather intellectually dense lecture more immediately intelligible.

Sammadar makes sense only if we agree that ultimate resistance is about a willingness to die for a cause. Sharmila obviously is committed to this level in her fight against the AFSPA. And the beauty about her struggle is, she is not even bitter against anybody, not even those who have made the continued promulgation of the Act possible. All she wants is the Act repealed without even bothering to blame anybody for its continuance. It is a fight against a dark idea and not anybody. Which resistance can be as pure?

What must supporting Sharmila amount to then? Should it also be an equal willingness to die for the cause Sharmila so believes in? The more relevant question is, to my mind, not so much about matching Sharmila in the commitment to have the AFSPA repealed for I don't think there are not many, if any, who can boast of such calibre, but about what must be the appropriate response to Sharmila's resistance, of those who are against the idea of the AFSPA but fall short of Sharmila's commitment against it? This humility to acknowledge that their own resistance is not ultimate, and that there is no way they would be willing to give up everything for the cause, unfortunately is missing. In the end then, though there are many who spit fire and brimstone in the resistance against AFSPA, only few would be pushed to where Sammadar anticipated in the lecture. There is therefore a degree of selfishness in those who imagine Sharmila as a martyr than a living legend and leader. I for one want her to continue in her struggle but do so alive. The AFSPA must go, but while it lasts, do everything else under the sun to ensure Sharmila lives.

A parable from the Bible which those of us who studied in mission schools (or else are Christians) would probably be familiar with comes to mind. It tells of an episode from King Solomon's life. The wise king was once called upon to deliver a judgment in a child custody dispute

between two women who claimed to be the mother of an infant. When nothing else worked to resolve the dispute, the king finally gave a mock verdict that he has decided that the infant be cut in half so either of the two women can keep a half each. One woman agreed the other did not, saying her rival may be given custody of the infant than to cut it up. King Solomon's real verdict followed. He concluded that the woman who was willing to lose custody of the infant so that it may live was the real mother. Here is a great lesson for all of us following and supporting the Sharmila issue. Taking cue from the parable, I would without hesitation say the real supporters of Sharmila are those who would fight with her without pushing her to her death and martyrdom.

# A Marxist Critique of the Modi Government's ICHR Nomination

## Koenraad Elst

Retired historian Romila Thapar has written an opinion piece (*History repeats itself*, 11 July 2014, *India Today*), giving the standard secular reaction to the appointment of equally retired historian Y. Sudershan Rao, as Chairperson of the Indian Council of Historical Research. It gives the predictable (indeed, predicted, see K. Elst: *A Hindutva Historian in Office*, 11 July 2014), show of indignation hiding an inside reaction of satisfaction at the BJP's renewed display of incompetence in reforming the field of history.

### Status

“The appointment of a historian whose work is unfamiliar to most historians shows scant regard for the impressive scholarship that now characterises the study of Indian history and this disregard may stultify future academic research. Given that the writing of history in India over the last half-century has produced some of the finest historians, recognised both nationally and internationally, one is surprised at the appointment of Professor Y. Sudershan Rao, as Chairperson of the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR). Professor Rao's work is unfamiliar to most historians, with little visibility of research that he might have carried out. He has published popular articles on the

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historicity of the Indian epics, but not in any peer reviewed journal, and the latter is now a primary requisite for articles to be taken seriously at the academic level.”

Here we have, at some length, the usual status-mongering. It says, in short, that Prof. Rao is not “eminent.” It is a rather sophomoric argument: outsiders (such as politicians) and beginners imagine that academic status has a whole lot of meaning, and that you can't be a serious scientist unless you have this kind of status. Insiders, however, have a far lower opinion of this academic status. Sometimes, indeed, it is only given to people of exceptional merit. From these highly visible cases, outsiders extrapolate to all others. But in many more cases, it is the mediocre minds and the faithful followers who get promoted, while the really talented people are blocked or are encouraged to seek more lucrative employment outside academe.

The mechanics of the presence or absence of status is as follows: The Indian Left jealously guards its power position in academe and decides who gets status within the humanities, or who is blacklisted and kept out. Then the politicians select their sources of authority or their interlocutors by the status they “have” (i.e. which the Left has conferred on them), which in turn enhances their status. And then the India-watching circles abroad go by the status which individuals turn out to have acquired in India, and further increase their “eminence.” Thus, Romila Thapar's own nomination to American chairs, after her retirement in India, crowned her career of being an ever more eminent historian in India.

The focus on status is a long-standing practice of the Indian Left, and for a good reason. As Sita Ram Goel already remarked in his anti-Communist days, the Indian Communists made sure to create status for those loyal to them. If you were a writer, they would arrange for you to be invited to a writers' conference in Moscow and get an award there, and then you would be introduced in India as an “internationally acclaimed writer.” This was all the more important because people in general base their judgment on status, but no one more so than the Hindus. Indeed, the fabled Hindu moneybags will rather sponsor an enemy with status than a friend without it. The BJP will rather nominate a “secularist” with status than a proven Hindu loyalist without it. So, in the case of our Communist writer, they will honour him for his status, not realizing that this status has purposely been created for him by their declared enemies. And they will shun a pro-Hindu writer because he has no status, ignoring or disregarding the fact that he has been denied

any avenue that might have led to status. The last thing they think of is to make an effort and create status for people who are perceived as belonging to the Hindu camp.

### **The BJP Role in Education**

To be sure, there are provincial universities where the Leftist lobby's power is limited. Education is largely a matter for the States, so BJP State Governments control a fair number of second-rank but nonetheless real nominations. Indeed, if they had meant business, they could have created a centre for excellence developing a more objective counter-narrative to the dominant Leftist version of history. Still, they do get to fill vacancies for history professors once in a while. These do not confer the kind of status that Jawaharlal Nehru University can offer, but they should at least be sufficient to groom a set of historians outside the Left's sphere of influence. And indeed, even as an outsider, I can off-hand enumerate a handful of credible and competent non-Left historians, among whom a new ICHR chairman might have been picked. India is a big country, and non-Left historians may be seriously under-represented, but in absolute figures they are still a force to be reckoned with. Prof. Rao himself is a veteran of one such little known university in Warangal, Andhra Pradesh.

As for the process of peer review, upheld by Romila Thapar as a key to academic status, it has come under criticism for being highly susceptible to corruption. Thus, Indians might think of Northwestern Europe as much cleaner than awfully corrupt India, but right on my doorstep, Tilburg University in the Netherlands has been through a sensational fraud scandal in 2011-12. Social psychologist Prof. Diederik Stapel had built a whole career on much applauded papers, nicely peer reviewed, and in their conclusions very welcome among the "progressive" crowd. But then it transpired that he had a long-standing practice of making his research data up, so as to suit his preconceived "conclusions." The investigative commission appointed for the case not only discovered large-scale fraud affecting the work of other researchers as well, but specifically reprimanded the reviewers who had okayed Stapel's work so often. This was but an extreme case of a general phenomenon: papers get easy acceptance from peers if they support the dominant view, but are held to far more demanding standards if they are at odds with it. In India, just imagine what it would take for a history paper with "communal" conclusions to be accepted by a Leftist-controlled review panel. So, of course Prof. Rao cannot boast

of many peer reviewed publications, but that says little about the quality of his work.

A serious look into his output, however, reveals that he is indeed not the man from whom we can expect an overhaul of the Indian history sector with respect for the normative methods of history scholarship. Here we have to concur with Romila Thapar: 'Rumour has it that since he is working simultaneously on various projects, a recognised monograph has still to emerge. The projects are linked to spiritualism, yoga, the spiritual contacts between India and Southeast Asia, and such like. Whatever connections there may be between these themes and basic historical research, they are at best tenuous, and it would require a mind of extraordinary insight and rigour to interweave such ideas.'

For a professor teaching lessons about historical method, it is rather poor to base herself on "rumours." I have remarked before that the dominant scholars are often "fishwives," who believe and then propagate mere gossip. Nevertheless, an internet search and our limited findings there give a first confirmation of her impression.

### **Historicity of the Epics**

According to the eminent historian: 'The two issues that he has highlighted in his statement to the press as the agenda for his Chairmanship are also prominent in the Hindutva view of Indian history. One is that of proving the historicity of texts such the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and establishing the dates of the texts and their central event. At least in the case of the Mahabharata battle, we are on fairly solid ground in assuming that it was a historical event. The same is true of the Trojan war, although Ilias enthusiasts also have had to struggle against skepticism before this was generally accepted. On the other hand, many embellishments as well as unrelated stories and discourses are of other dates.'

She observes: 'This is a subject on which there has been endless research for the last two centuries. Indologists and historians have covered the range of possible investigation discussing philology, linguistics, archaeology, anthropology and even astronomy to try and ascertain a definitive chronology for these texts. But to no avail, as a precise date eludes them. To go over the ground again in the absence of new hard evidence would merely be repeating familiar scholarship – but it may not be familiar to Professor Rao.'



The available investigations have brought us much closer to a serious chronological assessment than she seems to assume. Only, it does not favour the historicity of “the” Epics. They confirm that traditions were collected and expanded over centuries, and additions made even after a redaction meant as “final”. Only believers treat the Epics as a divinely revealed text that has to be dated as a single whole. From the wording in the newspaper’s rendering of the interview, it seems that Prof. Rao belongs to the believers rather than to the historians, but then again, most Indian papers are not above manipulations.

After her defeat in the Ayodhya controversy, she still uses the present ICHR discussion to fool the world once more with her negationist thesis: ‘Professor Rao’s other statement to the press of there being archaeological evidence to support the theory that there was once a temple where the Babri Masjid later stood, is largely a political statement as the report of the excavation at the site in Ayodhya is not publicly available. Those few who have had the chance to read the report may not agree with the statement.’ Are we to suppose that her own interventions in this debate were not political? The negationist stand against the pre-existence of the Ayodhya temple was an extreme example of how the humanities often serve to provide a scholarly veneer to theses that arise purely from political motives.

### **The ICHR’s Chairmanship**

An interesting point is this: “Again, according to what was published in the newspapers, Professor Rao’s second comment was regarding his objection to the introduction of Marxist tools of research by the ICHR during the chairmanship of Professors R.S. Sharma and Irfan Habib. Professor Rao should be more familiar with the ICHR since he was appointed to the Council by the first BJP government of 1999-2004. He should know that for the most part of its existence, the ICHR has been under the chairmanship of non-Marxists such as Lokesh Chandra, S. Setter, MGS Narayanan and so on. So if they had wanted to remove the so-called ‘Marxist tools of research’, there was nothing to stop them from doing so.”

The ICHR Chairmanship is largely a ceremonial and administrative post. If the holder of the title is not particularly dynamic, not much power inheres in it. That is why the Left didn’t mind giving it to non-Leftists once in a while. They themselves are interested in real power, i.e. the power to change things according to one’s own designs, whereas most Hindus are only interested in office. (I thank Arun Shourie for

correcting me when I once parroted the usual complaint that most politicians “only want power”. The right expression was: “they only want office.”) Office means you get all these photo opportunities and TV appearances, a fat salary and glittering perks to show off. A child’s hand is easy to fill.

I doubt that the enumerated ICHR Chairmen ever had the instruments to remove the Marxist influence from their institution. But at any rate, there are little signs that they ever tried. The Marxists, by contrast, only desire office to the extent that it is an avenue to real power. Indeed, the history of their acquisition of cultural and educational power is one of a division of labour: ‘Congress politicians, originally around Indira Gandhi, would get the glamorous offices, whereas their Communist allies would do their long-term moles’ work in the less conspicuous cultural-educational sector.

The good element in this sobering assessment of the ICHR Chairmanship is that Prof. Rao may perhaps not be the best historian, but he can still do a fine job is what the post is meant for: put the right people in the right places and inspire them to do the research needed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is known for having a low opinion of diplomas and having more respect for achievement. That is why he nominated Smriti Irani, underqualified but a proven hard worker, to the Human Resources Development ministry, who in her turn thought of Prof. Rao as the right choice for the ICHR. Let us hope that she knows of qualities of his that we have yet to appreciate.

### **Real Marxism**

The eminent historian, who is not known to have protested when Tom Bottomore’s *Dictionary of Marxism* describes herself as a Marxist, takes issue with the loose use by Prof. Rao and many others of the term *Marxism*: “It is perhaps worth pointing out that the kind of history that is often dismissed by Hindutva ideologues as Marxist is not actually Marxist but bears the stamp of the social sciences. The distinction between the two, despite its importance to the interpretation of history, is generally glossed over by the proponents of Hindutva. This is largely because they have scant understanding of what is meant by a Marxist interpretation of history and therefore fail to recognise it. For them, a Marxist is simply someone who opposes the Hindutva ideology. Consequently, a range of historians unexpectedly find themselves dubbed as Marxists.”

It is not just Hindutva ideologues who point to the preponderant influence of Marxism on India (which is simply a fact), and neither is it only them who use the term *Marxism* a bit inaccurately. And here, she does have a point. What she calls “the social sciences” is her name for the scholarly veneer that the Leftists in academe give to their own ideology, but that ideology is indeed not always Marxist, and these days less and less so. Marxism was one specific school of thought in the Leftist spectrum, and after it has been abandoned in the Soviet Union and more gradually in China, it has had to give way in India too. Nothing ever dies in India (as Girilal Jain observed), and Indian Marxism will take a long time to wither away, but it is a fact that postmodernism, protocolonialism and other forms of egalitarianism are taking over where Marxism once flourished. To the average Hindutva observer, whose understanding of these ideological distinctions is blurred at best, these remain all the same.

Let me give a single example of the difference between Marxism and the more current forms of Leftism, one that Prof. Thapar will certainly recognize. The Marxist historian Shereen Ratnagar asserts: “if, as in the case of the early Vedic society, land was neither privately owned nor inherited by successive generations, then land rights would have been irrelevant to the formation of kin groups, and there would be nothing preventing younger generations from leaving the parental fold. In such societies the constituent patrilineages or tribal sections were not strongly corporate. So together with geographic expansion there would be social flexibility.” (in Romila Tapar, ed.: *India: Historical Beginnings and the Concepts of the Aryan*, National Book Trust, Delhi 2006, p.166)

Nowadays it has become fashionable to moralize about the caste system, with evil Brahmins inventing caste out of thin air and then imposing it on others; Neo-Ambedkarites give a lead in spreading this view. But hard-headed Marxists don’t fall for this conspiracy theory and see the need for socio-economic conditions to explain the reigning system of hierarchy or equality. In particular, it is pointless to lament the inequality of “feudal”, pre-modern societies, as the socio-economic conditions for equality didn’t prevail yet. Socialism (or, to name a fashionable instance of egalitarianism: feminism) simply couldn’t exist or emerge in a feudal society. However, the pastoral early-Vedic society did have the conditions for a far more equal relation between individuals. In the later Vedic period, the caste system emerged, first with mixing of castes (caste was passed on in the male line, but the father was free to

marry a woman of another caste, see the Chandogya Upanishad or still the Buddha), then with endogamy. So, the Marxist, materialist and “scientific” analysis is quite distinct from the “petty-bourgeois” idealistic view.

## Real History

Prof. Thapar feigns bad memories of the A.B. Vajpayee government, when the established historians laughed without end at the sight of the Hindutva crowd’s incompetence: “During the BJP/NDA government of 1999-2004, there was a frontal attack on historians by the then HRD minister M.M. Joshi. The present HRD minister, who unfortunately is unfamiliar with academia beyond school level, gives the impression that in this case she may be doing what she perhaps was appointed for: Carrying out the programme of the old history-baiters of the BJP who now have a fresh innings.”

It should not surprise us that the august professor, in spite of her Marxism, so openly disdains the proletarian HRD minister. It is the old glorification of status all over again. While her Marxist school has waged a very long attack on real history, so that a lot is to be cleaned up now, she is right to have a low opinion of M.M. Joshi’s tenure and initiatives. Marxists were at least sophisticated in their distortions, and hence could win over most of the India-watchers abroad, but the Hindutva history-rewriters were clumsy and disdainful of quality control. It is as yet too early to know whether Mrs. Irani or Prof. Rao are willing and able to do better.

Her final point sums up her judgment of the new situation, and I need not comment on it: “Again, rumour has it that the ICHR did send a shortlist of its recommendations for Chairmanship to the HRD ministry. The list had the names of historians who had helped construct the ICHR into a viable research body. But that list seems to have conveniently got lost in the ministry. Therefore, a different name was pulled out of another hat and the person appointed. If this is so, then the prognosis is both predictable and dreary.”

## An Instant World

### B.G. Verghese\*

I am honoured to be invited to deliver this evening's lecture in honour of Prabhash Joshi. He was a family friend and a warm companion and an esteemed colleague in the Indian Express and beyond. We shared many professional and social values and I admired his dedication to the causes he held dear. Our bonds were cemented during the Emergency and remained so until the end, when he was campaigning against the rising menace of "paid news."

Modern media as we understand was born not more than 300 years ago with the equivalent of the Reformation and Renaissance that unfolded globally. Change occurred with technological innovation which gained revolutionary momentum with the coming of the printing press, telegraph, the railway, steamship, cable, radio, film, TV, the integrated chip, computer, satellite, internet, cell phone, I-pad, I-pod, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter et al.

I was born in the radio age; entered journalism in the hot metal/ rotary age when one had a 24-hour cycle of dak editions. I matured in the offset age with multiple editions and facsimile. And I retired in the early computer age. Now there is internet, "breaking news" and the social media which are all beyond my comprehension. We live in an instant, 24 x 7 interactive world. Nothing is the same. Disinformation and rumour compete with information.

The multi-media environment is different and changing. Managers and corporate owners rule. The media has for the most part become shallower in content and more tuned to sensation, entertainment and ratings. What we need to do in India today is to take stock, see where

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we are and where we should be headed. This cannot be done a Fourth Press Commission as urged by some. The press cannot be seen in isolation but as part of the larger media scene.

At the end of World War-II, several influential figures in the US got together to set up the Hutchins Commission to review the state of the American press. The Commission emphasised social responsibility in the face of corporate manipulation and the need for fairness and balance. As the reigning post-war global power, the US media also had to take greater interest in international affairs. The Hutchins Report was widely cited even outside the United States.

Then in the later 1970s, UNESCO appointed the MacBride Commission to look into global North-South relations between the information-rich news providers and global news agencies and the information-poor Third World to ensure another kind of political and social balance. This too had considerable influence.

Today, as described, the situation is entirely different. The Indian media has hugely multiplied and entered a totally new communication era with every man and woman a citizen-journalist on social media. Everything is transmitted and analysed in real time. I would strongly recommend the appointment of some of our wisest and best minds to reflect on how to harness the new media to new and constructive purpose. Such a Blue Ribbon Commission, preferably set up outside the Government, should consist of educationists, scientists, administrators, communicators, politicians, corporate leaders, social workers, labour leaders, cultural experts and women and must report to the nation. This could then form the basis for public debate and action on the way forward. There has to be a paradigm shift in thinking.

The media in India is currently in crisis and has suffered a severe loss of credibility. Managers have taken over from editors and gossip and sensation have supplanted news. Objectivity has suffered. If the print media is in trouble, sections of the electronic media have gone out of control. The Press Council is poorly structured and the electronic media has an even weaker and more limited self-regulating mechanism. The fast-multiplying social media is, however, uninhibited by any framework of control. It can be highly irresponsible, tendentious, faceless, self-serving and fragmenting and has often given currency to rumours and plants that have led to violence and turmoil.

In the media of today, the one who "breaks" the story, whatever its veracity, sets the stage. The rest follow as a pack creating a subjective reality that may be far removed from the objective truth. Competition

spurs unrestrained comment and gossip resulting in trial by the media and kangaroo courts. Institutional and individual reputations can be ruined in minutes with the trashing of the due process. The new ethic, renders persons and institutions guilty as “charged” by any unnamed busybody, until proven innocent.

Worse, news is easily politicised and parties and ideological groups enter the fray to build and play on manufactured sentiment. One can enumerate countless cases of this kind of reckless reporting, dubious sting operations and unsourced video-clips. Social media was responsible for triggering and fuelling the Kokrajhar and Muzaffarnagar riots. Gone are the days when the “Rashomon test” was applied and reporters were required to probe all facets of a story, so that whatever was nearest to the truth emerged and was reported as objectively as possible. See how the Arushi murder case and the more recent media arraignment of Justice Ganguly on grounds of sexual molestation of a law intern have been reported. The Judge was hounded and the “victim” has since refused to come forward and testify.

Embedded news was introduced by the US Government in coverage of the Iraq war. It was shamelessly aped by the mainline Indian media in its coverage of Anna Hazare’s “fast unto death” at the Jantar Mantar a couple of years ago. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to berate the press without acknowledging much good reporting and fair commentary.

Another ground for concern is the impatience of those in authority, including the corporate world through its power of advertising, to stifle freedom of expression. Book and film censorship have been staple, now even on such vague grounds as something being liable to “offend the sentiments” of unnamed sections of the population. M.F. Husain was brutally hounded into exile. Moral policing is rife and armed goons of political parties such as the Trinamool Congress and SSP and of the Left, BJP and even the Congress have wreaked havoc on their opponent, even getting away with murder. The law is unable to take its course on account of political partisanship, thus giving licence to unruly language and behaviour. Unfortunately, the media all too often gives wide currency to such conduct and hosts debates and discussions that only inflame passions, divide society and elevate trivia to issues of high policy.

Despite the negative fallout of such trends, there appears to be a belief that democracies do not regulate the media for to do so would be to muzzle free expression. This is humbug. The US has a Federal Communications Commission that monitors standards and adjudicates complaints. The UK is re-moulding its Broadcast Complaints

Commission while other countries have similar institutions. India is unique in having no statutory broadcast complaints authority. The complaints commission that was to be set up alongside Prasar Bharati, was set aside as a Broadcast Commission was proposed for the commercial channels. Since it would have created confusion if there were separate complaints bodies for Prasar Bharati and the commercial channels, the Complaints Commission was dropped while the broadcast commission was not enacted. In the result, there is no formal broadcast complaints authority. This is a grave lacuna.

The suggestion that there be one mega, omnibus Media Complaints Commission for both the print and broadcast media is unviable. The two media are very different in character and a leviathan of the kind proposed would collapse under its own weight. More damaging has been the indifference, even veiled hostility towards public service broadcasting.

The role of public service broadcasting has scarcely been understood in India. Nehru told the Constituent Assembly in 1948 that All-India Radio would be granted autonomy in due course, somewhat on the lines of the BBC. That never happened and though AIR was fairly independent in the early years, it was increasingly seen as an official trumpet. One of its worst legacies was the creation of a stultified, Sanskritised Hindi as the official language of India under Dr. Keskar, an early I&B Minister, that antagonised everybody. It promoted incomprehension rather than communication, quite ignoring the mandate of Article 351 that required the official language to borrow from all Indian languages, especially Urdu.

The Emergency saw the abolition of the AIR Code by Indira Gandhi and AIR was formally proclaimed an official handmaiden since the private media was considered anti-government and said to be in the hands of monopoly owners and the ‘jute press.’ Alarmed by the Emergency experience, the Janata government set up a Committee to fashion an autonomous authority for broadcasting. This reported in 1978 only to be told by the then I&B Minister, L.K. Advani that it was mandated to advise on ‘autonomy’ but had recommended ‘independence!’

A Prasar Bharati Act was finally passed in 1990 but was not notified for seven years until 1997, following the Supreme Court’s so-called airwaves judgement of 1995. Some further amendments followed in the wake of inter-party contestation but the Corporation was firmly tied to the Government in terms of personnel, senior appointments, finance

and personnel. It was a confused Bill but, even so, a beginning. Alas, Prasar Bharati was never given a chance. What emerged and has remained is a highly governmental structure with bureaucrats and I&B Ministry in control. This persists, with the bulk of the staff on deputation from government. A Strong CEO has more recently had to confront the I&B Ministry and a stand-off prevails.

By its charter, a noble document, Prasar Bharati is required to cater to all sections of India's extraordinarily diverse and plural society. The private channels, being commercial, have to earn their keep, largely from advertising, which is dependent on TRP or ratings. So what is broadcast is largely determined by what will fetch advertising support. Consequently, programmes have to cater to popular sport and entertainment and to the tastes of those who consume up-market merchandise and services.

Now by today's yardstick, 30 per cent of the country lives below the poverty line while another 30 per cent hovers just above it. However, the harsh truth is that while every consumer is a citizen, not every citizen is a consumer which means that the *aam admi*, a *dal-roti* consumer, only gets the broadcast crumbs that fall from the rich man's table whereas she needs information and knowledge for empowerment. What interest does the poor man have in hour after hour of such absolute trivia as the silly Priety Zinta-Ness Wadia wrangle, with shrill commentaries to boot?

Unfortunately, Parliament, the media, the advertisers and the entertainment world have no use for Prasar Bharati, though it remains the best source of News, howsoever staidly reported. An inadvertent consequence of Prasar Bharati has been the eclipse of Radio by TV, a great loss to the nation. AIR has become a poor relative. Its external and monitoring services have virtually disappeared. Local broadcasting was long stymied and community radio discouraged. There has been little change. FM channels have multiplied as entertainment and local channels with a limited news mandate.

As mentioned earlier, objectivity has fled for the most part and titivation, political bias and sensation have taken centre stage. What does one make of the patriotic hysteria whipped up by some channels over Ved Prakash Vaidik's interview with the proclaimed Pakistani terrorist, Hafiz Saeed, in Lahore last month? One does not have to agree with Vaidik's politics and his closeness to Baba Ramdev to assess the event. As a journalist, he got a scoop by securing an interview with India's most wanted adversary. There was nothing criminal about this

and there is little that Hafeez Saeed or Pakistan has been able to exploit. It is another matter that the interview or conversation was poorly conducted, did not press crucial issues and yielded little substance. Thereafter, it was poorly exploited by Vaidik though a column is said to be imminent. Be that as it may, it is surely mistaken to rant against him as a traitor who should be incarcerated and hounded.

It is also strange that anchors and critics should ask whose "permission" Vaidik sought, why he failed to ask certain questions and whether he was an emissary of the Prime Minister. If journalists have to seek the permission of those in authority before they interview a personality, that will be the time to shut shop. Prabhakaran and Osama bin Laden were interviewed by American and Indian journalists while in hiding, while Peter Arnett of CNN remained in Baghdad to report "Desert Storm" from the inside, to the great embarrassment of the US government and the great benefit of the world.

In this case, the Government has clarified that Vaidik acted entirely on his own volition and that it had nothing to do with the meeting "directly, indirectly or even remotely." The BJP certainly displayed double standards as it has in the past castigated "seditious" contacts with and references to certain Hurriyat leaders in Kashmir by certain commentators in Delhi.

What is also deplorable is that some reporters and channels garbed Vaidik's remarks on Kashmir, which were perfectly legitimate, to make them appear anti-national and seditious. No correction or apology followed. "Publish and be damned" seems to be the fashion.

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry has no role to play. All its separate limbs like the Films Division, Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity and so on could be autonomous boards, with daily information needs entrusted to individual ministries. The recently outgoing I&B Minister, Manish Tiwari was wise enough to say that perhaps the time had come to abolish the Ministry. What is needed is a coherent national communications policy that is absent despite the national motto "Satyameva Jayate." But this is simply not understood.

I am an old-fashioned communicator and know nothing about the new social media. But I worry about the Prime Minister's call to all bureaucrats, ministers and the public to twitter and message him directly. This is populism and could create almighty confusion. The Aam Admi party tried governing by twitter and SMS. It was fun but did not work. The "people" surely are "sovereign". But we must be beware of the fool multitude.

The media today is no more the Fourth Estate. It is the First Estate and feared yet closely followed by the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. The communications revolution has vested it with tremendous power. This must be used responsibly; for the media is ultimately a trustee of the people's right to know, truthfully and in time. It must match its power with responsibility and return to its fundamental mooring of mission, not merely commerce.

**Forthcoming Special Numbers of the Dialogue**

**1. Himalayan Region**

**2. India: Science Society and the Religion**

**3. The Indian Intellectuals**

## The North-East: Old Mindsets - New Opportunities

**J. N. Roy\***

By all accounts the overall environment in the North-East region, or I will prefer to call, seven North Eastern States of the country has been changing for the better. Ethnicity/identity propelled violence has abated with most of the major insurgent groups are in talks with the government and statistical violence graph having considerably moderated. The discernible change in the atmospherics' is, it would appear, driven by the new generation of inspirational youth and the burgeoning middle class in Assam plains and the tribal societies and States. And yet things can neither change nor evolve fast in an area wracked by violence, variety of demands ranging from autonomy, statehood to independence jostling with slow moving democratic process. It becomes more difficult if it is seeded by long-standing mutual distrust and a public discourse and academia mired in grievance and blame game. In brief, it would appear that while in general people's mood is to move on, they are being held back by old mindsets, fossilized issues and a governance afraid to move from strategic security paradigm to that of growth, trust and urgency. These are in fact the factors which unconsciously underpin the current crop of issues of which the trouble spots of the Bodo Tribal Council (BTC) region, Karbi-Annglong/Dimasa/Hasao in Assam and Manipur are the examples.

Without being over optimistic one can discern opportunity and openings which need to be seized in good time. But these require a shift in frozen mindsets and terms of engagement between the centre and the State government and its institutions and the people. Caution needs to be replaced by optimism, boldness and trust. The question

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remains is it too much to ask for in a ponderous power-seeking democratic process and wrongly much maligned Central government, which seems to be hamstrung by a timid and patronising bureaucracy and political non-engagement and fear of innovations.

The data below will indicate the significant decline in violence in the region, as well as approximate strength and arms holding of some important insurgent groups.

#### Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in India's Northeast 2005-2014

	Civilians	SFs	Terrorists	Total
2005	334	69	314	717
2006	232	92	313	637
2007	457	68	511	1036
2008	404	40	607	1051
2009	270	40	542	852
2010	77	22	223	322
2011	79	35	132	246
2012	90	18	208	316
2013	95	21	136	252
2014	132	13	135	280
<b>Total*</b>	<b>2170</b>	<b>418</b>	<b>3121</b>	<b>5709</b>

Source: [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org) \*Data till September 7, 2014

		Cadres	Arms Holding
I. Assam -	BTC	850	500 pro-talk
	NDFB	600	250
	NOFB (R.D.)	250	100
	ULFA - (Singhjit)		
II. Manipur -	UNLF	1500	2000
	PLA	800	1500
	PREPAK	400	400
	KYKL	450	400
	KCP	150	150
III. Nagaland-	NSCN (IM)	2800	2000
	NSCN (K)	1200	1000
	NSCN (KK)	1000	800

Source: Press Reports

However, the mere statistics does not tell the whole story, and can even be misleading. The trend in favour of peace has to be consolidated by politico-administrative initiatives and the perceived sense of

alienation, isolation and above all of alleged neglect and lack of importance remains to be addressed. Besides, the challenges of violence in the BTC, Karbi-Anglong, Dimasa-Hasao, GNLA in Meghalaya and several in Manipur are causes of worry. In BTC the ethnicity based violence despite agreements and negotiations has led to over 230 casualties since 2008, including 100 in 2012 and 30 in recent April, 2014 violence by a splinter group of NDFB led by Singjit Singh. Over 4.50 lakh people have been displaced in these incidents. Bodo problem presents the biggest challenge in Assam, where despite BTC their population is approx 30 per cent in the area and efforts to convert it in majority by ethnic cleansing and displacements is the root cause, alongwith the molly-codling by the State government for political reasons. It's a self-destructive approach. In the last two years, six new militant groups have emerged in Assam; five of them in Karbi-Anglong and Dimasa-Hasao ADC's and the sixth a Bengali outfit from BTC. Besides, even the inactive and dormant militant outfits still have good number of firearms and cadres to cause trouble. These need to be handled firmly and fairly.

There are some other significant changes worth taking note of. Not only the violence graph has come down but the nature of such incidents has changed. Now the number of violent incidents against the State entities is less than the intra-group, intra-tribal or intra-ethnic-groups. Most of the major insurgent-groups like ULFA, Bodo outfits, ones in Karbi-Anglong, Dimasa-Hasao are in talks with government, while their splinter groups are resorting to violence for attention and may be for a place on the table. The government has in the process 13 Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements with such groups. Politically, in the 2014 Parliamentary elections in Assam, the BJP replacing AGP as the main opposition is a significant political statement, besides rejection, at last by the people of the AGP for betrayal of the cause for which people supported it.

Politically, Assam the largest State in the region continues to face ethnicity based pressures. Creation of 6 ADC's under schedule VI and 18 non-statutory Development Councils, have only generated more such demands from small groups. Opportunistic adjustments and concessions have only come home to roost and steadily it is becoming a State where everyone is a minority and a legitimate question arises as to who is an Assamese? This is manifest in the statistics below: Assam's total Electorate 1.86 crore:-

(i) Muslims 57 lakhs, (ii) Tea garden labour 22 lakhs (iii) Bengali

Hindu – 23 lakhs (iv) Bodo's 10 lakhs, (v) Rest 74 lakhs Assamese Hindus, which includes various tribal/SC groups eg – Ahoms (12 lakhs), Koch-Rajbansi (9 lakhs) Chutia (5 lakhs) Mottok (4 lakhs). (source Indian Express April 4.5.2014 – Writings on the Wall – Shekhar Gupta). Even settled Meghalaya experiment is under strain and Garos are asking for their own State. Objectively, its all result of allowing the ethnicity related demands (some are real) to become a blackmail by being over accommodative and succumbing to violent threats. Result expectedly is a socio-political chaos.

Some experts feel that in the NE they are looking at limits of governance with security as the driving force. Maladministration and rampant corruption in the delivery system have thwarted the efforts of economic development, and ethnicity/identity related violence has not only created strong vested interests, but also invested the governance with a security bias. It is obvious, that we learn from our past mistakes and attempt new approaches, attitudes and models. However, in democracy no sweeping changes are possible overnight. Change of course will have to be gradual and consensual. In order to succeed, the bottomline should be that all changes and measures must be products of local level dialogue, consensus and agreements and not imposed from above. Association of civil society in resolving problems looks promising in Assam while in Nagaland it has received a setback.

The problems relating to governance and corruption and land security, need utmost government, attention as these have contributed to the proliferation of ethnicity related demands and violence in the region. The current problem in Bodo Territorial council (BTC) is among other reasons rooted in alleged occupation of their traditional land by outsiders; an argument not accepted by others, of who are there for very long years. Growth and lack of infra-structure are two other inter related issues needing hard-nosed solutions. While ethnicity related problems need multi-dimensional/multi-stage tackling, involving patience and the civil society, those of bad governance and corruption need a determined approach of accountability and result. There cannot be fit-all-sizes solutions, but some necessary steps can set the tone for change.

Some suggested measures and postulates may include:

(a) De-mystify and De-romanticise the North-East vision. The attitude of looking at the region as one regional entity should be given up as there is no single identity in the region and much vaunted seven sisters behave like step sisters. In essence it is an artificial and imposed identity. Its multi-cultural identity should be given due recognition and respect.

'Infact the concept of North-East as a composite entity is resented in NE as a racial slur meant to differentiate their Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Mongoloid racial origins and features. They question why a 'North-East Policy?' Are there Southern, Northern and Western region based policies?

(b) All the seven or eight States should be dealt with as independent entities; like other States in the country. A notion that they are special should go. Common issues like power and communications etc. can be coordinated locally or by the concerned Central government departments as in other parts of the country. This will involve immediate abolition of the North-East Council (NEC) and the DONER. They have neither delivered nor achieved anything of significance. Allegations of vested interests, nepotism etc., abound. Infact, a laudable people oriented development NEC's Vision Document – 2020, was buried (2006-08) by the vested interests and politicians, local and Central. Abolition of these will also improve the State accountability in developmental activities and confer respect and recognition as equals. Besides, each State has different problems and situations. Peaceful Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram cannot be clubbed with disturbed Manipur.

(c) Another related issue is to revisit the romantic vision of Verier Elwin in governance based on protection of the tribal cultures, population and areas from the "rampaging" plains people and their culture. Basic question is who protected the identity of such groups before the advent of British rule in 1826? In over thousand years of recorded history, none of them lost their identity or existence till the colonial rule introduced elements of dividing the hills tribes and plain tribes, and plains and others. It led to social distancing and mutual fears and apprehensions. The fact is that unlike other parts of the country the tribals in the NE have always been self-governing sovereign entities needing no protection. If Naga's own version of history is believed, others needed protection from them. Singphos, the smallest tribe in Arunachal has practiced Buddhism for centuries without any threat to its existence or identity. We need only respect the multi-cultural diversity of the region and get out of the "protective" mindset. It has only created vested and preferential pools of interest. Besides, most of the important groups like Nagas, Khasis, Mizos, Garos, Kukis, have embraced Christianity, modernity and education which has nothing to do with their old traditions and culture which we endeavour to protect. In brief they are capable of taking care of their own future and need no outside intervention to protect the romantic version of their culture and tradition. The present generation wants peace, progress and jobs. This trend and



its implicit interdependence should be encouraged. Vision projected should be of commonality of interests and not exclusivity.

(d) A message should go that the Centre is looking beyond the security paradigm. Recourse to violence will be dealt with sternly, and exclusively by the State governments and the police. For sometime, security coordination, due to prevalent culture of violence, will present a problem – but meeting this challenge should increasingly become a local responsibility, assisted by the Centre to the minimum. Appointment of mostly army and police officers as governor's in the past was not a proper message. Neither is appointment of the ex-Army chief as minister DONER by the Modi government. Immediate correction is called for. This should change. Similarly the current attitude of All India officers in the States, aptly described as "suitcase officers," should also be taken care of rather strictly.

(e) The issue of connectivity with the rest of country is real and has become an important psychological factor in the thinking of the region. The, transport-corridor through Bangladesh and the "Look East" intercourse will take time to acquire substance. The problem has to be addressed both at the physical and psychological levels. Its complex security environment precludes fast growth of industries and entrepreneurship. A well developed, railways and road transport network within and outside can be the immediate possibility. Air connectivity has limitations and is mostly a psychological and elitist relief.

(f) The States and societies in the region should be encouraged to resolve their identity/ethnicity – related problems by intra-internal dialogue and civil society interventions and not run to the Central government for solution. It should be made clear that they have to find their own solutions and the Indian Constitution has proved inclusive enough to take care of all reasonable aspirations. In this tumult of grievances and demands little credit has been given to the accommodative culture of the Constitution, even indulgence to undeserving ones. This aspect needs highlighting and recognition. Despite exclusivist, ethnic demands there is considerable amount of commonality by way of language, folklore, traditions and cultural practices. There is an urgent need to recover the old sense of mutuality which pre-existed, present fragmentation, mostly encouraged by colonial historiography. This has been readily lapped by the current crop of academia and intellectuals, deepening the isolationist mindsets. There is need for discovering the real past history of the region on one hand and introspection on their own responsibility for the present situation

and how to get out of it. Blaming only the Centre and others is against self-respect and dignity and betrays complexes.

(g) To take care of unique ethnic/minority issues every State government should constitute bipartisan State level social or ethnic councils as an advisory body consisting of academia and civil society leaders to debate these issues and problems and find solutions. The Centre should not view each ethnicity related assertion as necessarily secessionist or anti-national and intervene. We should encourage the civil society to deal with such problems. The militant groups do not want such forums as it exposes their myth of popular support and their own narrative of the past and history to buttress their demands.

(h) It is too late to jettison the schedule VI entities like the District Autonomous Councils (DAC) etc., as these have over the period acquired strong vested interests and symbols of autonomy and "identity." There are presently 10 DAC's under Schedule VI (six in Assam) and dozens of development councils under State laws in the region. However, the functioning of the DAC's should be closely audited for their relevance and effectiveness in addressing the local needs. If found wanting, it should be examined if their functioning can be altered to lead agencies for development work and implement the scheme like the Backward District Initiative (BDI), Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana, Backward Region Grant Fund, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Panchayat Raj Scheme etc. Implemented with local/State concurrence these may prove more effective, integrative and honourable. However, the changes in the roles of DAC's will require local consensus, as these have developed strong political vested interests, and an uneasy relations with the State political apparatus. Infact time has come to examine the very rationale of Schedule VI after creation of predominant tribal States like Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh etc. It should be examined if these objectives can be achieved by the time tested methods of reservations and affirmative actions on the lines of SC/ST reservations.

(i) The ethnicity/identity related issues, have tended to acquire undue importance and influence. At the best the 'ethnicity' is a fluid concept and at the worst divisive and a blackmail. It should be seen and dealt with in perspective and in practical terms. While it should not be ignored, but it should also not be overplayed.

(j) As far as possible, the central government should not get formally involved in negotiations with the secessionist and militant groups without clear terms of engagement. These are used to mainly gain legitimacy,

breathing time to regroup and to undermine the rule of law and constitutionality. Where it becomes necessary, e.g. Nagas and ULFA, etc. it should be made clear that:

(i) Negotiations will be with all factions of that particular society and the final agreement subject to the approval of the people with the consensus building amongst the civil society. And negotiations should be concluded, urgently and not allowed to linger on, as this generates uncertainty and confers legitimacy to even the undeserving;

(ii) If demands concern other ethnic groups or the States, then these must be resolved by mutual discussions and dialogue and the Central government will not involve itself in such exercise.

(k) The local police should be enabled to handle all security related problems. Para-military, and in rare cases army, will only assist the local police to tackle insurgency and violence. There are no militaristic solutions. Administration and police should be strengthened to stand and be counted, even if it involves temporary risks. Besides, two relatively recent developments need to be taken note of, which if not tackled in time can have consequences.

One, unmistakable intrusion of Maoists/Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in the region and their efforts to forge links with the local insurgent groups. Unless, dealt with firmly in the beginning itself, the LWE has the characteristic of insinuating and establishing itself, taking advantage of the faultlines and becomes, difficult to dislodge. This is the lesson in Central India: Secondly, China for all their arms distance public posture, is once again becoming active and trying to exacerbate the existing faultlines to alienate the region from the rest of the country. Various psychological ploys, like race, history etc., are being used for the purpose. Ignoring it may prove costly later. Monitoring and response are needed.

There is nothing new in the above suggestions and each one can be argued for and against. But what is important is to sincerely revisit the terms of engagement which the Central government has with the region and the States within the region have with each other. So far the approach has been to somehow manage the situation, postpone unpleasant decisions, be it the issues of Naga Talks; in Manipur Meitei-Naga conflicts inflicting serious damage to national concerns; illegal migration, ethnic demands and hope for the best. As stated earlier, no drastic change of course is possible. What is, however, important is to start the process of change of course for the better, with consensus, and patience. We will have to dare to succeed. Things are changing both in the

region and around it. Hope and optimism will prevail, but there is no political will and intellectual vigour to actualize it. In the last analysis the mindset has become the biggest impediment in the path of change. When grievance becomes the main fodder of public discourse, it belittles and strips of all the protagonists of self-respect and dignity. People seem to be moving on but a section of regions academia and intellectuals are oblivious of the generational shift and are still mired in the past grievances and colonial racist and divisive theories. They need to re-examine the authenticity and legitimacy of their postures and self-introspect.

# Seven Sisters: A Metaphor for Seven Fragments

**Harekrishna Deka**

In 1972, the map of Assam changed and its size shrank. While the two valleys remained together, the hills saw emergence of several States. The country soon had to invent a new metaphor to give the new map a new image after cutting it into parts and then re-joining it into a new composite whole. Instead of referring to the new States separately, the Centre started calling the region by a geographical directional name "North-East." Then in 1976, in the Congress session held at Guwahati, the Assam Chief Minister, Sarat Chandra Sinha, introduced a new metaphor "Seven Sisters" to describe the region. His purpose was to stress the common economic destiny of the seven territorial units of the region and thereby dispel misunderstanding between Assam, the largest State, and the smaller ones, all members of the North-East Council. The metaphor was not simply used in the context of border disputes between Assam and Nagaland as stated by the veteran journalist, Satish Chandra Kakoti<sup>1</sup>, though it was in the background. The metaphor "Seven Sisters" was not Sinha's own invention. In 1972, Jyoti Prasad Saikia, then working as a journalist for *The Times of India* and based at Agartala, first used this description for India's North-East in a radio talk he delivered on the occasion of the inauguration of Tripura State. Saikia later joined Sarat Chandra Sinha's personal staff as a press secretary (he was to become a member of the Indian Administrative Service in Assam cadre in later years). Indira Gandhi endorsed this description while addressing the youth convention in the AICC session at Guwahati (then Gauhati) and later the central leaders eagerly appropriated the idea so as to give the region an integrated image. But to understand the

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compulsion behind the act of dismemberment of a State and the attempt to conceal its broken look, we need to follow the political developments in Assam after India's independence.

In 1947 too, there was a change in Assam's map. It lost Sylhet, its largest and most populous district, to Pakistan when British India was dismembered. But in the rest of the province (which became a State under the Constitution of Independent India), no change was affected except adjustment by way of transfer of some plains land from the frontier tract (presently Arunachal) consisting mainly of hills. Even at the time of the reorganization of the States in 1956 on linguistic basis, which was the prime question before the States Reorganization Committee (SRC), it was found imprudent to divide Assam on linguistic or ethnic lines because of the overwhelming national security considerations and in view of its strategic location, and it remained a multilingual and multiethnic State. No doubt, the demand for a separate Hill State was raised before the SRC at the time it visited Assam but unlike in some other States, no violent agitation took place on this demand when it was rejected. In Naga Hills, of course, a section of the Naga tribes under A.Z. Phizo's leadership had already started questioning India's sovereignty over these tribes and subsequently there was a revolt that turned into the country's most enduring insurgency. Even before India attained Independence, Naga National Council claiming to represent all the Naga tribes had declared that the Nagas would not join India once the British left the country.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the exclusionary policy of the British in respect of the hill areas of Assam was not abandoned by the new nation-state after Independence but the emphasis was different. The sixth schedule of the Constitution served the purpose of the excluded and partially excluded areas. What Nehru said in his address to the opening session of the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Area's Conference at New Delhi in June 1952, throws some light on the purpose of giving the north-eastern hill tribes a separate status under the Constitution. It was not to "allow them to be engulfed by the masses of Indian humanity and not to make them anthropological specimens." Later, in 1957, in his foreword to Verrier Elwin's 'A Philosophy for NEFA' he admitted that he came to this realization gradually and he wrote, "My ideas were not clear at all, but I felt that we should avoid two extreme courses: one was to treat them as anthropological specimens for study and the other was to allow them to be engulfed by the masses of Indian humanity." He was against 'over-administering these areas.'

The North-East Frontier Tract remained under direct charge of the Central Government through the Governor, though it was considered a part of the State of Assam. In Assam proper, provisions were made for all the Assam hill districts to have autonomous councils to enable the tribes to participate in the democratic process and in local self-governance. These were constituted except in Naga Hills where a demand for independence grew and where resistance against a council set-up was strong. However, there were problems regarding funds and this caused discontent amongst the emerging tribal leadership. On the other hand, many Assam leaders like Rohini Kumar Choudhury and Kuladhar Chaliha were opposed to the move and asked for immediate integration of these areas with the rest of the country. Nehru's fear was not unjustified. There was a possibility that sudden opening of the living space of these small communities to those with whom they had very little social contact — who were very numerous and who had different cultural life — could have caused fear and anxiety. Very large and one-way population movement from the Hinduised plains to the secluded hills of the NEFA inhabited by tribes largely following some kind of animistic faith of their own and some following Buddhism could have irreparably destroyed their social fabric. It would have been like confronting an alien culture as the British officials, by a deliberate design, had chosen to keep these cultures apart. On the other hand, this protective arrangement appears to have been taken too far by the Government of Independent India at a time it sought to build a united nation from the varieties of its cultural life. As a result, the leadership in both areas of the plains and the hills of the region could never gain the precious experience of working together for some length of time in governance and did not have the comfort of familiarity. Unfortunately, instead of giving a respectful status to the tribal culture of these hill tribes in the composite culture of the newly emerging Indian nation with deep understanding, the patronizing government officials started showcasing the culture of the hill people in national festivals and exhibitions in a thoughtless manner as some exotic varieties to be appreciated by the other Indians from a superior cultural position. Another unexplainable arrangement was made in respect of the North-East Frontier Tract, later called the North-East Frontier Agency (presently called Arunachal Pradesh). The area was placed under the External Affairs Ministry as if it was not a "home" territory of the emerging Indian nation. Earlier, even Nagaland for sometime was under the Ministry of External Affairs. The only explanation was that

Jawaharlal Nehru wanted to pay personal attention to the area and the external ministry was under his charge. This tract being a frontier with China and China's territorial intention becoming clearer day by day, its placing under the home ministry was necessary even as a political posture against China's emerging claim. Nehru's desire to give personal attention to the region was hardly fulfilled if we look at the state of development there during his time. It was because, Nehru, despite his immense sympathy for the area as borne out by copious notes and letters he wrote that are on record, was much preoccupied with events elsewhere in the country. His growing involvement in international affairs also must have taken his attention away. Moreover, in those days, Nehru appeared to have been more concerned about the integration of the remote North-East region than its economic development as borne out by his remark, "thus they (the people of the frontier areas) lack the feeling of oneness with the rest of India or the Indian people and are distinctly afraid that their small numbers will be swamped by others...., apart from suffering economically." On this aspect, his feeling was that removal of the 'fear and apprehension from their mind' was of the first priority. 'How to make them feel at one with India' was so important that 'everything else is subordinate to this, even economic betterment, although that is highly important.'<sup>3</sup> While protecting the tribes from being 'swamped by the Indian humanity', there was no imaginative arrangement to engage them through cultural understanding.

It was thought that the autonomy granted through the mechanism of the sixth schedule of the Constitution would remove the hill peoples' apprehension that they were being dominated by the people from the plains. Nehru also felt that self-governance at local level would help in psychological integration of the hill people with the rest of the country. Even if this was so, removing economic backwardness of the region should also have received pointed attention and equal priority. Nehru had seen first hand that the British in their effort to keep the North-East hills in isolation deprived these areas of road or rail connectivity. During his extensive tour of the region from 19 to 25 October, 1952, Nehru had to undertake his travels aurally as surface communication was almost non-existent or if there were a few roads they were in deplorable condition. During his aerial tour, he could not land at Towang as his aircraft lost its way in an unfamiliar air route. The route was not charted for regular aerial visits. Despite Nehru's such experience, neither the Central government nor the State government did much to improve road connectivity in the region. Each government felt that the

responsibility was with the other. Even at that time, there was technology to provide rail connectivity to the hills. The British had done this in the North Cachar Hills to connect Sylhet and Surma valley to the rest of Assam in the interest of the tea planters but nowhere else in the north-eastern hills did they try to build railways, because it did not serve their exploitative economy. For the British administration, opening a trade route to the Chinese market through the North-East Frontier was a priority and having failed in this mission they simply tried to convert them to Christianity. This is very clear from the book: *Baptists in Assam (1836-1936)*, written by Victor Hugo Sword. For this purpose, they extended all facilities to the Christian missionaries but in NEFA this mission was not very successful. Thereafter, they appeared to have been more concerned to maintain this region as a buffer between their Indian colony and recalcitrant China. Later, with the nationalistic aspirations taking shape in the other parts of the country, they would not allow this area to be influenced by Indian nationalistic struggle. Hence, connecting this region to the other parts of their colony in India was out of their scheme of things. What Edward Arnold had said in 1865 and what proved prophetic about the role of railways in helping India in its national integration might be remembered. He said: 'Railways may do for India what dynasties had never done — what the genius of Akbar... could not do; they may make India a nation.'<sup>4</sup> Even in the North-East, a railway could have played this part effectively. If not a railway, efficient all weather roads connecting the remote parts of the north-eastern hills would have been an important infrastructural development towards better understanding of the hills people and their integration with the people of the rest of the country. Sadly, the makers of a nation even after India's debacle in the Indo-China war in 1962, did not think of integration of this region in terms of infrastructural connectivity and road communication remained extremely poor in NEFA. It appears isolation was thought to be a virtue.

However, the policy of engaging the hill people in self-governance did have a positive effect in one respect. The English education introduced by the British had given rise to an educated middle class among the tribes and this middle class felt a sense of engagement in the democratic process of the country. Nehru hit the point when he wrote to Jairamdas Doulatram, then Governor of Assam on April 3, 1955, "the main object should be to make them feel that they are functioning for themselves and are not being ruled by outsiders. It is this psychological situation that we have to create."<sup>5</sup> It was this class that

represented the political voice of the people and their sense of participation stood in good stead when China overran a part of the North-East hills. The tribes instead of hailing the Chinese as their liberators fled from their homes and suffered immensely in heat in refugee camps in the plains (the author acted as a volunteer in such a shelter at Guwahati in 1962). The tribes of the North-East Frontier Agency (the Tract became an Agency in 1954) passed the loyalty test but still the mental distance between the peoples of the hills and the plains was not satisfactorily bridged. NEFA's political isolation, socio-cultural exoticism as seen from the plains and its remoteness due to lack of communication were factors that distanced them from the people of Assam plains as well as from other Indians.

After Gopinath Bordoloi, there was little attempt by Assam's political leaders and also by the bureaucrats to understand the tribal mind. As said above, the Centre did not allow the Assam Government to exercise its executive jurisdiction over NEFA and this region remained both physically and psychologically isolated from the State. But other hill areas which constituted the political parts of Assam were the direct responsibility of the Assam Government, which failed to handle them sensitively. Among them, the Nagas were the first to demand not only separation from Assam but also sovereignty. But other hills which had no immediate objection to being a part of the State were not nourished with care and discontent started brewing in a few years after India's independence. Nehru lamented in his note that the State administration lacked human approach. He recorded, "Ministers hardly ever go to these areas in the interior and have to rely on reports of some local officials. Even officials at headquarters seldom go there. The approach thus, instead, of being human and personal, is very largely official, departmental and bureaucratic." In a letter dated April 9, 1955, addressed to Bishnuram Medhi, Nehru castigated the State Government thus, "There is a feeling among these hill people of frustration and a lack of faith in the Assam administration." On Bishnuram Medhi's insistence that these people should be assimilated to Assam, he wrote in the same letter, "It has been your wish, and I quite understand it, that these tribal people should be assimilated to Assam. In effect, however, what has happened is a reverse process. They are becoming hostile to Assam."<sup>6</sup> An instance of the State government's insensitivity can be cited here. During Bishnuram Medhi's time, Nehru had once ticked off the State government for failing to release a sum of Rs 4 lakh kept in a separate account for tribal development in Khasi hills. The State government

merged it in its own fund on technical ground and did not even think of finding a way out to release the money in time, which caused resentment amongst the Khasi leaders. In another instance, how a remote frontier area can become emotionally sensitive on issues that might seem insignificant otherwise can be understood from an incident that caused serious repercussion in Manipur. When in 1955, rice was exported from Manipur to Assam to tide over scarcity in the latter, prices shot up in Manipur and caused law and order trouble there. In Nehru's own words: 'People (of Manipur) said that this was the first effect of merger with India, and they cursed the Government of India....In fact, everything that had gone wrong was laid on the score of rice export being allowed.'<sup>7</sup> Among the hill tribes, the Khasis had closer social commerce with the people of Assam plains as the capital was in Shillong. But the tribal lands in Shillong were allotted to settlers from the plains—mostly service holders and traders, and this caused strong resentment among the tribal indigenous people. Some of the areas opened up for such settlement were named after the ministers who were from the plains (e.g. Motinagar, Bishnupur etc.). All these insensitive actions and some more fueled mistrust and the cherished assimilation was never achieved.

The psychological scenario was quite complex. With the democratic process opening up political possibilities, it was the respective middle class that was aspiring to enjoy the dominant share of power in hills and plains and their expectations got projected as the aspirations of their communities. There was lack of convergence of their differing goals as their power-interests differed. Assamese nationalism seeking dominance during the fifties and sixties and even thereafter cannot be read in isolation and without taking into account its own sense of vulnerability against assertive Bengali linguistic nationalism. The Assamese middle class elite started feeling a sense of release from domination only after 1951, the year that showed in its census that with the removal of Sylhet and the immigrant Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley deciding to adopt Assamese as mother tongue, the Assamese speaking people became a majority in the State. The picture was quite different in 1931. It was not for nothing that Assamese political leaders were keen to lose Sylhet at the time of partition except Sir Sadullah, one time Muslim league premier of Assam, who pleaded for its retention in Assam. The Assamese nationalists' attempt at dominance stemmed from a defensive psychology and its actions, at times violent, were principally directed against the assertive politics of the Bengalis of both the Brahmaputra and the Surma valleys. Only later, unemployment

and land alienation brought the question of "bahiragata" to the fore. The latter was an old issue but linguistic nationalism kept it in the shadow till the end of the seventies of the last century. By that time linguistic nationalism of the Assamese middle class achieved a measure of success through the Official Language Act of 1960 and introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction in higher studies in 1972. But while seeking consolidation of the dominant status, the adherents of Assamese nationalism failed to read the sensitivity of the people of the hills where the educated middle class elites were seeking their own political space and wanted to be the masters of their own people's destiny. The emerging political elites of the hills in their ethnic aspirations encountered hindrance from the ideology of Assamese nationalism.

Thus, the homogenizing project of the Assamese middle class did not take into account these aspirations of the tribal middle class nurtured in English education. This middle class was also conscious of religious difference and cultural distinction between the peoples of the plains and the hills. In this psychological scenario, Lushai Hills (later Mizoram) suffered from "mautam" (famine) between 1959 and 1961 and the famine situation was very indifferently handled by the State government. The Mizo National Famine Front under Laldenga formed to help food distribution during famine rebelled in 1966 having renamed itself as the Mizo National Front in 1961. It took the path of armed insurgency and demanded sovereignty like the Nagas. The discontent in Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills was on the issue of the introduction of Assamese as the State official language but the agitation there was fortunately channeled through a democratic path. Even before that, it was seen that the assimilation process was not working and there was a demand for a Hill State when the State Reorganization Commission visited the State in 1955. After the Assam Official Language Bill was introduced in Assam Assembly in July 1960, a newly formed organization All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) built up a strong movement for a separate Hill State. As S. K. Agnihotri said: 'In the 3<sup>rd</sup> conference in November 1960, the APHLC emphasized that the fulfillment of this demand was the only solution that could safeguard the interests and satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the hills people.'<sup>8</sup>

In Naga hills, the hardliners built up an armed guerilla struggle since 1956 and the Centre eventually conceded a State of Nagaland to the Naga people in 1962 to conciliate them. While the moderate Naga leadership became reconciled to this arrangement (an alternative political

discourse was already there to support a constitutional process for meeting Naga national aspirations), and this section decided to seek national destiny in the Indian democratic structure, The hardliners, however, continued their armed struggle for sovereignty, despite the surrender of a large number of hostiles and the break-up of the NNC that had first spearheaded the rebellious movement. The mantle of rebellion passed on to the NSCN. (Only now there is some thaw in the hostility). Separation of some of the hills from the plains of Assam thus actually started from 1962 and culminated in 1972. The Hill State Movement that grew in strength in Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills and the insurgency in Lushai Hills were the contributory developments that led to the division of Assam into several States and the concept of "Seven Sisters" took birth. Interestingly, the late Professor V. Venkata Rao of Gauhati University had mooted a novel idea to prevent total separation of the hill districts of Assam from the State. In a meeting with the then Governor of Assam, Vishnu Sahay, in 1966 he had brought in the concept of federalism and advised formation of a sub-federation in the region with equal status to the constituting units. Though the Governor was receptive to the idea, the policy-makers in New Delhi rejected it. This interesting idea came to an end there even without a trial.<sup>9</sup>

The rise of a politically conscious middle class, both in the hills and the plains, divergent ethnic aspirations, socio-cultural distance, the inability of the national wisdom to discover essential threads for integration in a salad bowl syndrome, the Centre's lack of interest to give a trial to the idea mooted by Prof Rao, and above all, bureaucratic short-sightedness in the administration, all combined to fragment Assam. Thus far, the geographical name North-East was applied to a portion of the present North-East India (that is to NEFA). Now all the seven States (the five States carved out of Assam together with Manipur and Tripura) came to be called the North-East. Two of them, Arunachal and Mizoram started as union territories when Assam was divided in 1972 but became States in 1975 and 1986 respectively.

During the British occupation, there was only one border along the Himalayan range, which itself was a natural barrier between a strong imperial power and enigmatic China. But since India's independence, the entire region became and is even now a difficult and sensitive frontier with foreign powers having claims on parts of its territory. And this whole frontier region has been linked to India by a narrow corridor

between two countries, India and Bangladesh, the latter's political mood remaining unpredictable and changing with the change of government there. This frontier having become fragmented into several parts in 1972 looked vulnerable and their economic viability came to be questioned too. Against this background, the Centre desperately sought a strong metaphor to bind these parts into a cultural filial bond. The region was euphemistically called "Seven Sisters." The soft-sounding feminine image of "Seven Sisters" actually masked the nation's security concerns. At the time of reorganization of the North-East, not only was there threat from a hostile neighbour but also from internal disturbances in Nagaland and Mizoram where army was extensively deployed. The birth of Bangladesh had somewhat lessened the vulnerability of one frontier, and yet this border has never been peaceful.<sup>10</sup> Illegal immigration, smuggling activities, cross-border movements of insurgent groups and Pakistan's proxy war make this border extremely sensitive. Burma (Myanmar)'s inability to check the movement of Naga, Manipuri and Assamese insurgent groups to and from that country has kept this border also disturbed.

The professed purpose of reorganization of the North-East was its all-round and equitable development as a composite region. In forming the North-East Council, the Centre stressed that the region's economic plan should be coordinated, so that all these frontier States moved together. This was also emphasized by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, while inaugurating the North-East Council in 1972. "The primary purpose of the Council is the development of the region for greater human welfare. The first principle of development is coordinated activity. I have no doubt that different units of this region will gain by such coordinated work."<sup>11</sup> However, when the decision to create the new States was taken, the more important consideration for the nation-state was (and is even now) that the North-East frontier should not look weakened because of its reorganization. Indira Gandhi, in fact, stressed the importance of both aspects — economic development and strategic security—in her inaugural address. She said: 'In addition to the economic and social problems, the north-eastern region is important to the country because of its strategic situation.'<sup>12</sup> In the context of the disturbed scenario of this frontier region, this is actually a bigger concern for the Government from the national perspective,

The north-eastern States suspected of being not economically viable and being divided into small States with tribes psychologically not yet

satisfactorily integrated with the nation, does actually present a vulnerable look. Its link with the "mainland" is through a very narrow stretch of land in North Bengal, called Siliguri corridor. This increases its vulnerability. (Looking at the map of the North-East, it is possible to imagine that it looks like a bird about to fly in a direction opposite to the mother bird). At least in one respect, the Central Government's security concern is evident. It is the question of national security that comes into play when the Governors are appointed in some of these States. Very often, army generals or intelligence officers have been preferred as Governors. Besides, one of the heaviest deployments of armed forces has been in this region for a very long time. Both Indo-China border and Indo-Bangladesh border are required to be heavily guarded. Internal security is equally disturbed adding to the vulnerability of the region. Thus national security appears to be the unstated reason why a new metaphor was found so attractive by the Centre when it was proposed by Sarat Chandra Sinha. The **Seven Sisters** appeared integrated through the image of a filial relationship, even if cartographically it looked so fragmented. However, this metaphor can succeed only if the diverse peoples of the region are psychologically integrated and feel a genuine sense of belonging to the Indian nation-state. What Nehru thought more than five decades ago still holds good.

Has this mission been achieved? It seems that in the political power arena, the smaller hill States do not feel comfortable with their eldest sister Assam to develop a closer affinity. Demographically, Assam looks like a giant rather than an elder sister. Of the 38.17 million people living in the region according to the 2001 census, 26.5 million belong to Assam. Inter-state border claims have made this relationship problematic. There are demands for ethnic integration and for re-demarcation of State boundaries over such demands. It leads to tension and violence. Moreover, social intercourse and cultural exchanges amongst the hill tribes and the peoples from the plains are very minimal to ensure emotional integration at a level where a filial chord manifests itself. This requires a core agency to play a key role, and the North-East Council could have been structured to play this vital role. But this institution has remained just an inter-state funding agency for economic development and a discussion forum till now. It has not been given a dynamic role to actively promote socio-cultural exchanges in a broader framework besides being a driving dynamo for economic development. The invented metaphor of "Seven Sisters" is yet to be naturalized.

## Notes

1. Article 'Assam Nagaland Clash' in 'Problems of North-East'(1996) by Satish Ch. Kakati, Assam Book Depot, Guwahati. What I have said is from my personal enquiry. When asked, Jyoti Prasad Saikia told me that he hit upon the idea of seven sisters from William Wordsworth's poem 'seven sisters'.
2. On Naga rebellion, see more information in 'India after Gandhi' by Ramchandra Guha, pp. 321-324 & 430-431, 'Constitutional Development in North-east India' by S.K. Agnihotri in 'Reorganization of North-east India since 1947' ed. by B Dutta Ray and S.P. Agrawal, chapter 'The Naga Imbroglgio' in 'India's Northeast Resurgent' by B.G. Verghese.
3. 'Documents on North-east India vol. 4' edited by S.K. Sharma and Usha Sharma, p. 288, 2006, Mittal (Henceforth DNEI for short)
4. See B.R.Nanda's book 'The Making of a Nation', Introduction part 2, Harper Collins, 2004
5. DNEI, p. 366
6. DNEI, p. 363
7. Letter to A.P. Jain, May 19,1955, DNEI, p. 370
8. S.K. Agnihotri's article 'Constitutional Development in North-east India since 1947' in the book 'Reorganization of Northeast since 1947 edited by Dutta Ray and S.P. Agrawal, Concept (1996)
9. B. Pakem refers to Prof. Rao's plan in 'Essays on North-east India: presented in memory of Prof. V.Venkata Rao (1994), edited by Milton S. Sangma for Department of History, North East Hill University, Indus Publishing.
10. See the book 'The Bengal Borderland'; by Willem Van Schendel, Anthem Press (2005).
11. Indira Gandhi-Selected Speeches and Writings, vol. 3. The speech was delivered on November 7, 1972 at Shillong.
12. *ibid.*



## Banking in Assam

Amiya Sharma\*

Banking in Assam should really be studied as a case of 'banking on banking for development of Assam.' Yes, for the improvement of the economy of the State we are really banking on the banks themselves, *ceteris paribus*. But since it is common knowledge that the banking sector has not shown much improvement in Assam as well as in the NER to reach a level that is needed to push the economy in a balanced way, one wants to look into the reasons why. One remembers a meeting where in the presence of the government officials, the civil society organizations and the RBI officials, Mr. P. Chidambaram, the then Finance Minister told the gathering almost bluntly that the banks are commercial institutions and, therefore, it would not be possible to push them to bring changes in the present structure to assist the NER. This was said in the presence of Mrs. Usha Thorat, the Deputy Governor of the RBI who had just completed a study to improve the banking scenario in the NER. One can imagine what could have come out of the recommendations of the Usha Thorat Committee report of the RBI. It would not be out of place perhaps to state that during the tenure of Mr. Pranab Mukherjee as the FM banks were out to do anything and everything in West Bengal, especially in his constituency. Similar things happened when Mr. Chidambaram himself became the FM. So could he have not goaded the banks in that meeting?

This type of attitude make people like us believe that there is a lot of truth when some leaders from the region express in no uncertain terms that the Centre is responsible for the relative underdevelopment of the NER. Banks are mainly in the public sector. And if an FM of the stature of Mr. Chidambaram makes his opinion public, as in the meeting

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mentioned above, then one can imagine what the reaction of the banks would be. How many of the officers want to serve in the NE region on their own? This is in spite of the special incentives they get for serving in the region. Bankers must have gone home very happy that day after the support they got from Mr Chidambaram indirectly for not doing anything slightly risky in the region.

Risk is a part and parcel of the banking business. The NER being located in the remote corner – the periphery as opposed to the mainstream or the Centre – the risk is perhaps more as of now. But it is not the region's fault that it has been pushed to the periphery. With 'development' and more 'mainstreaming' risk can come down as it is not an absolute quantity. One has used the word 'mainstreaming' deliberately to refer to the attitude of the people in the rest of the country towards the region. 'Development' is also used here to refer to what the common people understand by development. Today, environment is becoming a big factor in our lives and one has to discount for the damage inflicted while building modern economic structures. Even the use of carbon credit will give the NER a higher weightage in the development index than what has been assigned till now. In the annual economic survey called the "state of the states" by the India Today magazine, the NER always gets high ranks when all such factors are taken into account, although in the mainstream accounting sense NER is not considered developed.

One would like to refer to the report by the Shukla Committee 1997 regarding the development of the NER. The report was discussed by almost all the major organizations related to development discourse in the country. From what one remembers, the Committee having gone into the details regarding the backlog that has to be made up in the infrastructure for the region compared to the rest of the country, recommended some Rs 80,000 crores at 1995-96 prices – which may be valued at about Rs 300,000 crore at current prices, if not more. Basically, the investment that the country should have made in the region since independence should have been at least Rs 80,000 crore higher. In that case the risk that the banks are now feeling would have been less.

What however is argued that it is one thing for the government to spend money in the region. But of greater interest is to see that the private sector also spends with equal enthusiasm for the consumption as well as business propagation. This did happen during the British period and there is evidence that Assam's economy was somewhere

near the top in terms of per capita income in 1950-51. But the economy started slipping down in ranks after the Planning Commission started its activities. By the beginning of the third plan Assam's per capita income fell below the national average and it has never recovered from that tag. It was, thanks to Devegowda's initiative that there has been much emphasis on giving more funds to the NE region so that it can march alongside the other States.

Today, the rest of India may feel that the NER is getting a huge share in the resources of the Centre; there is the provision of funds by DONER, the Non-Lapsable pool, the allocation to the NEC and what not. More importantly the region gets funds from the Centre under the special category State, so that 90 per cent come as a grant and 10 per cent as loan. But it is to be argued that such devolution by itself is not enough. Government alone cannot bring about the development of the region – the private sector has to play a major role. But for that we have to have a strong private sector and a willing banking sector. Although it is about Rs 40,000 crore coming from the Centre to the State annually, if the C-D ratio were to be 78 per cent which is the ratio for the country as whole (2012 data), Assam would have had the privilege of another Rs 53000 crore approx. (based on 2012 figures) for investment by the private sector. In that case the State would have been in a much stronger position. If we were to calculate as per the population of Assam, then about Rs 80,000 crore should have been the credit disbursement figure in Assam in 2012 since total credit was Rs 48,21,527 crore in 2012.

Even if there is a private sector that is capable of taking up various business projects in the region, they are not sound financially. One should not expect the local businessmen to have their own funds to run business – for this the banking sector is there. This is where the problems seem to lie. Has the banking sector been able to give the support to the local entrepreneurs that is required? One understands that the mainstream banks have different projects in mind than what the locals have. Being brought up in an environment which is more agriculture or primary sector based, the projects normally are related to this sector. But the bankers do not find these projects interesting. One so-called expert banker brought up in Haryana remarked once that he does not finance fishery projects because he cannot see the fish under the water! Worst part that this statement was accepted by the local bankers in the meeting, isolating this writer as the only one opposing the comment. This is also the reflection of the local people accepting the mainstream experts as having the same expertise on the region's subjects too.

Perhaps because of the supply and demand forces at play, the initial businessmen in the NER failed miserably in their ventures and thus failed to repay the loans, as the bankers normally complain. Perhaps because of the cultural differences, the people who borrowed money from the banks were unable to repay as the banks would have liked. For whatever may be the reasons, it seemed that the loans given out to the people here had resulted in higher rates of default and thus, the bankers were not happy to give further loans now. Therefore the much talked about low C-D ratio has been the norm in the region.

Low C-D would explain a low rate of loans given out of the amount collected as deposits. But what about the number of branches of banks to collect deposit? The existence of a large network of banks would have raised the amount of deposits collected. This would have also helped people to open accounts. More importantly this would have brought in the type of monetization of the economy in the region that is required today. We all understand that for modernization of the economy and the development of business sector there is a great need that money flows easily within the sector.

Even when there is infusion of a great amount of funds by the Central government, a corresponding increase in the number of private businessmen who are local and who would be interested in building the economy stronger would have served the region better. But because of the very same reasons, there was no bank to back the local entrepreneurs with the result that funds flew in to the region from the Central government and again got out of the region through the outside contractors, aided by the bureaucrats who were not interested in working in and for the region. This perhaps explains the negative attitude of the local boys towards the businessmen who reside in the region but seems to have interest in developing their own area of origin. After a time these businessmen are the ones who seem to influence or rather, run the politicians of the region. Prof. S. B. Gupta of Delhi School of Economics in his book very clearly points out the importance of non-market forces like belonging to the same party circle in creating a nexus between the banking officials and the businessmen. Such nexus tilts the banks behaviour to favour the big businessmen as against the local small entrepreneurs.

Relationship between banks and private business sector had always been strong in Assam. Being industrialized very early compared to many Indian States in sectors like plywood, tea and POL, banking in Assam was perhaps not comparatively as bad as it is today. The first bank was established in 1806 in India in Calcutta which was converted to the

Presidency Bank in 1809. In Guwahati the first private sector bank was started in 1926. By 1951 some 47 banks operating in Assam had to wind up business. There were also private banks like Nath Bank, Assam Bank, Surma Valley Bank, Nowgong Bank, Comilla Union Bank etc. However, the cooperative banks were the main players later on. By 1970, the banking scenario had changed because of the bank nationalization. The number of bank offices was 95 in 1970, with the C-D ratio of 39.2. Today the scenario is such that there are some 1574 scheduled commercial bank offices with SBI and associate banks numbering 270; 786 nationalized banks, 407 RRBs, 109 private sector banks and 2 foreign banks. The C-D ratio is still 37.3 after all the various reports and recommendations to increase it. In fact the C-D ratio in 2005 was higher at 42.0!

The non-banking financial institutions which also take part in the business of making loans available and developing the financial sector in the state are IFCI, NABARD, SIDBI, AFC and NEDFi. IFCI has not been very active in the region for some time now. NABARD has been active in the agri and rural development sector but is known for its loan to the State government under the RIDF scheme. SIDBI has been inactive too, this being the result of its profit seeking objective, although it is meant for the development of the backward regions. NEDFi which was established under an act of Parliament and now placed under the DONER has been giving loans to the local entrepreneurs – tiny ones under micro finance and also major ones like hospital, cement factories etc. The expectation of the people has been very high and that is perhaps something that authorities need to work out. As the government provides funds to NEDFi under the Central government budget, the public has the right to demand that the norms for availing credit from NEDFi be more friendly and development oriented.

Although the C-D ratio is still low compared to the Indian average (37.3 compared to 78.1 as on March 2012), what is noticed is that the priority sector advances are more than the minimum levied, i.e. it is more than 40 per cent. Within the priority sector however, the share of agri is low. This is a matter of concern since Assam is more agricultural than the Indian average (31 per cent being the contribution of agri in Assam income as against 22 per cent for India in 2007-8)

The branch network is mostly urban while Assam is more rural (about 86 per cent compared to 69 per cent for India). This is also the main reason why the number of account holder is low. A branch serves on an average some 21000 persons in Assam while the same is 14000 for the rest of India (2010 figure). Assam's physiography also makes the spread of

banking uneven. Some people have to spend the whole day to reach the bank. So difficult is the communication network in Assam. Then there is always the question of KYC norms which in traditional communities is difficult to fulfil. The voter cards have been issued lately but with full of mistakes. Since there is the suspicion of illegal immigrants settling in Assam, which also put back the issuance of Aadhar cards in the State, the progress of account opening will be slower than the rest of the country.

Speaking of the poor people in the region, there was always the system of local collection of thrift from which small loans could be given in emergencies. The modern version of the same is called micro credit (MC or mF) where the implementation of the latter is somewhat different. It was Prof. Md. Yunus who had formed affinity groups for giving small loans. The group dynamics was such that they would come to each other's aid when somebody was in difficulty, so that loans are always repaid on time. But it was also the case that if one of them deliberately tried to default on the loans the group would use the peer pressure tactics to get the loans repaid on time. In India it was picked up by organizations like the SEWA, MYRADA, RGVN and also propagated by NABARD. But the Government of India too took up the scheme in the year 1999, encouraging formation of the Self Help Groups (SHG), under the Rural Development Ministry. Initially some NGOs were collecting thrift from the members and also the public for onlending to the poor people in the locality. Seeing that it was helping the poor as well as the NGOs to earn some income for their own sustainability, the banks were also approached for help. A few banks found the system easier than the direct lending under the priority sector and therefore they started using the indirect mode through the NGOs. Even in Assam the NGOs started the micro finance system in a big way. RGVN was the pioneer in supporting the NGOs and even for development of the SHGs. NEDFi too assisted some of the NGOs to spread the mF programme in a big way. Of the other organizations SIDBI and NABARD played a big role – SIDBI targeting the NGOs while NABARD targeted the SHGs.

Initially the banks were not very keen to lend here in Assam to the NGOs. But having seen the success in the other States here too banks would lend. Once again a few banks used RGVN for onlending to the smaller NGOs. These NGOs in turn lent to the SHGs and other poor individuals. There was another novelty in Assam that even the CM gave Rs ten crore to AFC to onlend to the NGOs so that they could reach the remote corners through the micro credit scheme. The situation became such that the loans for the SHGs and the JLGs were easier to get than the individual projects submitted by the better off individuals.

Things changed quickly in the micro credit scenario. Due to the greed of some NGOs and some of the leaders in micro credit, along with the pressure of recovery of the loans, there were few cases of suicides of the borrowers in Andhra Pradesh due to which the State government came down heavily on the perpetrators. mF was to be discontinued in the present form there. Since almost thirty per cent of the total mF borrowers and the loans were made in Andhra Pradesh, the repercussion was very heavy in the rest of the country too. As a result many NGOs suffered from default of the loans from the poor people who got indication from the government that they would not face any adverse situation from the NGOs if they default on these loans. In Assam, banks started the programme late. But they were also very quick to end the programme. Some of the NGOs who were doing some good work in the sector suffered from lack of availability of funds, as the banks were not giving loans. The government of Assam also passed some strictures regarding mF by the NGOs. Although the new cooperatives and the NBFC MFIs were encouraged to do mF, there were very few such organizations. The situation is slightly better today but the enthusiasm is dwindling. However, some of the banks like the HDFC Bank has also started mF programme now.

Banking system in Assam will improve if there is more careful monitoring by the State government. At present at the SLBC meetings there is not much importance given to what is happening in the banking scenario by the State government representatives. Most of the time the question of recovery of the loans are brought up which puts the government on the back foot, since the onus is also on the government for some of the loans given out, especially for the rehabilitation of the surrendered militants. In the progressive States like Andhra Pradesh, the CM and his team attend the SLBC, which is a rare event in Assam. It is not only true for the banking sector that the CM and his team are not being forceful in demanding its progress, but the same is also true in the case of the railways, the national highways and other public sector departments under the Central government. For example, the case of FCI not purchasing rice from the local farmers has been in the news in the last few years. In the end, it can be said that for the development of Assam, the private sector has to take up the major position for which the banking sector must play a very strong and pro-active role. And for this to happen there has to be a strong push from the Centre, followed by equally strong monitoring by the State government.

## Federal Finance in India and Assam

H. N. Das\*

The Indian polity is federal in structure but unitary in bias. A strong Central government is its hallmark. That is why the architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, described India's polity as a 'flexible federation.' Federalism in India has a native flavour also. We can trace it back to the Kingdom of Vaishali of the sixth century B.C. Later the Mauryas, the Guptas, the Mughals and the British used this concept while organizing the administrative systems of their respective empires with strong Central governments. It was in the above background that the Indian Constitution of 1950 had been drafted. Its unitary features are manifest in several provisions and specially in article 356 which has given the Government of India (GoI) certain unique controlling powers such that in special circumstances it can even take over the administration of a particular State. This provision is not available in any other federal country. Then there are certain institutions common to GoI and all States. These include the Election Commission, the Union Public Service Commission, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, the Finance Commissions, the higher Judiciary, the All India Civil Services and the central para-military forces. Other common institutions include the Planning Commission, the National Development Council, the National Integration Council and the Inter-State Council.

Political as well as fiscal federalism is provided for in the Constitution by the Seventh Schedule, under article 246, which contains 3 lists. The union parliament has full and exclusive powers to legislate in respect of the items in List I (Union List) and also powers to legislate in respect of items in List III (Concurrent List). The State legislatures have exclusive powers to legislate in respect of items falling under List II (State List) and concurrent powers in respect of items falling under

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List III. There are 97 items in List I, 67 in List II and 47 in List III. The executive powers, distributed between the Union and the States, include powers to levy duties and to raise revenues through taxes operating on mutually exclusive spheres.

Another notable feature of the Indian Constitution is the assigning of the residual powers. In most federal polities the residual powers are with the States. In the United States of America (USA), for example, when the thirteen original States formed the Union, they assigned certain specific powers to the Central government and retained with them the residual powers. The other States joined later on the same condition. In India, however, the residual powers have been assigned to GoI by entry No. 97 of List I under article 246. This has made the Central government stronger. Many scholars find this to be odd. They feel that the residual powers should be with the States so that each State can develop in its own unique atmosphere of many different ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural groups.

Most economists and political leaders feel, and rightly so, that the sources of revenue allocated to the States are not only inadequate but inequitable too. The makers of our Constitution were conscious about this. Therefore, they included certain provisions in the Constitution itself in order to safeguard the interest of the States. They devised a unique system of transfer of fiscal resources from the Union to the State governments. By this system the Union government is required to share its revenues with the State governments. The provisions for this purpose have been included in the Constitution. The objectives are, firstly, to enforce national rules and standards and, secondly, to remove vertical and horizontal imbalances. The vertical imbalances refer to imbalances between the Union and the States and the horizontal ones refer to imbalances among the States. The idea is to avoid uneven provisions of public services across different States including allocations in respect of "merit goods" such as education and health-care services.

The process of resource sharing is achieved by fiscal transfers made mainly by two institutions: the Finance Commissions (FCs) and the Planning Commission (PC). FCs are appointed every five years under article 280 and their recommendations are dealt with under article 281. It is really fortunate that all the 13 past FCs (1950-2015) have been free and fair and their recommendations have been almost universally accepted by the political establishments and civil society. Over the years it has been noticed that roughly about equal amounts have been transferred by the FCs and the PC from the Central to the

State governments. The PC's transfers are confined to plan expenditure in accordance with the Gadgil-Mukherjee formula for the general category States and by pre-emption of about 30 per cent of pre-determined funds to the special category States. The FCs mainly provide for non-plan expenditure. But they try to leave behind some surplus for development expenditure as well. Besides direct transfers, successive FCs have made a practice of granting periodical debt relief so that the States are relieved of the burden of unsustainable loans. FCs also provide for grants to cover any projected revenue deficits of States. This is called the "gap-filling" approach. The main task of the FCs is to make recommendations on the sharing with the States of taxes which are levied by the Union government under a few articles of the Constitution mentioned below: articles 268, 268A, 269, 270 and 271. In addition, they have always recommended grants-in-aid for specific purposes, including those under article 275, and for calamity relief. It is significant that the immediate past four Commissions (FC-X to FC-XIII) have recommended fairly large transfers of Union resources to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), which have become Constitutional entities after the 73<sup>rd</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> amendments of the Constitution in 1992. Amended article 280 read with the new article 243 provides for this.

FC-XIII (2010-15) recommended that 32 per cent of the Union government's net proceeds from the shareable Central taxes minus administrative expenses should be transferred to the States. The grants-in-aid recommended by FC-XIII has totaled Rs. 3.19 lakh crores. It also stressed on fiscal consolidation under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act. It recommended a total amount of Rs. 26,278 crores for disaster relief, including capacity building. For the PRIs and ULBs the amount recommended is Rs. 87,519 crores. The grand total of transfers under FC-XIII has been estimated at Rs. 17,06,676 crores during 2010-15. Out of this Assam is expected to get Rs. 57,832.7 crores. This will include amounts under grants-in-aid, grants to PRIs and ULBs, debt relief and calamity relief. Announcing the acceptance of the recommendations of FC-XIII the then Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee had said in February, 2010 that 'despite the fiscal stress being faced by the Centre the Government has accepted the major recommendations of the Finance Commission keeping in mind the larger interests of the federal polity.' I personally feel that the 'larger interest of the federal polity' refers to two important objectives. The first, of course, is to provide larger funds to all States

for running of their administrations and for development. The second is to provide funds to the weaker States. In a country where the difference between the rich and the poor States, as measured by the per capita income, is as much as 1:7 the present system of differentiation in the sharing of Central taxes has really become an ameliorating factor.

The PC (Planning Commission) had been set up by a Cabinet resolution in March, 1950. Recently, the new BJP-led NDA government has decided to scrap the PC. This was announced by the Prime Minister in his Independence Day speech on August 15, 2014. The PC will be transformed into a “Think Tank” probably under the new name of National Development and Reforms Commission. The PM has invited public opinion on this matter. It must be remembered, however, that the PC had done yeoman’s service in the past by transferring huge amounts of Central funds every year as plan assistance to the States. In addition the States also got their respective shares in the central sector and the centrally sponsored plan schemes under the aegis of the PC. It will be necessary now to identify the organization which will be entrusted in the future with this task of scrutinizing the plans and allocating funds to the States. Hitherto the PC used to perform this task. The role of the Union Ministry for Development of North-Eastern Region (DONER) and the North-Eastern Council (NEC) which now make additional and exclusive allocations to the eight NER states, including large amounts from the Non-Lapsable Pool of Grants, will also need a re-look.

Many in the advanced States feel that a premium has been placed on the inefficiency of backward States by giving them higher financial allocations which they are unable to transform into productive resources. These critics, therefore, argue that resources are being wasted on the poorer States. They particularly point out the cases of the BIMARU States of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Odisha beside the eight small States of the NER. But they do not realize that unless the people living in these States come up to a certain minimum standard, India as a whole cannot achieve progress. I agree that in some of these backward States, corruption is rampant and inefficiency is widespread. It is these issues which the GoI and the civil society should really address. Penalizing the poor people of these States for the faults of the corrupt and inefficient functionaries is not a viable solution.

As against the above-mentioned views of the critics in the richer States there is a strong demand in some of the poorer States, particularly the NE States, for more autonomy and more finances. They point to

Jammu and Kashmir, where so much of funds have been invested by the GoI and where there is even a separate Constitution. These are serious matters which require deep thinking with reference to the unity, security and integrity of the country. It is felt that the better course would be to give some more powers to the States. But the Centre must retain supervisory powers. The separate Constitution for Jammu and Kashmir should be scrapped. The financial equity aspect may continue to be looked after by taking recourse to State specific grants of the FCs.

In the cases of PRIs and ULBs some separate funds were recommended by the last four FCs – X to XIII. FC-X allocated Rs. 4,380.93 crores to PRIs and Rs. 1,000 crores to ULBs. FC-XI allocated Rs. 8,000 crores to PRIs and Rs. 2,000 crores to ULBs. FC-XII allocated Rs. 18,000 crores to PRIs and Rs. 4,300 crores to ULBs. FC-XIII recommended Rs. 87,519 crores for PRIs, ULBs and Special Areas during 2010-15. The break-up is Rs. 63,050.5 crores for PRIs, Rs. 23,111 crores for ULBs and Rs. 1,357.1 crores for Special Areas. These Special Areas have been defined as “areas covered by the V<sup>th</sup> and the VI<sup>th</sup> Schedules and the areas exempted from the purview of Part IX and Part IX A of the Constitution. In Assam the Special Areas include Bodoland, Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong Districts. From the total devolution of Rs. 87,519 crores the respective shares of States are determined in accordance with a formula which gives 50 per cent weightage to population, 10 per cent to area and 15 per cent to index of devolution. The remaining 25 per cent, separately for PRIs and ULBs, are based on different weightage to a few other criteria. The actual amounts of allocation for the local bodies of Assam works out to be Rs. 1,577.7 crores for PRIs, Rs. 253.6 crores for ULBs and Rs. 61.8 crores for Special Areas during 2010-15. The unfortunate thing, however, is that the local government functionaries are ignorant about these allocations. Moreover, the inefficient State government is likely to fail to draw the full amounts from GoI by March 31, 2015. The substantial transfers to local bodies made by FC-XIII is really a good beginning because both PRIs and ULBs need funds for their running. Article 280 (3) (bb) of the Indian Constitution enjoins the FCs to make recommendations regarding the “measures needed to augment the Consolidated Fund of a State to supplement the resources of the Panchayats in the State on the basis of the recommendations made by the Finance Commission of the State”. A similar provision has been enacted in article 280 (3) (C) in respect of ULBs.

One controversy which has surfaced in recent times relates to the ideal proportion of devolution vs. grants in the transfers made by the FCs. FC-XI had transferred only 13.5 per cent as grants. FC-XII preferred more grants. It transferred 18.9 per cent as grants. FC-XIII transferred 15 per cent as grants. I personally feel that larger proportion of grants is better because grants are more specific and more focused.

In addition to FCs, equally large amounts have been transferred to the States every year by the PC mainly in the shape of Central assistance to State plans. The PC, however, is an entity set up by an executive order. It has no constitutional or statutory basis. As already mentioned, the Modi government has now decided to scrap the PC and to transform it into a "Think Tank" only.

In Assam the Annual Plan includes a Tribal Sub-Plan and a Scheduled Caste Component Plan. Moreover, the amounts going to the Sixth Schedule areas of Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong and the four Bodoland districts for Plan are allocated separately. In addition, Assam, including the above cited areas, share in the substantial assistance given to the States under the Central sector and the centrally sponsored schemes.

Assam also has the problems of the new entities of the 19 tribal and ethnic councils set up at the sub-federal level to satisfy the political aspirations of different small groups. Substantial financial allocations have been given to each of these entities in the State budget. It will be necessary to integrate the fund requirements of these councils by including these in the FC-XIV's recommendations relating to the period of 2015-20. Actually there are demands for more such ethnic councils. Again, some of the existing councils are demanding more powers, more finance and Sixth Schedule status. There are also certain ethnic groups which are demanding tribal status. In the case of the six main groups the demand for tribal status is now under active consideration of the GoI. These issues at the federal and sub-federal levels require urgent consideration, so that inter-ethnic disturbances and agitations can be avoided. For that purpose both the FCs and the PC (or its successor) must take full cognisance of all these issues and problems while making financial allocations for Assam in the future.

In the case of ULBs special attention will be necessary because of the rapid pace of urbanization. Very soon 50 per cent of Indians will live in the cities and towns. Both Mumbai and New Delhi along with the surrounding cities and towns have become huge urban conurbations. A large number of other cities will join the ranks of Mumbai and New

Delhi very soon. FC-XIV will have to take account of their problems and make suitable allocations. Already the Union budget for 2014-15 has provided Rs. 7060 for 100 smart cities. This is a new concept to upgrade and modernise the facilities available in certain identified urban areas. For integration of the urban areas with the surrounding rural areas the District Planning Committees, enshrined in article 243 of the Constitution, will have to be energized. This will accelerate the development process in both these areas.

One of the terms of reference (ToR) of FC-XIII was to "review the present arrangements as regards financing of disaster management with reference to the National Calamity Contingency Fund and the Calamity Relief Fund and the Funds envisaged in the Disaster Management Act, 2005." Successive FCs had been entrusted with similar ToRs. Their recommendations have ensured that the States are reasonably provided with resources for disaster management. According to media reports Assam failed to utilize Rs. 700 crores out of the money provided for this purpose during 2005-10. This is unfortunate. This should not be allowed to recur specially when thousands of victims in camps and make-shift homes suffer due to non-availability or inadequacy of succour.

The importance of transfer of Central funds to the State governments can be discerned from the fact that in the Annual Budget of the Government of Assam (GoA) seventy per cent of the revenue is derived from GoI. During 2014-15, for example, the total receipts of GoA have been estimated at Rs. 57,311.40 crores. Out of this the following amounts are expected to be received from the GoI: (1) Share of Central taxes Rs. 14,105.08 crores, (2) Grants for annual plan Rs. 10,102.69 crores, (3) Non-plan grants Rs. 1,976.30 crores, (4) Grants for Central sector and centrally sponsored schemes etc Rs. 10,869.06 crores and (5) Loans from the GoI Rs. 217.97 crores. GoA's own receipts will be confined to the following: (1) State taxes Rs. 11,245.43 crores, (2) Non-tax revenue Rs. 4,298.24 crores, (3) Internal debts Rs. 4,391.14 crores and (4) Recoveries of loans and advances Rs. 5.49 crores. This dependence on central financial resources has its roots in the nature of the Indian polity as enshrined in our Constitution. This has been already mentioned.

One lesson that we can learn from a study of Indian History is that whenever the Central government had become weak India was divided. Therefore, the Central government must remain strong. But the States will have to be given enough financial resources so that all the people of India can progress in all fields. The local government institutions must also be given adequate financial support so that their services to

the citizens improve. Beside that the other political entities such as the district councils, the ethnic and the tribal councils and the State specific institutions must also be looked after properly. It must be the objective of the FCs and the PC (or its substitute) to ensure that these entities are fully covered, as far as financial resources are concerned.

This brief description of the Constitutional pattern of resource sharing between the Union and the States in India will show that there is a very close and intimate relationship established among them during the period of more than six decades since Independence. There have been occasional protests and objections by some of the States regarding specific matters. But there has been a general acceptance of the allocations and the States seem to be generally satisfied. This augurs well for Indian federalism. It is in this context that the report of the FC-XIV (2015-20), which is expected to be submitted by December, 2014, is being eagerly awaited. Provided that the GoA has presented its case properly and also provided that the required data has been furnished in time there is no fear that Assam will get justice from FC-XIV. The urgency is for the GoA to utilize the Central funds fully and properly for the benefit of the people of the State.

## Maoist Spread in North-East India and Linkages with Region's Insurgent Groups

**Wasbir Hussain\***

### Introduction

The North-Eastern region of India has been riddled with insurgency for decades. All the States in the region have witnessed some sort of insurgent activities. However, negotiated settlements and ceasefire agreements between the insurgent outfits and the government have been able to curb the levels of insurgent violence over the years. After decades of insurgency, there is some semblance of peace in the region.

But, this peace, by no means, looks permanent. With most of the major insurgent groups in the region coming overground, the void created is being quickly filled up by small, newly sprung outfits. Most of these outfits are anti-talk factions of other insurgent groups, who have formed a separate entity, opposing the peace mode adopted by the parent outfit. However, the group which is taking maximum advantage of this void is the Maoists, nicknamed the 'Red Rebels.'

It is now official that the Maoists or Naxalites have managed to extend the 'red corridor' to North-East India and have linked up with a number of insurgent groups in the region, adding an entirely new dimension to the area's security situation, besides forcing the authorities to take a re-look at their counter-terror strategies. In fact, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has begun a formal probe to get at the bottom of the linkage between the Communist Party of India (Maoist), the main political platform of the Naxalites in the country, and the

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People's Liberation Army (PLA), one of Manipur's, or for that matter the North-East's, significant insurgent groups.<sup>1</sup> Besides, official communications from authorities in Assam say in no uncertain terms that the Maoists in the State are being armed and trained by the anti-talk faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) headed by Paresh Baruah. The ULFA has been one of Assam's frontline insurgent outfits, one faction of which, under the leadership of Arabinda Rajkhowa, is currently engaged in peace talks.

The Maoists have been trying to capture the vacuum left by other insurgent groups of the region. Even though the spread of Maoism in Assam or the North-East came to light only a few years ago, it is now confirmed that Maoists have been working in the region since the 1990s i.e. for more than two decades. This fact came into light after the arrests of top Maoist leaders in Assam in 2013.

### **Arrest of Top Maoist Leaders: Lid off the Maoist Activities in NE India**

On April 26, 2013, police arrested Aklanta Rabha alias Maheshji and Siraj Rabha alias Bijoy Rabha alias Suraj from the Jorabat area in the outskirts of Guwahati, near the Assam-Meghalaya border.<sup>2</sup> Aklanta Rabha was a central committee member of CPI (Maoist) and Chief of the outfit's North-East operations. The central committee of the CPI (Maoist) is the second highest decision making body of the outfit after the Politburo. The other arrested Maoist, Siraj Rabha was a training instructor of CPI (Maoist) and a landmine expert.

However, the incident which confirmed deep penetration of Maoists in Assam was the arrest of veteran Maoist leader Anukul Chandra Naskar alias Pareshda, who was a member of the Politburo of the CPI (Maoist), on May 8, 2013.<sup>3</sup> He was arrested from Cachar district in the Barak Valley region of southern Assam. A week later, on May 15, his wife Kabita Rabha was arrested from a rented house in Odalbakra area of Guwahati, the capital city of Assam.<sup>4</sup> She was running a printing press from the rented house and published Maoist literature for distribution in the State.

Interrogations of the arrested Maoists revealed that the groundwork for Maoist activities in the North-East was laid some 20 years ago. One of the arrested Maoist leaders, Aklanta Rabha, had joined the Maoists during 1991-92 and has been associated with Maoist activities since then. At the time of his arrest, he was looking after the activities of the Maoists in the North-East, particularly in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

According to police sources, Aklanta accompanied a senior Maoist leader, Sumit *da*, also known as Amitabh Bagchi, to Assam twice in 2005 and 2007 to strengthen relations with other North-East-based militant groups and to build up a people's guerrilla army in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Interrogations of arrested Maoists further revealed that the char or riverine areas of Dhubri district bordering West Bengal and forest areas are the new targets of the Maoists. They have also managed to increase their influence in the districts of Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Silchar, Karimganj and Kamrup (rural) and have created a fresh support base of at least 150 cadres in these districts. Maoists have also succeeded in making inroads into the Barak Valley region in southern Assam, which comprises three districts, namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The Valley shares inter-state borders with Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram and an international border with Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> Aklanta Rabha revealed the names of at least five persons who joined the Maoists and are currently working at the village level in Barak Valley to strengthen the base of the Maoists in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Maoists are now looking to establish bases in Meghalaya. Aklanta admitted that he had already established contacts with a number of Khasi youths to bring them to the Maoist fold. Already, five to six such meetings have been conducted between the Khasi youths and Maoist leaders. In fact, Aklanta was arrested when he was waiting for the arrival of a few Khasi boys for their periodical meetings. The Khasi boys, however, could not be arrested as they did not turn up at the stipulated time of the meeting. According to police investigations, Maoist leader Amitabh Bagchi alias Sumit *da*, a politburo member of CPI (Maoist), had asked all local Maoist leaders of Assam to develop a tie-up with Khasis, Rabhas, Garos and people of tea tribes who have been agitating for their political and financial rights for a long time.<sup>8</sup>

The Assam government in May 2013 sent a proposal to the Central government to declare nine districts of the State as Left Wing Extremism affected districts.<sup>9</sup> These districts are Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Golaghat, Sivasagar, Goalpara, Cachar and Karimganj. The proposal said that 35 police station areas of these nine districts are affected by Maoist activities. Those include, eight police station areas in Tinsukia, five in Dibrugarh, four in Golaghat, four in Dhemaji, one in Sivasagar, one in Lakhimpur, three in Goalpara, five in Cachar and four in Karimganj district. These nine districts have altogether 103 police stations.<sup>10</sup> However, the Centre did not accept the proposal on the ground that there is not much incidents involving Maoists in these areas.

On 22 November, 2013, the Union Home Ministry extended the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 in Assam for one more year with effect from 4 December, 2013 and again gave the State a 'disturbed area' tag under the Act.<sup>11</sup> However, this was the first time that the Home Ministry has cited Maoist activities as one of the reasons for continuing with the 'disturbed area' tag. This shows how the Maoists have been able to infiltrate a region which was already embroiled in ethnic insurgencies. With problems like poverty, under development and unemployment, the Maoists have enough issues at hand through which they can garner support from the deprived masses and consolidate its position in the State.

A report by the Anti-Maoist Task Force of Assam police,<sup>12</sup> states that the police have details of 171 Maoist cadres and active linkmen in the State. Out of these 171, particulars of 83 cadres are available in better details. Of the 83 cadres, 21 hailed from Sadiya PS area, 9 from Tingkhong PS area, 7 from Merapani area, 6 each from Pengeree PS area and Kakopathar PS area. There are also cadres from bordering districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Also substantial cadres are found from Dhemaji district. Many districts from middle and lower Assam have been represented which indicates the extent of the Maoist tentacles. During the interrogation of the arrested cadres the hierarchy of the CPI (Maoist) and the organisational structure was revealed.

### **Links with Manipuri Insurgents**

In 2008, the then military Chief of the CPI-Maoist, Mallojula Koteswara Rao, popularly known as Kishenji, was reported to have visited Thoubal in Manipur. He is said to have held a meeting in October 2008 with the frontline Meitei insurgent group, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and had adopted a resolution to back each others' interests. Reports with security agencies say Kishenji identified himself as Pradip at the meeting that was attended by a team from the ULFA, led apparently by Partha Gogoi. Partha Gogoi was believed to have attended the Manipur meeting under express orders of ULFA military Chief Paresh Baruah.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the nexus between the CPI (Maoist) and the PLA have since been corroborated by detained leaders of the Manipuri insurgent group. Disclosures by N Dilip Singh alias Ningthambam Ranjit alias Wangba, a senior leader of the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF), of which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a constituent unit, and Arunkumar Singh Salam, his colleague, arrested on 1 October, 2011 in Delhi, not only reconfirm thickening of operational relationship between

the Maoists and the RPF/PLA but also unveil their audacious plan to upgrade it to a strategic level.<sup>14</sup>

A note prepared by a security agency makes disturbing reading: "...The proposed Strategic United Front, the concept of which is being currently flashed out by leaders of the two outfits, would eventually incorporate all 'revolutionary groups' including those in Jammu and Kashmir and the North-East. This development acquires sinister salience when viewed in the backdrop of credible reports about the Chinese security agencies exhorting the Northeast militants to forge a common platform of which Jammu and Kashmir militants and CPI (Maoist) would be crucial constituents to launch synergised campaigns of violence against India..."

The arrested PLA leaders are also said to have revealed that their outfit and the Maoists have since built on their intent of mutual cooperation spelt out in their joint declaration in October 2008 during the second Congress of the RPF/PLA in Myanmar. Dilip Singh (self styled Captain, Chief, External Affairs, PLA) in fact was assigned in March 2009 with the job of operationalising the liaison with the CPI (Maoist) to push their relationship forward. The note by the security agency adds: "He (Wangba) visited Jharkhand along with his deputy and met senior CPI (Maoist) leaders in April 2009. Based on an agreement during this visit, three PLA cadres imparted combat and communication training to CPI (Maoist) cadres of five States (Orissa, Chattisgarh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) for two months from August 2010 in Jharkhand..."

That this was a nexus that was actually working has now been proved with the security establishment obtaining enough evidence to ask the NIA to launch a full-scale probe. The RPF/PLA, for instance, was said to have provided TH-K-2AT wireless communication sets to the Maoists, more of which were sought by them in 2011. The Maoists had also requested rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) for carrying out attacks on 'enemy camps' with a view to capture an estimated 1000 weapons or more.<sup>15</sup> The note by the security agency talks of an advance of Rs. 15 Lakhs that the Maoists paid to the RPF/PLA for purchase of arms in 2009. The Maoists were said to have purchased a truck to transport such consignments from Imphal.

It was on 8 June, 2011 to be precise that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) ordered the NIA probe, on the basis of which the investigating agency registered a case against the PLA. Before starting its probe against the rebel group, the counter-terrorism agency informed

the NIA court in Guwahati that the PLA “had imparted training to Left-wing extremists in the mainland of India,” and therefore, they will start a probe against it.<sup>16</sup> According to NIA, some of the PLA members visited places like Rourkela, Kolkata, Guwahati and Champai in Mizoram since July 2010 to impart training to Maoist cadres.

Media reports quoting NIA sources said many PLA leaders went to the jungles in Jharkhand and imparted training to Maoist cadres for 39 days between 11 September and 20 November in 2010. The NIA has launched the probe under the provisions of Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The NIA has registered its first case against PLA under sections 120 B, 121 A of IPC and sections 17, 18, 18-A and 18-B of UA(P) Act.<sup>17</sup>

The NIA’s mandate on this case is to find out the larger conspiracy behind PLA’s alleged plans to “destabilise India” with the help of Maoists and other like-minded militant groups of the North-East. Apparently, the premier anti-terror agency has also been asked to conduct a probe into PLA’s nexus with China.<sup>18</sup> “A case (number 1/2011) has been registered at the NIA police station in Guwahati under Sections 120 (B), 121 (A) of the IPC and Sections 17, 18, 18-A and 18-B of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act,” news reports quoted sources as saying.<sup>19</sup>

On 21 April, 2012, a Maoist leader, Indranil Chanda alias Ajay Chanda, was arrested in Kolkata by the West Bengal Police.<sup>20</sup> He had connections with senior PLA leaders and was instrumental in transshipment of arms from PLA hideouts in Manipur to the Maoist strongholds in Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. Chanda was the one who had sent money to the PLA for supplying sophisticated arms and ammunition. According to official sources, the Upper Assam Leading Committee (UALC) of CPI (Maoist) was also constituted under his initiative.<sup>21</sup>

On 21 May, 2012, NIA filed the first chargesheet on links between PLA and CPI (Maoist).<sup>22</sup> The NIA chargesheeted three PLA leaders for allegedly supplying arms and ammunition and imparting training to Maoists - N. Dilip Singh alias Wangba, Senjam Dhiren Singh alias Raghunath and Kh Arnold Singh alias Becon.

On 28 May, 2012, NIA’s investigating team arrested PLA leader Ibotombi Singh from Gopalpur in Ganjam district of Odisha.<sup>23</sup> He had replaced N Dilip Singh alias Wangba (who was arrested in October 2011) in the PLA hierarchy and was given the responsibility of coordinating with Maoists and had gone to Odisha for that job.

NIA filed an additional chargesheet on CPI (Maoist)-PLA nexus on 18 December, 2012.<sup>24</sup> The chargesheet was filed against Maoist leaders Pallab Borborah, Indranil Chanda and Ibotombi Singh, who were all arrested in 2012 from Assam, Kolkata and Odisha, respectively.

NIA again filed a supplementary chargesheet on 31 July, 2014, against two accused persons namely Amit Bagchi alias Alok and G Jiteshwar Sharma alias Gypsy. Bagchi is the central committee member of CPI (Maoist), while Gypsy is a senior member of PLA.<sup>25</sup>

### **CPI (Maoist) – ULFA Linkages**

The first recorded meeting between the CPI (Maoist) and the ULFA was the one in October 2008 when Maoist leader Kishenji visited Manipur for a meeting with the RPF/PLA.<sup>26</sup> The ULFA, as mentioned earlier, was represented by Partha Gogoi, deputed by none other than Paresh Baruah. What transpired at the meeting (if reports shared by security officials are true) was indeed significant. Kishenji apparently wanted groups like the ULFA to stop attacking the ‘proletariat’ or people belonging to the working class (wage earners etc.). The Maoist leader must have had the serial killing of migrant Bihari workers and settlers by the ULFA in Assam in mind while calling for a halt in attacks on the ‘proletariat.’ The ULFA refused to pay any heed to Kishenji’s call. After all, the ULFA is not a pan-India outfit unlike the CPI-Maoist and it draws its sustenance from targeting symbols of the Indian State or people from the mainland who are soft targets but identified with the Hindi-speaking ruling class.

Later, of course, as events would unfold, the anti-talk faction of the ULFA did take the Maoists under its wings, obviously as a matter of strategy in the wake of the split in the outfit with a large group headed by Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa entering into a peace dialogue with the Government of India. More than anything else, Paresh Baruah was looking for force multipliers and the nascent Maoists on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh were the sort of allies he and his group was looking for.

### **Maoists on The Assam-Arunachal Frontier**

The Maoists are taking full advantage of the vacuum in the insurgency scenario in Assam. They have managed to have a firm hold in the region and have established bases in the Lohit and Lower Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering eastern Assam’s

Tinsukia district.<sup>27</sup> And this fact has been confirmed by a number of official communications. One such communication from a central agency under the Union Ministry of Home Affairs says that the CPI (Maoist) is operating in the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border in the name of the Upper Assam Leading Committee (UALC). It says the UALC is functioning with distinct wings for political and military activities under the command of designated 'political commissars' and 'military commander.'<sup>28</sup>

On 12 February, 2014, the then Minister of State for Home RPN Singh told Rajya Sabha in a written reply, "Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border has emerged as another theatre of Maoist activities. The outfit is also establishing separate channels in the North-East, particularly in Nagaland for procurement of ammunition."<sup>29</sup> He further said that UALC has been engaged in recruitment and training of cadres for the outfit in Assam and these cadres have been utilised in extensive propaganda against mega dams in Assam.<sup>30</sup>

The UALC is believed to have been formed in 2009-10 with 15 members.<sup>31</sup> The members were drawn from six districts of Assam, namely, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Darrang, Golaghat, Sivasagar and Jorhat. The UALC is active in eastern Assam and adjoining Lohit and Lower Dibang valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The key member of the UALC is Aditya Bora. He was a former member of the ULFA and also a former President of the Assam Students' Youth Organization (ASYO),<sup>32</sup> which is a frontal group of the Maoists.<sup>33</sup> He had later left ULFA and joined the Maoists. He was arrested in 12 February, 2011 in Odisha (Orissa).<sup>34</sup> He was in Odisha on a Rs 5 lakh contract to train Maoist cadres in Odisha and Jharkhand. His task was to train the rebels in guerrilla warfare against the combat forces.<sup>35</sup> He was later released on bail. On 18 August, 2011, he was one among five arrested by Tinsukia police and Army, but was released as the security forces couldn't identify him.<sup>36</sup> He is now believed to be based in the Lohit and Lower Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>37</sup>

Many Maoist cadres of UALC hail from Sadiya, a sub-division in Tinsukia district of eastern Assam. According to Assam Police, there are 21 Maoist cadres from Sadiya.<sup>38</sup> It needs to be mentioned here that Sadiya sub-division is one of the most under developed areas of Assam. The sub-division, with a population of around 1.20 lakh (as per 2011 census), has just one degree-level college and that too has only the arts stream; there are only three higher secondary schools and only one school has a centre for the students to sit for their High School Leaving

Certificate (HSLC) examination.<sup>39</sup> During a survey carried out by Centre for Development and Peace Studies, Guwahati, in 2013, it was found that 67 per cent of the residents in Sadiya have monthly income of less than Rs. 5,000 and though majority of the people are dependent on agriculture as their main source of income, only 33 per cent of them have their own agricultural land. Electricity connection is still not available in 13 per cent of the households in Sadiya and there is no health centre near the house for 58 per cent of the residents.

The extent of Maoist activity in the Lohit and Lower Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh came to light in August 2011, when arrested Maoist cadres said that they used to hold 'revolutionary meetings' in their hideouts at regular intervals and that such meetings were attended by 150 to 200 cadres.<sup>40</sup>

Following are some of the incidents involving Maoists along the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border areas:

- 26 July, 2012: Three Maoist cadres were arrested in Kaupatani village under Mahadevpur police station in Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>41</sup>
- 9 May, 2012: Four Maoist cadres, including a local commander, were killed in an encounter at Borgora village in Sadiya sub-division of Tinsukia district. Two Maoist cadres managed to escape during the encounter. The killed Maoist cadres included Siddhartha Borgohain, Commander, UALC, CPI (Maoist), Rajib Gogoi, Arup Chetia and Kamala Burhagohain. All the killed cadres were local residents of the area. Two AK47, one AK56, 6 magazines, 150 rounds of ammunition, three grenades, six mobile handsets, 16 SIM cards and several extortion notes were recovered from the slain Maoists.<sup>42</sup>
- 4 October, 2011: One Maoist cadre was killed in encounter with security forces in Ambikapur area of Sadiya sub-division of Tinsukia district. However during the incident, one 9 mm carbine and 18 rounds of ammunition were snatched by the Maoists from the police.<sup>43</sup>
- 28 September, 2011: Nine youths were arrested from different parts of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. The arrested youths confessed to be influenced by Maoists. All of them were from Sadiya in Tinsukia district of Assam. They said that they were entrusted with the task of mobilising locals against construction of mega dams in the Dibang Valley region in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>44</sup>

- 18 September, 2011: Maoists snatched four 0.315 rifles, 63 rounds of ammunition and four mobile handsets from forest guards in Dibru Saikhowa reserve forest in Dibrugarh district.<sup>45</sup>
- 17 August, 2011: Four Maoist cadres were arrested from Mahadevpur area under Namsai Circle of Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>46</sup>

These incidents indicate that the Maoists have become quite active along the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border. The anti-talk faction of the ULFA, headed by Paresh Baruah, also imparted arms training to Maoist cadres on the border with Arunachal Pradesh, across the Tinsukia district. This was revealed in a letter written on 25 October, 2011 by a senior Assam Government official based in eastern Assam to the then Assam Chief Secretary N. K. Das. The letter also stated that youth in the age group of 20-25 years were lured by the Maoists and the main pull factor for these boys was the lack of economic activity and employment avenues in areas like Sadiya of Tinsukia district.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Front Organizations**

The Intelligence Bureau (IB) has noted in September 2011 itself that the CPI (Maoist) has been engaging in activities in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh “under the garb of local movements, including the Mega Dam Resistance Forum...” In fact, the Assam Governor, Patnaik has also said publicly that Maoists in the State were functioning under various banners including the Mega Dam Resistance Forum.<sup>48</sup> Sometime later, Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi also made statements, corroborating what the IB and the Governor has been saying.<sup>49</sup>

On 29 December, 2011, Assam Power Minister Pradyut Bordoloi stated that dossiers were being prepared on Maoist elements infiltrating into the anti-dam movement in the State. “We are checking the background of the protestors. We have got information on some, and we are compiling a dossier on them. These elements are basically driven by Maoist ideology and their religion is to create disorder and unruliness,” Bordoloi told a news conference in Guwahati.<sup>50</sup>

Maoists have also formed frontal groups like Assam Student Youth Organization (ASYO), which was formed by Maoist leader Pallav Borbora, who has already been arrested by NIA on 3 June, 2012.<sup>51</sup> This group is quite active in the Sadiya sub-division of Tinsukia district. Some other frontal organizations formed by the Maoists are Chah Suraksha Samiti, Mahila Bahini, Biplobi Yuva League, Biplobi Sanskritik League, Biplobi Krishak Committee, Biplobi Kobi Goshthi.

Maoists have also published a magazine, Janagana, in Kamrup district of Assam.<sup>52</sup>

In January 2011, six suspected Maoists, including two women, were arrested from different areas of Assam’s northern Dhemaji district. They had been carrying out Maoist activities under the name of Brihat Nadibandh Pratirudh Mancha.<sup>53</sup> The arrested persons were Kishore Das of Maj Kuruwa under Sipajhar police station in Darrang district, Nibash Hajong of Silapathar in Dhemaji district, Dhaniram Das of Lakhpathar Koibartya village under Dhemaji police station, Diganta Gogoi of Borguri in Tinsukia district, Jun Bora of Chowdangpathar under Merapani police station in Golaghat district and Maneka Medhi of Pengeri in Tinsukia district. Kishore Das is said to have confessed having undergone training at a Maoist camp in Orissa for three months.<sup>54</sup>

In fact, Chief Minister Gogoi has gone to the extent of thinking aloud as to whether there was a Chinese link to the anti-dam protests in the State. On 12 January, 2012, Gogoi stated the anti-dam movement in Assam has been fueled by people working to further China’s interests.<sup>55</sup> Without mentioning any names, Gogoi said, “Those opposing big dams are actually working for furthering China’s interests. China is trying to divert Brahmaputra water but they do not oppose it. China will divert Brahmaputra water if we do not implement our right of use of water resources in the absence of an international treaty on use of water resources (sic).”<sup>56</sup>

### **NE Rebels Arming the Maoists?**

Reports say that Paresh Baruah, the ULFA’s exiled military Chief, has been a key supplier of arms and ammunition to the Maoists in India. Of late, of course, charges of the Paresh Baruah-led ULFA faction supplying sophisticated arms and funds to the Maoists in Assam and elsewhere in the region have been leveled by people in authority, including Assam Governor Patnaik.<sup>57</sup> The question arises: where exactly could Paresh Baruah (currently said to have made China’s Yunnan province his key base), be sourcing these weapons? Well, if reports are to be believed, the China North Industries Corporation or Norinco, a shady Chinese arms manufacturing company, which is a key supplier of unauthorized weaponry to insurgent groups and street gangs across the world, is also selling weapons to the Maoists through intermediaries. Importations of most Norinco firearms and ammunition into the United States were blocked during the Clinton Administration in 1993 under new trade rules, when China’s Most Favored Nation status was renewed. Concern

about their use by criminals in inner cities was the reason put forward for the prohibition. In 1994, some employees of Norinco came under federal investigation from both the FBI as well as the ATF after a successful sting dubbed “Operation Dragon Fire.”<sup>58</sup>

Another source for arms purchase by rebel groups in the North-East, which could eventually be re-sold to the Maoists, is the notorious United Wa State Army, a rebel ethnic minority army of about 20,000 soldiers in Myanmar. The UWSA is the military wing of the United Wa State Party (UWSP), and was formed after the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1989. The United States government labeled the UWSA as a narcotic trafficking organization on 29 May, 2003. On 3 November, 2005, The Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control listed 11 individuals and 16 companies that were “part of the financial and commercial network of designated significant foreign narcotics trafficker Wei Hsueh-kang and the United Wa State Army (UWSA).” The UWSA is said to be the largest drug-producing organization in Southeast Asia.<sup>59</sup>

The Maoists are also said to have established links with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isaac Muviah (NSCN-IM). On 9 May, 2010, then Union Home Secretary G.K. Pillai stated that the Union Government was aware that the CPI-Maoist had been in touch with NSCN-IM. He contended, further, that IM leader Thuingaleng Muivah had confirmed, “a few years ago, the CPI-Maoist had approached his outfit, apparently to help them with arms.” The meeting had taken place at the NSCN-IM’s camp in Hebron near Dimapur (on the Assam-Nagaland border). Reports also indicated that IM leaders attended a Maoist meeting in the Dandakaryana area in Chhattisgarh. It is also suspected that NSCN-IM might be training Maoist cadres.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

The threat has turned into a reality—Maoists have actually made its foray into Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and elsewhere in the North-East. What could actually sustain the ‘red rebels’ is lack of development caused by various factors, including poor accountability and leakage of development funds, and the area’s geography, the porous borders that the region shares with Myanmar, China, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. With frontline ethnic insurgent groups either on a ceasefire or in advanced stage of peace negotiations with the Government, the anti-peace talk factions of groups like the ULFA could use these Maoists as force multipliers. If an effective security and development strategy is not

adopted, the Maoists could well come to fill the void created by ethnic insurgent groups giving up arms and joining the mainstream. Instead of sitting and discussing an anti-Naxal or anti-Maoist strategy later, the authorities would do well to devise a development action plan to give youths in areas like eastern Assam’s Tinsukia district or the Lohit and Dibang Valley districts in adjoining Arunachal Pradesh jobs and livelihood options, besides providing connectivity to the far flung areas. Government also needs to fill up the vacancies in various development departments. Another issue is the police strength in the Maoist-affected areas. The police strength as well as infrastructure needs to be improved.

The entry and gradual consolidation of the Maoists in North-East has grave security implications. The region is already fractured with numerous ethnic insurgencies, and there are hosts of other issues such as unemployment, poverty, poor governance, under development, which can provide recipe for further discontent among the masses. A group like the Maoists can take full advantage of such situation and fully consolidate its position in the region. At present, the group is not involved in any major violent activity but if proper remedial steps are not taken, then the region is likely to witness a full blown Maoist insurrection.

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## Need for Early Restoration of the Derailed Democratic Process in the North-Eastern Region

**P. P. Shrivastav\***

The essence of Democracy – *Government of the people, for the people and by the people* – implies active and continued involvement of the people in governance: most importantly, in the socio-economic development. To bring about this imperative change in the perception of the people in our North-Eastern Region (NER); participation in their own Government, an innovative experiment was initiated by the North-Eastern Council in 2005. It included wide consultation with different sections of the people on their vision in the various fields of socio-economic development over a 15-year perspective, drawing up of area plans on the basis of such vision and continued consultations in their implementation, monitoring; and of institutionalization of this process of involvement through continuing consultations.

It started off very well and was enthusiastically welcomed by the people. But it also set the alarm-bells ringing loud among the strongly entrenched powerful vested interests within the system, for whom enhanced public awareness and transparency meant erosion of their arbitrary powers to divert specific projects and public funds to subserve their personal and political ends and financial interests. They managed to nip the process in the bud.

A brief account of how this happened is given below mainly to invite attention of the new leadership to the need to revive this process in developmental planning so that the common man:

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\*Shri P. P. Shrivastav IAS (Retd.), former member of the North-Eastern Council, has served long in the North-East.



- *identifies himself as a part of the Government that he has elected;*
- *derives satisfaction from his involvement with the planning process of his Government;*
- *appreciates that the Plans are in tune with the collective aspirations of his community;*
- *willingly shares the responsibility for successful implementation of the Plans and helps in monitoring of their progress.*

It is only this way that the spirit of democracy can be restored in the NER.

The idea was conceived in deliberations of the **Committee on Revitalisation of NEC** set up by the Govt of India in Oct 2003 (under the chairmanship of the author) to advise *“on measures for realizing the revised mandate and revitalizing NEC”* consequent on its empowerment as the statutory Planning Body for the eight States of NER in terms of the 2003 amendment of the NEC Act, 1971.

The Committee took into account the grievance that the people are left largely untouched in the official planning process; and that the *Plans, in public perception, are Government's Plans and not theirs;* and *hence the common man has remained largely ignorant, disinterested and unconcerned about success or otherwise of the Plans and has little stake in their successful implementation.*

The Committee also felt that such a situation was paradoxical in NER where the communities have age-old traditions of participative democracy and self-governance that are still practiced by the individual community but *not* shared with other communities (since they, for historical reasons, have all along been rival-claimants over the sole means of subsistence, viz., the land, the forests and the waters). Thus the sterling elements of the traditional value-system (*truthfulness; honesty; transparency; unanimity in decisions by consensus; community above individual;* etc.) have remained largely confined to dealings within the community: the norms in dealings with *“others”* (*which expression includes the Government and its agencies*) different, ranging from indifference to hostility.

The Committee recommended, *inter alia*, that:

- (i) Topmost priority should, therefore, be given to the task of developing a *‘shared vision’ as the first step* in inviting *the common man to become an active stakeholder in the process of development of his area and the community;*

- (ii) *An inspiring and practical NER Vision Document-2020 that must reflect the vision of the people, prepared by the people of NER* may be brought out and put into shape with necessary inputs from experts;
- (iii) *Clear objectives of socio-economic planning and strategies tuned to the ethos of the people and their socio-cultural traditions,* may be formulated;
- (iv) *A system of periodic interaction with the Civil Society should be institutionalized* by NEC to involve a wide spectrum of people to come together for regular consultation on regional concerns;
- (v) Wide publicity may be given to all plans and schemes in the located areas to enable the community to function as watchdog against exploitation, sub-standard performance and corrupt practices by individuals. This will also give them a feeling of involvement and a partner of their own Government for their development and welfare.

This strategy was accepted by NEC at its first formal meeting (12 April 2005) and found mention in the inaugural address in which it was appreciated that *“this Vision Document will be drafted with the involvement of different section of the People”* that *“it should be perceived as a People’s Plan”* which *“approach would also be in tune with the strong traditions of self-governance in the NE Region”* and that *“Intelligent involvement of youth, especially University students and faculty for various items of the Planning exercise, would give them a glimpse of the future being planned for them.”*

The exercise started with a brainstorming session by a core group of people from various walks of life from all the States at Shillong in May 05. Extensive discussions and intensive deliberations led to an *Open Letter* to the common man on the theme – *“Let us Dream: Let us think: Let us plan our future.”* It was translated into all the recognized languages in NER and widely circulated through State Government channels and also through Civil Society organisations. Thus, the people (long used to the traditional self-governance under strict overlordship-cum-containment strategy of the erstwhile colonial rule) were invited to offer their views and get involved in their own governance and become active partners in actualisation of their aspirations, through this *Open Letter*. People were mired to send their views and comments and share their ideas with the NES in the implementation of their vision.

The next step was to commission C-NES, a well-known local-led national-level NGO for the purpose. It partnered with over twenty Civil Society groups in all the eight NE-States. Their volunteers, duly trained and oriented, covered around 50,000 households with a carefully drafted questionnaire to collect their vision of needs, aspirations and priorities in around 200 blocks in all the eight States. The responses were compiled and discussed again in around 1000 village group-discussions, twenty District-level and 40 State-level workshops and seminars, with Government Officers and large sections of enlightened citizenry, including economists, journalists, academicians and others. Concurrently, a series of discussions were organised in various fora including universities, academic institutions with the involvement of faculty, students, alumni (ex-students) to engender a milieu for them to think, debate and respond.

The first draft of the Vision-Document based on the views expressed in these micro-level meetings carefully compiled and modulated with the views that emerged at Block and District and State-level meetings was ready in March 06. Work on this first draft of **People's Vision NER-2020** was done under the direction of Shri T. P. Khaund, IAS (Retd), an officer with imagination and drive; deep knowledge of the region and the regional ethos; and one with tremendous commitment for the involvement of the common man in this unique democratic process.

This was a crisp document focusing on the aspirations, suggestions and priorities indicated by sample responses of the *common man* from all the eight States. The only *add-on* to this was the bare minimum of the strategic road-map ahead with brief factual statistical data to show that the people's aspirations are not utopian flights of imagination, but practical and implementable documents. For example, thanks to the two famous Agricultural Scientists, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan and Dr. V. L. Chopra (the then Member, Planning Commission) with whom meetings were held at personal level, agriculture and allied segments were studied by the National Academy of Agricultural Scientists in close association with the scientists of NER and their recommendations were included in the Peoples' Plan. This simple document was to be circulated and put on public domain for everyone to see, offer suggestions and comments. We felt that it was important to ensure that the ***common man recognized his own suggestions, recommendations and aspirations in the document***, and related himself to the vision and then started taking interest in the Development Plans of his own

Government to further ensure that his aspirations were translated into reality. It was to be widely circulated among the stakeholders (including the State Governments) and discussed in different fora of academicians, experts, legislators and others, given the final shape and then placed formally before the NEC. The Planners at all levels were to be advised to take the people's aspirations and priorities into account while framing Village/District/State/ Regional Plans. It was with this idea that the document was submitted to the then Chairman for his perusal and approval.

It was at this stage that pressures from certain quarters, mainly hangers-on, middle-men, contractor-lobby and the like, stood in the way of approval of the policy of continued consultation with the people to spread awareness among them on the part of the final Plan that related to their area and interest, and the consequent projects, their implementation and monitoring. Presumably, since open abandonment of the consultation process would have led to criticism, the whole process got stalled in April 06 on the plea that this document should not be put on public domain to seek further suggestions and comments from the people, but that the task of formulation of the Vision Document should be entrusted to an expert body to make it more impressive. The Delhi-based National Institute of Public Finance & Policy (NIPFP) was commissioned to undertake the task of preparing the Vision Document with scholarly intellectual inputs so that it could impress the Planning Commission and others.

For the next many months the intense technical process of formulation of a professional 15-yr Plan went on in the NIPFP with occasional interactions with the bureaucratic set-up. Interestingly, those connected with interaction with the people on such an unprecedentedly massive scale and in reflecting the views of the people into the simply worded ***Draft-1 of Peoples' Vision NER-2020***, were totally ignored and kept out.

The first NIPFP-draft Vision was no doubt a scholarly document, very much suited to the environment and culture of Yojana Bhawan but one that would go above the heads of the common man of the North-East, who would not see the fulfillment of their aspirations that they had so hopefully expressed in their meetings on their Vision of themselves and their area over the next 15 years. In brief, a common man would not identify himself with it.

Meanwhile, a ray of hope came with the change at the top in NEC. The new Chairman, a person known for his sharpness of intellect, was

quick to see the basic shortcomings of this last twist in approach from highly people-centric to totally technico-academic – in formulation of the Document on NE-People’s Vision drawn up now in Delhi by Delhi-based experts. It lacked the regional flavour and hurt local sentiments. In the NE Region it was alluded to as *Delhi’s Vision-2020* and certainly not the North-East *People’s Vision-2020*. The disconnect of authorship with the Region was too obvious to miss.

The new Chairman made an effort to correct this distortion. In his effort to give local flavour to this work by NIPFP, he set up a Committee of a few eminent persons from the NER, headed by Sanjoy Hazarika, the well-known journalist-author and prominent pillar of Civil Society in NER, to touch up the NIPFP draft. Unfortunately, the time available to the Committee became a serious constraint. Maybe, the feeling was that it would be expedient to finalise the People’s Vision-2020 in double-quick time so that it could be released by a VVIP in a grand ceremony in Delhi. Meetings were quickly organised, generally one in each State, to discuss the latest draft of the Vision Document. Alongside, the Sanjoy Hazarika Committee did its best within this time. The final Vision-2020 Document was improved no doubt, but the basic objective – of continued people’s participation in formulation, implementation and monitoring of the Plan in consonance with the Vision, got lost on the wayside. The revised **Vision–NER-2020** was got formally approved and signed by Members of NEC in a special session of NEC at Agartala (12-13 May 08) and the final document was released by the Prime Minister on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July 08 at New Delhi in presence of a large number of invitees from the NE Region.

The ceremonial part of the Vision-experiment was perfect, but the spirit was lost. Revival of the practice of people’s active participation in the various stages of their own government’s developmental effort could not be achieved in the world’s biggest democracy, in a region where people’s participation in decision making had been a living practice since ages. A people-centric living vision was converted into a barren lifeless uncreative document.

Fortunately, this is not the end of the journey: let us try to correct the course even now. At the macro-level, Governments can continue to formulate Annual Plans following the broad strategies in consonance with this Vision-2020 Document. But at the micro-level the planning process must adopt bottoms-up approach, with village-plans drawn up in consultation with the people, forming the base of the District Plans, which in turn would subscribe to the State Plans and with gaps filled in

by the Regional Plan. Equally important is the step of making the community aware of the projects approved in consonance with the approved plans and in their implementation and monitoring in total transparency. That will perhaps be the best way to prevent leakages, diversion of funds, sub-standard work, time and cost over-runs and unholy contractor-official-politician nexus at the cost of the community. somekind of similar approach to planning in some respects is envisaged in the Panchayati Raj scheme also.

Continuous consultation with the common man, especially in the rural hinterland and with Mohalla Committees/Resident Welfare Associations in urban areas has to be resumed and continued year after year for development to be inclusive and for the people’s aspiration to be reflected in the planning process. Transparency is needed to discourage the *creamy layer* from siphoning off the benefits for itself through the contractor-bureaucrat-police-politician nexus, which seems to have become the norm. The common man and the community are in the best position to prevent and expose scandals, get the guilty brought to book and return men of integrity to represent them. This is the essence of democracy and is of crucial significance to the survival of the system.

Nagaland has shown the way with its *Communitisation* programme. It started off very well. Heavy arrears in payment of electricity bills in villages ended with the Village Authority paying bulk-bill for total consumption from the Village Transformer and realizing proportionate charges from the villagers (with marginal savings to pay for emergency repairs locally to ensure uninterrupted electric supply in their village). The evil of teacher-less schools with regular teachers securing diversions for side-business or engaging substitutes at a pittance for teaching on their behalf, came to an end at the insistence of Village Authority to teach well or quit. However, reports have started coming that extraneous influences manage to secure delays in release of funds to the Village Authority. This must be stopped for overall progress of the people.

Fortunately, the new Government at the Centre, having assumed office on the basis of an overwhelming support of the people, is committed wholeheartedly to strengthening of the genuine democratic process and prevent hijacking of democratic process at the hands of the vested interests and self-centred elements, whether in politics, middlemen, bureaucracy or elsewhere. Updating of the People’s Vision-2020 or going back to the first vision document, provides an easy and popular way of enlightenment and empowerment of the common man

leading to their becoming active stakeholders in progress of their own selves, their families, community, State and the Nation. How this was proposed to be done has been explained in detail above and it could be appropriately improved upon. There is hope that democratic process will be restored in the North-Eastern States and that will lead to the gradual elimination of corruption, nepotism, violence and progress towards prosperity through value addition of the local produce, for which there is a tremendous scope in the NER. With appropriate skill-up gradation and scope for productive entrepreneurship, the energy of the youth will be diverted away from the lure of extortion, militancy and insurgency and lead to a bright future for the Region. Above all, it could be the potent weapon against the perceived and mostly intellectual promoted sense of isolation and neglect.

## Unorganised Manufacturing Sector of Assam: Its Size, Structure and Growth in the Post-Reform Period

**Dilip Saikia\***

### 1. Introduction

The unorganised manufacturing sector represents an important part of the economy in many countries, especially in developing countries like India. The sector is regarded as the growth engine of many developing economies and is one of the fastest growing industrial sectors all over the world. In India the unorganised manufacturing sector has been experiencing stupendous performance over the last three decades, especially after economic reforms. The strategic role of the sector is perhaps the creation of a wide variety of gainful employment opportunities at a very lower cost of capital, together with its contribution in terms of production, income generation, exports and capital accumulation (Bala Subrahmanya, 2004). The sector also plays a vital role in growth of entrepreneurship and industrialisation in rural and backward areas through creating new small enterprises.

India's industrial scenario is largely confined within the growth of employment oriented unorganised manufacturing sector. The sector with more than 99 percent of the total manufacturing units, accounted for about 80 percent of the total manufacturing employment, around 25 percent of manufacturing value added and 40 percent of manufacturing exports during 1994-1995 to 2005-2006 (Saikia, 2011). The sector is not only huge, but also quite diversified, including a wide range of manufacturing units, dispersed all over the country both in rural and

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urban areas. Recognising the role of the unorganised manufacturing sector, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plans have assigned the highest priority to the sector for creation of gainful employment opportunities.

Assam is one of the industrially underdeveloped States of India. The manufacturing sector contributed only about 7 percent to Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) during 2010-11. The growth of the sector registered at 3.8 percent (at constant 2004-05 prices) during the same year (Economic Survey, Assam 2011-12). Likewise in the country as a whole, the unorganised manufacturing sector occupies a dominant position in the industrial scenario of the State. In 2005-06, with more than 99.5 percent of the total manufacturing units, the sector accommodated more than 83 percent of the total manufacturing workers in the State. Notwithstanding the vital role played by the unorganised manufacturing sector in the industrialisation process as well as creation of employment and fulfilment of socio-economic objectives in the State, the sector has not received due attention in the policy sphere and research community. Recognising the growing significance of the sector in the industrial scenario of the State, the present study makes an attempt to examine the structure and growth of unorganised manufacturing sector of Assam.

The economic reforms initiated in India since 1991 and the ongoing process of globalisation has thrown not only opportunities, but also posed challenges to the unorganised manufacturing sector in the form of an increasingly competitive business environment (Sahu, 2007 and Bala Subrahmanya, 2004). With the opening of the economy and internal liberalization process, its regions are not free from confronting with these challenges (Unni et al., 2001). Therefore, issue arises regarding the performance of the unorganised manufacturing sector in the backward regions like Assam as these regions have many difficult developmental aspects, such as poor infrastructure – physical, financial and social, low level of development, low level of industrialisation, etc. In this light, we analyse the size, structure and growth of Assam's unorganised manufacturing sector in terms of different indicators such as number of units, employment, value added and fixed capital in the post-reform period. We also discuss the pattern of factor allocation and factor productivity of the sector in terms of technology indicators such as capital-labour ratio and worker productivity. The rest of the paper is organised in the following sections. The next section discusses the database used in the study. Section 3 discusses the size and structure of unorganised manufacturing sector of Assam. Section 4 analyses the

growth performance of the unorganised manufacturing sector, followed by analysis of the factor productivity of the sector in section 5. The final section sums up the findings.

## 2. Database

The data used in this paper has been collected from the National Sample Survey (NSS) data on unorganised manufacturing sector, for three points of time, viz. 1994-1995 (NSS 51<sup>st</sup> round), 2000-01 (NSS 56<sup>th</sup> round) and 2005-06 (NSS 62<sup>nd</sup> round). These surveys cover all the units of unregistered manufacturing sector and provide a large variety of estimates for the entire unregistered manufacturing sector. In the NSS framework, the unorganised (or unregistered) manufacturing sector covers all the manufacturing enterprises that are not covered by Annual Survey of Industries. *Per se*, the sector includes all the manufacturing enterprises except (a) those registered under section 2m(i) and 2m(ii) of Factories Act, 1948 and Bidi and Cigar Workers (conditions of employment) Act, 1966 and (b) those run by Government (Central Government, State Governments, Local Bodies)/Public Sector Enterprises. However, these rounds differ from each other in terms of industrial classification and coverage, which leads to a few conceptual and methodological inconsistencies in different rounds of data. For example, the 51<sup>st</sup> round, 56<sup>th</sup> round and 62<sup>nd</sup> round data are based on the National Industrial Classification (NIC) of 1987, 1998 and 2004 respectively. Therefore, required adjustments to the industry groups under the NIC 1987 and NIC 1998 have been made, to make the industry groups comparable with the industry groups under NIC 2004. Secondly, some industrial categories such as 'repair services' and/or 'repair of capital services' are included in the 51<sup>st</sup> round, but excluded in the 56<sup>th</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> rounds; and some industrial categories such as cotton ginning, cleaning and baling, and recycling are included in the 56<sup>th</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> rounds, but excluded in the 51<sup>st</sup> round. These industrial categories have been excluded from the analysis in order to make valid comparison among all the three NSS rounds.

## 3. Size and Structure of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector

The size of unorganised manufacturing sector is huge both in terms of number of units and workers in Assam. Table 1 depicts the size of the unorganised manufacturing sector in terms of four indicators, viz. number of units, workers, gross value added and fixed capital for the post-

reform period. It shows that in 1994-95, the sector with 307200 units accounted for about 99.53 percent of total manufacturing enterprises in the State. However, between 1994-95 and 2000-01 as many as 28651 units have closed down. As a result, by 2000-01 the number of units has reduced to 278549, which is about 99.50 percent of the total manufacturing units of the State.<sup>1</sup> The period 2000-01 to 2005-06 has witnessed substantial number of new unorganised units— about 92333 units, as a result of which the number of units has increased 370781 in 2005-06, which is 99.53 percent of the total manufacturing units.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the dominance of the sector in the industrial scenario in the State has remained throughout the post-reform period.

The predominance of the unorganised manufacturing sector in the State is true in respect of employment as well. In 1994-95 the sector accommodated about 622814 workers, which is 83.3 percent of the manufacturing workers in the State. The number of workers has slumped to 498800 in 2000-01. This implies that there have been about 124014 job losses in the unorganised sector during 1994-95 to 2000-01.<sup>3</sup> This employment setback was largely because of the closure of as large as 28651 units during this period. However, with many new enterprises came up during 2000-01 to 2005-06, about 133651 new jobs have been created in the sector, causing the number of workers jumped to 632481 in 2005-06, which is 83.1 percent of total manufacturing workers in the State.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1: Size of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector of Assam**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>1994-95</b>	<b>2000-01</b>	<b>2005-06</b>
Number of Units	307200(99.53)	278549(99.50)	370781(99.52)
Worker	622814(83.30)	498800(81.59)	632481(83.10)
Gross Value Added (Rs. Lakh)*	36583(26.17)	43937(33.76)	64712(24.89)
Fixed Capital (Rs. Lakh)*	26033(12.98)	28371(8.69)	50849(12.46)

*Notes:* Figures in the parenthesis represent percentage to total manufacturing sector.

\* The values of gross value added and fixed capital are at constant (1993-94) prices. Source: NSSO (1998a, 1998b, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2008a and 2008b).

Thus, it is apparent that in terms of number of units and workers the unorganised manufacturing sector approximately sums up the total manufacturing sector in the State during 1994-95 to 2005-0.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the size of organised manufacturing sector in the State is meager,

with the sector accounted only for 0.50 percent of the total manufacturing units during 1994-95 to 2005-06, and about 16.7 percent of manufacturing employment in 1994-95, 18.4 percent in 2000-01 and 16.9 percent in 2005-06 (Saikia, 2013). Contrarily, the size of the unorganised manufacturing sector, in terms of gross value added and investment is relatively shallow. The sector's contribution to total manufacturing gross value added recorded at 26.17 percent in 1994-95, which increased to 33.8 percent in 2000-01 and then declined to 24.9 percent in 2005-06. The gross value added (at constant 1993-94 prices) generated in the unorganised manufacturing sector recorded at Rs.36583 Lakhs in 1994-95, Rs.43937 Lakhs in 2000-01 and Rs.64712 Lakhs in 2005-06. The similar is the situation in terms of investment. The sector accounted for about 13 percent of fixed capital employed in the manufacturing sector in 1994-95, 8.7 percent in 2000-01 and 12.5 percent in 2005-06. Thus, though the unorganised manufacturing sector accounted for more than 99.5 percent of manufacturing units and accommodated more than 80 percent of manufacturing employment in the State, the sector's contribution to manufacturing value added and investment is relatively meager in the post-reform period. This distinct gap is mainly because of the fact that the unorganised sector is extremely labour intensive and use inferior technology, which leads to, as we will see in a later section, abysmally low level of factor productivity.

Let us look at the structure of the unorganised manufacturing sector in Assam. In India the unorganised manufacturing sector is further subdivided into three enterprise types— own account manufacturing enterprises (OAMEs), non-directory manufacturing establishments (NDMEs) and directory manufacturing establishments (DME). As per the definition followed by the National Sample Survey (NSS), OAMEs are enterprises run without a hired worker on a fairly regular basis; NDMEs are establishments employing up to six workers, at least one of them being a hired worker employed on a fairly regular basis; and DMEs are establishments employing six or more (but less than ten) workers, at least one of them being a hired worker. Table 2 shows the composition and structural changes in unorganised manufacturing sector during 1994-95 to 2005-06 in terms of number of units, workers, gross value added and fixed capital, separately by each of the these enterprises type: OAMEs, NDMEs and DMEs. From the table the following points can be made.

First, a very large proportion of unorganised manufacturing sector in Assam has continued to be constituted by the OAMEs segment,

which are the tiniest self-employing enterprises, dominate in respect of each of the four indicators. For example, in 2005-06, 88.5 percent of the units, 74.6 percent of workers, 55 percent of gross value added and more than 50 percent of fixed capital in the unorganised manufacturing sector are concentrated in the OAMEs segment. On the other hand, these percentages are only of 10.3 percent, 18.1 percent, 31.1 percent and 30 percent respectively for the NDMEs segment and 1.2 percent, 7.3 percent, 13.8 percent and 20.1 percent respectively for the DMEs segment. The dominance of the OAMEs segment is discernable for the entire post-reform period from (1994-95 to 2005-06) in respect of all the four indicators.

**Table 2: Structure of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector of Assam**

Variables	Year	OAME	NDME	DME
No. of Units ('000)	1994-95	262.9 (85.6)	42.0 (13.7)	2.2 (0.7)
	2000-01	247.4 (88.9)	28.2 (10.1)	2.8 (1.0)
	2005-06	328.1 (88.5)	38.2 (10.3)	4.4 (1.2)
Worker ('000)	1994-95	489.5 (78.6)	116.3 (18.7)	17.0 (2.7)
	2000-01	392.5 (78.7)	81.1 (16.3)	25.2 (5.1)
	2005-06	472.1 (74.6)	114.4 (18.1)	45.9 (7.3)
Gross Value Added (Rs. Lakh)*	1994-95	21526 (58.8)	12472 (34.1)	2586 (7.1)
	2000-01	26197 (59.6)	10927 (24.9)	6813 (15.5)
	2005-06	35619 (55.0)	20132 (31.1)	8959 (13.8)
Fixed Capital (Rs. Lakh)*	1994-95	15483 (59.5)	9296 (35.7)	1254 (4.8)
	2000-01	15630 (55.1)	9061 (31.9)	3681 (13.0)
	2005-06	25459 (50.1)	15188 (29.9)	10201 (20.1)

Notes: Figures in the parenthesis represent percentage to total manufacturing sector.

\* The values of gross value added and fixed capital are at constant (1993-94) prices. Source: Same as Table 1.

Second, over time some remarkable changes have taken place in the structure of unorganised manufacturing sector. While the share of OAMEs in terms of number of units remained unchanged throughout the period, the share of NDMEs has marginally declined, which was gained by the DMEs. In terms of number of workers the share of OAMEs remained same during 1994-95 to 2000-01 and then declined marginally during 2000-01 to 2005-06, whereas the share of NDMEs declined during 1994-95 to 2000-01 and then increased during 2000-

01 to 2005-06, and that of DMEs has significantly increased throughout the period. In terms of gross value added the share of OAMEs has marginally increased during 1994-95 to 2000-01 and then declined during 2000-01 to 2005-06, whereas that of NDMEs has declined during 1994-95 to 2000-01 and then increased during 2000-01 to 2005-06 and DMEs has increased during 1994-95 to 2005-06. In terms of fixed capital, the share of OAMEs and NDMEs has declined throughout the post-reform period, while that of DMEs has significantly increased during the same.

Third, going by absolute numbers there has been overall improvement in number of units during 1994-95 to 2005-06, but a break up in the period shows that during 1994-95 to 2000-01 the number of units has drastically declined, particularly for OAMEs and NDMEs segments, while numbers of DME units has increased; and then during 2000-01 to 2005-06 the number of units has increased in all the three segments. But the absolute figures for NDMEs units in 2005-06 are lower than those for 1994-95, while in the other two segments the figures in 2005-06 are higher than those for 1994-95. In terms of number of workers, there has been improvement in the absolute numbers during 1994-95 to 2005-06 for the overall unorganised manufacturing sector, but except for DMEs segment, the OAMEs and NDMEs segments have suffered sharp decline in the number of workers between 1994-95 and 2005-06. In the OAMEs and NDMEs segments the absolute decline in number of workers during 1994-95 to 2000-01 was much sharper than the increase in number of workers during 2000-01 to 2005-06. Contradictorily, the DMEs segment has experienced significant increase in number of workers throughout the period (1994-95 to 2005-06). However, in terms of gross value added and fixed capital significant improvement is discernable for the overall unorganised manufacturing sector as well as all three segments during 1994-95 to 2005-06.

#### 4. Growth of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector

Table 3 illustrates the growth of unorganised manufacturing sector in Assam by enterprise types in terms of number of units, workers, gross value added and fixed capital for the post-reform period. During 1994-95 to 2000-01 the overall unorganised manufacturing sector witnessed an annual decline of 1.62 percent in terms of number of units. The decline was largely caused by significant decline in the NDMEs segment (6.42 percent) and OAMEs segment (1.01 percent), while the DMEs

segment enjoyed an annual growth rate of 4.1 percent. However, during 2000-01 to 2005-06 the overall unorganised manufacturing sector witnessed an annual growth of 5.89 percent, the growth was uniform among all the three segments of the sector; DMEs sector enjoyed the highest growth rate (9.46 percent). For the entire period (1994-95 to 2005-06) the annual growth rate in number of units recorded at 1.73 percent and barring the NDMEs segment, OAMEs and DMEs segments have witnessed significant growth.

The employment in the overall unorganised manufacturing sector has witnessed an annual decline of 3.63 percent during 1994-95 to 2000-01, but the sector has enjoyed significant improvement (4.86 percent) during 2000-01 to 2005-06. For the entire post-reform period (1994-95 to 2005-06) the sector has managed a marginal improvement (0.14 percent) in employment. Looking at the growth in the sub-sectors, the OAMEs and NDMEs sector have suffered a sharp decline during 1994-95 to 2000-01 and considerable growth during 2000-01 to 2005-06, but a marginal decline during 1994-95 to 2005-06. Contrarily, the DMEs segment has enjoyed significant growth in workers throughout the post-reform period.

Unlike in the case of number of units and workers, the unorganised manufacturing sector has improved quite considerably in terms of real gross value added and real fixed capital. The real gross value added of the overall unorganised manufacturing sector has recorded an annual growth of 3.1 percent during 1994-95 to 2000-01, 8.05 percent during 2000-01 to 2005-06 and 5.32 percent during 1994-95 to 2005-06. Similarly, the annual growth of real fixed capital recorded at 1.44 percent, 12.38 percent and 6.28 percent respectively during the same periods. All the sub-sectors have experienced quite considerable improvement in terms of real gross value added and real fixed capital during the entire period (1994-95 to 2005-06) as well as during the two sub-periods 1994-95 to 2000-01 and 2000-01 to 2005-06, except the NDMEs segment, which have suffered a decline in real gross value added and real fixed capital during 1994-95 to 2000-01.

**Table 3: Growth Rate (%) of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector**

Enterprise Type	Year	No. of Units	Worker	Gross Value Added*	Fixed Capital*
OAME	1994-95/2000-01	-1.01	-3.61	3.33	0.16
	2000-01/2005-06	5.81	3.76	6.34	10.25
	1994-95/2005-06	2.03	-0.33	4.68	4.62

NDME	1994-95/2000-01	-6.42	-5.83	-2.18	-0.43
	2000-01/2005-06	6.26	7.12	13.00	10.88
	1994-95/2005-06	-0.86	-0.15	4.45	4.56
DME	1994-95/2000-01	4.10	6.78	17.52	19.65
	2000-01/2005-06	9.46	12.74	5.63	22.61
	1994-95/2005-06	6.50	9.45	11.96	20.99
ALL	1994-95/2000-01	-1.62	-3.63	3.10	1.44
	2000-01/2005-06	5.89	4.86	8.05	12.38
	1994-95/2005-06	1.73	0.14	5.32	6.28

*Note:* \* The values of gross value added and fixed capital are at constant (1993-94) prices. *Source:* Same as Table 1.

## 5. Productivity of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector

Let us now analyse the productivity level of the sector. It is unanimously believed that the unorganised manufacturing units use very low level of technology, which results in low productivity, low profits and stagnation of the sector. This can be well understood by looking at the factor allocation pattern, which is expressed as capital intensity or capital-labour ratio. From Table 4 it is revealed that the unorganised manufacturing sector of Assam has suffered from very low capital-labour ratio. For the overall unorganised manufacturing sector, the capital-labour ratio (at constant 1993-94 prices) stood at Rs.4180 in 1994-95, which increased to Rs.5688 in 2000-01 and then to Rs.8040 in 2005-06. While the DME segment, which is relatively capital intensive within the unorganised sector, recorded relatively higher capital-labour ratio; the OAME segment, being the tiniest segment within the unorganised sector, experienced a very low capital-labour ratio. The real capital-labour ratio recorded an annual growth of 5.27 percent during 1994-95 to 2000-01, 7.17 percent during 2000-01 to 2005-06 and 6.13 percent during 1994-95 to 2005-06 for the overall unorganised manufacturing sector (Table 5). Within the unorganised manufacturing sector all the three sub-sectors have recorded significant growth during the overall study period as well as the sub-periods, the highest growth being experienced by the DMEs segment.

Although we are aware about the fact that worker productivity is a partial productivity measure and it presents only a partial picture of the efficiency in factor-use, in this study we have used this measure to analyse the factor productivity of the unorganised manufacturing sector in Assam. From the data presented in Table 4 we can see that the worker productivity of the unorganised manufacturing sector is awful.



The worker productivity (at constant 1993-94 prices) for the overall unorganised manufacturing sector was recorded at Rs.5874 in 1994-95, which increased to Rs.8808 in 2000-01 and Rs.10231 in 2005-06. Within the unorganised sector, worker productivity is lowest in the OAMEs segment. The worker productivity has increased in all the three segments

**Table 4: Productivity Indicators of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector**

Enterprise Type	Year	Capital-Labour Ratio (Rs.)*	Worker Productivity (Rs.)*
OAME	1994-95	3163	4398
	2000-01	3982	6675
	2005-06	5392	7545
NDME	1994-95	7990	10720
	2000-01	11172	13473
	2005-06	13274	17595
DME	1994-95	7377	15207
	2000-01	14587	27001
	2005-06	22202	19502
ALL	1994-95	4180	5874
	2000-01	5688	8808
	2005-06	8040	10231

*Note:* \* The values are at constant (1993-94) prices.

*Source:* Same as Table 1.

**Table 5: Growth Rate (%) of Productivity Indicators of Unorganised Manufacturing Sector**

Enterprise Type	Year	Capital-Labour Ratio (Rs.)*	Worker Productivity (Rs.)*
OAME	1994-95/2000-01	3.91	7.20
	2000-01/2005-06	6.25	2.48
	1994-95/2005-06	4.97	5.03
NDME	1994-95/2000-01	5.74	3.88
	2000-01/2005-06	3.51	5.48
	1994-95/2005-06	4.72	4.61
DME	1994-95/2000-01	12.03	10.04
	2000-01/2005-06	8.76	-6.30
	1994-95/2005-06	10.53	2.29

ALL	1994-95/2000-01	5.27	6.99
	2000-01/2005-06	7.17	3.04
	1994-95/2005-06	6.13	5.17

*Note:* \* The figures are at constant (1993-94) prices.

*Source:* Same as Table 1.

of unorganised manufacturing sector, except for DMEs between 2000-01 and 2005-06. The annual growth in worker productivity (at constant 1993-94 prices) for the overall unorganised manufacturing sector has recorded at 6.99 percent during 1994-95 to 2000-01, which has slowed down to 3.04 percent during 2000-01 to 2005-06. For the entire period (1994-95 to 2005-06) the growth rate was 5.17 percent. All the three segments within the unorganised manufacturing sector have recorded growth in real worker productivity during the entire period and two sub-periods, except the DMEs segment during 2000-01 to 2005-06.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper we analyse the unorganised manufacturing sector of Assam in terms of its size, structure and growth in the post-reform period. The findings reveal that the unorganised manufacturing sector plays a dominant position in Assam's industrial economy, especially in terms of number of units and substantial employment creation. Within the sector the OAMEs segment, which consists of the tiniest self-employed enterprises, dominate the scenario. Therefore, any policy towards industrialization in the State should consign utmost focus to the unorganised manufacturing sector and to the OAMEs segment within the unorganised manufacturing sector. The performance of the sector has been abysmal over the years. Many units have closed down during 1994-95 to 2000-01, especially in the OAMEs and NDMEs segments, while the DMEs segment has enjoyed some improvements. The OAMEs and NDMEs segments have also suffered substantial loss of workers, though the DMEs segment has considerably contributed in employment generation during this period. Though the sector and its all the three segments have shown some sort of improvement during 2000-01 to 2005-06, but this was not sufficient to compensate the decline of the sector, especially the OAMEs and NDMEs segments during the previous period. The unorganised manufacturing sector of the State continues to suffer abysmally low level of productivity. Therefore, in spite of the huge potentiality of the sector for creation of gainful employment the

sector was not able to generate enough employment opportunities for the growing labour force in the State. This calls for special policy attention for escalating the productivity level of the sector. Efforts need to be made for technology upgradation and efficiency in resource allocation for speedy growth of the sector. Since the State is very rich in natural resources efforts need to be made for exploiting the un-tapped resources in the State. Policies also need to be initiated for entrepreneurship development and skill-formation in the State.

The Government of Assam has several schemes for the expansion of the sector in the State. In its Industrial Policy-2008, the Government has declared several incentives and subsidies and brought some simplification in its procedures in respect of registration. At the same time various agencies and NGOs are also actively involved in the promotion of the sector in the State. The Central Government in its North-East Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy (NEIIPP)-2007 has provided a package of fiscal incentives and subsidies for the investors in the Northeastern states. In spite of such initiatives the State completely failed to attract sizeable investments, mainly due to the existence of several structural bottlenecks in the form of lack of sufficient infrastructures like power, industrial estates, transportation, communication, financial institutions, quality manpower, etc. Therefore, the State Government along with the Central Government should urgently make intense efforts for removing these infrastructure inadequacies in order to make the State a preferred destination for investment.

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## Notes

1. This decline is also accompanied by decline in the number of organised manufacturing units from 1461 in 1994-95 to 1388 in 2000-01. However, for the country as a whole, there has been substantial increase in the number of both unorganised and organised manufacturing units during the same period (NSSO, 1998a & 2002a and CSO, 1994/95 & 2000/01).

2. This period is also marked by increase in the numbers of organised manufacturing units in the State. At the all-India level, both the unorganised and organised sector has witnessed significant increase in the number of enterprises during 2000-01 to 2005-06 (NSSO, 2008a and CSO 2005/06).
3. This job loss in the unorganised sector is also accompanied by decline in the number of workers in Assam's organised manufacturing sector from 124885 to 112542 in 2000-01, about 12343 job loss in the organised sector. At the all-India level, though the organised sector has witnessed massive decline in employment, the unorganised sector has enjoyed substantial job creation during this period (NSSO, 1998a & 2002a and CSO, 1994/95 & 2000/01).
4. Between 2000-01 and 2005-06, the organised sector has also experienced employment gain in the State. However, for the country as a whole, the unorganised sector has suffered massive employment setback during this period, though employment in the organised sector was on rise (NSSO, 2008a and CSO 2005/06).
5. This is also true for the country as a whole. The unorganised sector approximately accounted for 99.2 percent of total manufacturing units and 80 percent of total manufacturing employment in India during 1994-95 to 2005-06 (Saikia, 2013).

## Resistance to British Power in the Hills of North-East India: Some Issues

**Amrendra Kr Thakur\***

“The legitimization of colonial state's authority was accompanied by the delegitimation of pre-colonial authority at all levels ranging from the pre-colonial claimants to sovereignty to lower levels such as the ‘native princes’, chiefs and the like.”<sup>1</sup> If we look into this part of the world, the North-East India, colonial state intervention was able to “delegitimise” not only the Ahoms of Assam but also other neighbouring hill polities including that of Burma (Myanmar). However, the colonial administrators and writers have presented the colonial intervention in this area, as the saviour of society and the action towards liberation of slaves as the greatest service to the humanity. The earlier generation of historians, which relied greatly upon the colonial sources, subscribed to colonial views in their writings. Consequently, the issue of resistance to the British rule in North-East India did not get the deserved space in the historiography of the region. This paper aims to bridge this gap. The first part of the paper studies the historiographical progress in this regard and the second part discusses the case of resistance of the Singpho and Khampti tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

### I

R. M. Lahiri writes, “The British seemed to step in as saviours rather than as conquerors. ... Assam was a liability rather than an asset. The Singpho territory had been overrun and pacified no doubt, but an

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influential number of the Singpho chiefs were still evading the protecting hands of the British Government. The Singphos were a predatory horde.”<sup>2</sup> Some other lacunae in this regard and the intentions of the British administrators and writers to project the Singphos and the Khamptis in all respects as an enemy of peace and prosperity of Assam, law and order in the region etc. have been elaborated upon on another occasion; hence unnecessary repetition is avoided here.<sup>3</sup>

The case of the Singphos and the Khamptis is not an isolated element. Before the formal annexation of the Lushai Hills by the Proclamation (September 5, 1895), the Lushais came in contact with the British Government and it wrought a considerable change in the Lushai life but the formal annexation accompanied by the Lushai administration “generated a new force which transformed the indigenous tribe into an educated and cultured race. It has already been pointed out that the aim of the new administration was to secure the welfare of the people.”<sup>4</sup> In the proceedings it is also recorded that “The new administrative set up was different from the Lushai system of Government before the arrival of the English.” According to Lewin “Their mode of government may be described as a democracy tempered by despotism.” The so-called paternal approach of the British administration is clear from the following observation: “The British Government ensured efficiency in the Lushai polity because the Superintendent was a philosopher, friend and guide always trying to educate the Chiefs into using their power well.”

It is not only the colonial records but the earlier generation of scholars have also echoed the same view. The English destroyed the big Chiefs in their fight against them and a large number of smaller Chiefs were replaced in their place. This led to peace and stability in the Lushai society. The sobering influence of the Christian missionaries also made a considerable headway in removing many primitive savage practices (like slavery, horrible funeral, raid, purchase of bride on credit etc.) of the tribe. The clergy forbade the marriage between the near relations and denounced the community sleeping of the unmarried persons. The sportive feasting and dancing gradually lost the popularity and the harvesting festivities got merged with the new festival, Christmas. The psalms and hymns of the *Bible* replaced the passionate tribal folksongs. The Lushais were educated and tamed. They gradually gave up their traditional life of the commune and became thorough-going individuals. The influence of the Christian doctrine took away the rusticity of the wild life and made them inclined to peaceful avocations.

Within a few years the educated Lushais became clerks in the offices, teachers in the schools, constables in the police force, and medical assistants in the hospitals. The frequent intercourse with the people other than the Lushais in the trade marts and other places broadened their outlook.<sup>5</sup>

The historiography of tribal resistance has another problematic area. It is the anthropolisation of the tribes of the area. They were described as the ‘primitive’, ‘cultural isolates’, ‘barbarous’, ‘head-hunters’, ‘criminals’, ‘opium eaters’, etc. The aspects of pre-colonial socio-economic and polity formations were fully dumped and they were analysed as a category of ‘undeveloped’, ‘uncivilized’ or ‘semi civilized’ lot. Consequently, the reactions were never treated as in its true spirit of the terms neither by the colonial masters nor by the early generation of historians. To them they were of ‘personal’ or ‘local’ in character. It was never assessed as a phenomenon of indigenous reaction protesting against the colonial penetration. It can clearly be observed that the British were forcefully penetrating into the hills, occupying the land and controlling the people. And we have resistance, or protest or rebellion from almost all parts of North-East India having the time span of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The people of Arunachal Pradesh wanted to keep the British at bay from the territories and not ready to accept the infringements of their rights in the hills or the plains. The problem has to be looked from this perspective too.<sup>6</sup>

The question of slavery abolition as a whole, to M. L. Bose, has been worthless to find a place in the discussion on British relation with the tribe in his book. Unlike his approach the abolition of slavery remained an issue of confrontation between the tribes of North-East India and the British. It is evident not only from the initial encounters between the two but also the subsequent moves of the British.<sup>7</sup> It is reported that Sibbom Gam and Seroj Gam in consultation with all the other *Gams* (Chiefs) stopped H. L. Jenkins from visiting their villages and even tried to detain him in a village. Besides, the outbreak of smallpox, the problem of slavery was an issue. Jenkins reports:

It must be admitted that some difficulty lies in the fact that nearly all their Ghams are large slave-holders, and suffer heavily and constantly from the escape of their slaves across the border into British territory. All the Chiefs feel a great deal of irritation against us on account of the extreme abolitionist policy that has been adopted of late years.<sup>8</sup>

In the reconstruction of the history of the tribal resistance to the British rule in the hills of North-East India another problem is the Assam-centric historiography in the region. The historians also heavily depended upon the records and writings of the colonial masters; resulting in myths and distortions in the history of the hills in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular. It also caused the lopsided growth of the historical research of the area. Even for the seminal *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, the land and the people of present Arunachal Pradesh have been almost an untouchable entity to the author; against the spirit of the whole project of the ICHR to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1972 of India's attainment of freedom. To quote "The book on Assam... comes alphabetically first in a series in which the role of legislatures in the history of freedom struggle and political change in the eleven Provinces of British India will be examined. The Frontier Tracts (present Arunachal) and the State of Manipur, which had some link with Assam, are however outside the scope of this study" (without any analysis and explanation of why outside the scope of this study). The author has negated the economic and political dimensions of historic relationship available and recorded at least from medieval period. Even during the "Planter Raj" the impacts of the legislations, administrative orders and military campaigns are quite evident on the land and people of Arunachal Pradesh; besides some socio-cultural influences too. The casual and unhistorical approach of the author towards the tribes of the area is also clear from the following: "The old aristocracy that had lost its offices of profit was the first to react violently to the alien rule... *The Singphos, a tribe on the Burma border, too raised the banner of revolt during the years 1830 – 31* (emphasis added by me). They were in touch with the organizers with the first rebellion and with the Khasi resistance leaders."<sup>9</sup> Situating the tribe into wrong geo-political position and even the time of the rebellion almost a decade earlier, the author has done more harm than good to the service to the historiography of Arunachal Pradesh. This work because of its otherwise high academic value would have certainly adversely affected the historical reconstruction of the region.

Another evidence of the problem of historiography is important enough to be discussed here. Basing upon the colonial records, H. K. Barpujari accepts the Singpho-Khampti atrocities against the Assamese population during the pre-British period and consequently has tried to show the British control of their territories legitimate.<sup>10</sup> The same incident has been described in the *Tungkhungia Buranji*, a contemporary

literary source, and therein the atrocities have not been indicated. Thus, the supposedly deserved harsh punitive measures against the Singphos and others are the creation of the British to justify their power in the hills.<sup>11</sup>

In a recent book, Imdad Hussain has studied the subject in a broader perspective. Though the case of Meghalaya is the main focus of his arguments and in the book, the examples from the other tribal societies of North-East India and Africa clearly show an objective evaluation of the colonial problem and response being the same almost in every society. He asserts that the historians have to provide "... a more powerful perspective on colonial rule in Assam and the hill and frontier areas, and the next to ensure that this finds its place in our national histories."<sup>12</sup> In the discussion on the resistance movements of the hills against the British power, besides the armed resistance, the studies on the constitutional methods adopted by the leaders, the role of church during the resistance movements and after, the role and contribution of native and indigenous educated elites, role of the press (regional and national), the freedom fighters/chiefs etc. from the other areas of North-East India, participation of women in the whole process have to start to avoid the regional and otherwise imbalances.

## II

The Khamtis and the Singphos inhabit the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh. These communities are the western extensions of larger communities residing in upper Burmese hills. The Khamtis were rice cultivators, traders, warriors and good artisans. They had their small principality. The Singphos were loosely organized under two significant Chiefs of Bisa Gam and Duffa Gam across the Patkoi ranges in Burma. Besides the fertile rice valley and the rich forestland, this area was rich in mineral resources such as coal, lime, iron, silver and petroleum. The indigenous tea-bushes and elephant-catching and trade in ivory tusk and elephants were other attractions of the area. The nearby forest also abounded in the natural rubber trees, which were tapped and the juice was processed for producing rubber. For colonial activities the new masters were in need of free labour and the area because of high concentration of slave population also became a hunting ground for the British. This region was designed to play significant role in British imperial-strategic and commercial interests when the British decided to cross over to upper Burma from this part of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Military occupation of upper Assam after 1826 brought the officer commanding the British troops in immediate and direct contact with the Moamarias, Khamptis and the Singphos. The operations against the Singphos and the Khamptis resulted, so far, in the liberation of over sixteen thousand seven hundred slaves, majority of whom were of the Assamese origin.<sup>13</sup> However, it was too much to expect of the Singphos and Khamptis that they would release those who were still at their disposal; for it must be remembered that the slaves constituted their main property. Without these their possession in the lowlands would be as valueless as those of their original hills. Early in 1825, the British informed four Singpho Chiefs that they would be allowed quiet possessions of their lands if they surrendered the Assamese slaves, recognised the British supremacy, and agreed to inform them of the Burmese activities on the borders.<sup>14</sup> But the loss of slave labour had impoverished the Singphos as the loss of the labour power.

In 1835 Capt. White observed that since the labourers could not be procured at the principal stations in Assam, the mitigated state of bondage was bound to prevail, whether it was prohibited by law or not. There was no chance of improving the anomalous state of affairs, unless and until the population increased, if some other extraordinary stimulus was given to increase the productive labour of the country. Slavery in Assam was not like slavery in Bengal or Hindustan; for in those parts it was possible to abolish a system of slavery or mitigated bondage altogether, because the slave-owners could out of the due compensation go to an open market and get, in exchange, out of the redemption money, an equivalent in labour. But in Assam, where productive labour was not easily procurable, it would be greatly detrimental to the interests of higher classes, and would be attended by ruinous consequences.<sup>15</sup>

The points highlighted and reported by White clearly demonstrate the complications in the question of availability of free labour; the interests of various classes of people involved in it. It is also apparent from the various reports of the assistance of F. Jenkins that they were unanimous in their goal of gradual abolition of slavery and other forms of bondage. However, they did not agree over the means to achieve the same goal. Jenkins after mature consideration drew up the following rules with a view to the future legal enforcement in the Province of Assam, which was never fully and honestly executed. Not only the proposed rules by Jenkins but also the terms of the agreement between the British and Singpho Chiefs of 1836 indicate measures in favour of

abolition of slavery and emancipation of slaves. The agreement mentions, "We agree to release and to cause to be released all Assamese Captives detained by us or Our dependents, such of them as chose to remain in Our village being at liberty to do so."<sup>16</sup>

The correspondences of 1840 add some significant aspects to the dimensions of resistance to British power in Arunachal Pradesh. It mentions, "It is this cause the abolition of slavery of irritation that frequently renders the Singphos on our frontier discontented and rebellious" on the one hand and "I solicit the favour of your early reply, as there are a large numbers of such deserters, with their women and children, claimed by the Singpho Chiefs, and who must either have a location assigned them, or be restored to the Singphos from whom they have deserted ..."<sup>17</sup>

While coming to the case of the Khamptis, the old Sadiakhowa Gohain died in 1835, and was succeeded by his son. At this time, there was a fresh influx of the Khamptis from across the border. The British authorities permitted them to enter in pursuance of a deliberate policy of setting warlike tribes along the border, so that they might stand against the Burmese. The Khamptis were, however, allowed to retain their privileges, such as exemption from taxes, and management of their internal affairs under their own Chiefs, as earlier conceded to them. But these concessions, from the Khampti viewpoint, were largely taken away by the forfeiture of their right to rule over the area. They also resented the humiliation of their ruler, the Sadiyakhowa Gohain. The release of their slaves by the British roused more bitterness. They saw in all these measures a design to impose tax on them and to lower their status to the level of their subjects.<sup>18</sup>

The establishment of frontier outpost at Sadiya was regarded as the infringement into the rights and privileges of the tribal Chiefs. The Khamti Chief since his occupation of Sadiya, had exercised jurisdiction both civil and criminal, over the Khamtis as well as on the Assamese who formed the bulk of his subjects. The wrath of the Khamtis considerably increased when they found in the newly constituted panchayats the preponderance of the Assamese. The usurpation of the authority of the Sadiyakhowa by the British could not but produce its inevitable reaction. This ran counter to the policy of Scott who consistently aimed at conciliating these warlike tribes to make them faithful allies against the Burmese or any other invader in that frontier. For fear of antagonizing the Khamtis, White left them un-assessed; but the fact that their Assamese pykes were brought under the direct control

of the government and were subjected to a money payment was interpreted by these tribes as a breach in the agreement. Unaccustomed, as they were, to the control of foreigners the very presence of the officer-in-charge of Sadiya and his active interference in their affairs, particularly in cases of slaves and bondsmen, produced in the minds of the Khamtis great dissatisfaction and deep resentment. The smouldering embers of discontent lay dormant to burst forth when an opportunity presented itself.<sup>19</sup>

The Singphos and the Khamptis became discontented and rebellious against the British rule mainly because of the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions of the area. They however, were not easily controlled and their frequent revolts continued to trouble the British administrators in this area. The hopes entertained by Major Jenkins that the eastern districts would remain undisturbed were doomed to a bitter disappointment. On the morning of 10 January 1843, the Singphos numbering about four hundred made a simultaneous attack on the frontier guards at Ningroo and Beesa, The rebels were repulsed at the former outpost with heavy losses; the detachment at Beesa surrendered after two days when their ammunitions were completely exhausted; its *jamadar* and *havildar* were killed on the spot and most of the sepoy carried into slavery. The detachment at Koojoo was also attacked although it was saved by the timely arrival of a party of sepoy under Lieutenant Lockett, all the Chiefs including Beesa Gaum and Ningroola who had hitherto been loyal were involved in the outbreak; the acknowledged leader was however Serro-la-ten, an adherent and supposed successor of Beesa Gaum. Captain Vetch, the Political Agent of upper Assam, hurried to Ningroo early next morning calling upon Lieutenant D. Reid, the Commandant of the Local Artillery, Dibrugarh, to join him there with guns and mortar; requisition for force was also made to Major Hannay, commanding Assam Light Infantry at Jaypur, and to Captain Smith at Bishwanath.<sup>20</sup>

It was indeed a rude shock to Jenkins to learn that even Ningroola on whom he counted much had joined hands with the rebels. The sudden and simultaneous attack on two frontier outposts followed by a report that Saikhowa was also threatened by a body of Khamtis led him to believe that there was a well organised plan of aggression in which the Tipam Raja, the Governor of Mougauing, might also have had a secret hand. To meet any emergency the Agent called upon Captain F.G. Lister, commanding Sylhet Light infantry at Cherrapunjee, to despatch two companies of troops and the Commandant of 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment

at Jamalpur to move two additional companies as speedily as possible.<sup>21</sup>

Feeling himself insecure, Ningroola surrendered soon after the insurrection and Beesa Gaum followed suit. Several Chiefs under Serroola took up their position at Tirapmukh near Ningroo wherefrom they were dislodged by Lieutenant Reid who had arrived in time with a couple of guns. On 22 January 1843, Vetch accompanied by 150 sepoy advanced towards Beesa then strongly entrenched by Let Gaum to connect with Lieutenant Lockett and Reynolds who had been directed to march there with detachments at Koojoo and Saikhowa. The enemy offered little resistance either at the breastwork thrown up at Karempani or at their stockaded position at Beesa. These were soon abandoned, but they were supposed to have been lurking in the neighbourhood. After a march lasting a few days through impenetrable jungles Captain Mainwarring, commanding the Second Assam Sebundis, succeeded in making a surprise attack on a party led by Let Gam, compelling them to beat a hasty retreat abandoning their stores and slaves. In the pursuit several Singphos were killed by the Doaneahs and the Nagas; the family of Let Gam was intercepted by a detachment at Towkak which made the Chief to surrender voluntarily to the Officer Commanding at Ningroo.<sup>22</sup>

Capt. Jenkins reported that the cause of the rebellion were three, viz., (1) encroachment on the lands and privileges of the Singphos; (2) the seizure and punishment by local officers of some members of their tribes; (3) the orders of the Tippum Raja who had the title of Chief of the Hookoom province of Burma. The Governor - General in Council, while reviewing the Report, set aside the last two causes and accepted the first cause as valid. As an outcome of an inquiry, instituted after the revolt it was found that The Governor-General in Council strongly felt that "encroachments upon the Singphos land and apprehension of further inroads upon their privileges" were the real causes of disaffection. The Agent was directed to give full consideration to these remarks and to report whether or not these were the real causes which drove the Singphos to revolt.<sup>23</sup> In the final report, it was held that the main reason behind the Singpho rebellion was the loss of their Assamese slaves.<sup>24</sup> Since there was no alternative source of labour in Arunachal Pradesh, the masters especially Chiefs were not ready to reconcile the damage to their socio-economic and political power. Hence, we can say that in the resistance to the British rule by the hill people of Arunachal Pradesh, the question of abolition of slavery and acquisition of their lands for colonial activities were the main reasons. The authorities in England never failed to realise

that the outbreak of the Singphos was the outcome of accumulated grievances and for which the local authorities were no less responsible.<sup>25</sup>

Thus we can say that the British power changed the pre-colonial socio-economic and political conditions of North-East India. Consequently, the tribes were impoverished because of an organized exploitation of their land-based resources. Though we seriously contest the Karl Marx's analysis of various aspects of Indian society, his analysis of colonial exploitation of Indians seems true. To quote, "The English East India Company, as is well known, obtained, besides the political rule in India, the exclusive monopoly of tea – trade. The monopolies of salt, opium, betel and other commodities, were inexhaustible mines of wealth. The employees themselves fixed the price and plundered at will. ... The treatment of the aborigines was naturally, most frightful in plantation - colonies destined for export trade only, such as the West Indies, and in rich and well - populated countries, such as Mexico and India that were given to plunder."<sup>26</sup>

#### Notes:

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## It is All About Respect and Trust

**Bijoya Sawian\***

The other day a friend of mine emailed me a FW that left a deep impression in my mind. The more I thought of it the more I am convinced that it is, most certainly, one of the many teachings of the elders that we have cast away and, therefore, left ourselves impoverished. It is a gem worth sharing especially when we, in India, are talking about understanding each other and integrating, of spreading peace, understanding and harmony.

An anthropologist proposed a game to the children of an African tribe. He put a basket full of fruits near a tree some distance away. Then he told the children that the first one who got to the tree would win the basket of fruits.

The children lined up and the anthropologist told them to run. The children took each other's hands and ran together. Then they sat together and enjoyed the fruits.

The anthropologist asked the children why they had run like that, all together. He said, 'I thought that one of you would have tried to win.'

The children answered, 'It is Ubuntu. How can one of us be happy if the others are sad?'

Ubuntu in the Xhosa culture means – 'I am because we are.'

Could we try to apply this to our lives, this simple wisdom of a small tribe of the "dark" continent? We, who belong to one of the most beautiful countries of the world with its immense variety. How long more will it take us to realize that this variety is meant to enrich our lives and not breed hatred and violence, divide and sever causing misery and havoc everywhere?

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'How can one of us be happy if the others are sad?' Indeed. In a society, however, where every advertisement, for example, which is bombarded on our senses, reeks of unhealthy competition and one upmanship this is not possible. The TV ad that says 'neighbour's envy owner's pride' speaks volumes about our psychology the ad that always used to make me cringe. We strive hard chiefly and only to outdo one another and not as a pursuit of excellence. Looking down on others is fashionable. One is not happy unless one is able to do that to some extent! That is the scenario prevalent in urban and semi-urban India. The culture that has seeped in and thriving is openly divisive at many levels and is far from one that encourages integration and harmony.

As we stand at the threshold of what many call the New India, I am not optimistic at all about integration. The most important step in integration is the genuine desire to understand each other and feel we are one. The first major step is communication without any pre-conceived notions about any community, class, caste, colour and creed. When we look deep into ourselves, we know that this is an uphill task and can be done only if we feel strongly about the need to integrate. Do we? No. We communicate only as much as is necessary to further our interests and certainly not to connect as one people, one nation. We do a bit of a show in various ways to prove that we are the most inclusive democracy in the world. That is all.

We are all talking about development and how far we can progress –materially. We are happy with the new government. Is there anyone, besides a few, talking about spiritual advancement as a government initiative? Not yet, but yes one is optimistic because the HRD Ministry is headed by an exceptional, dynamic and far sighted woman of substance. Besides the school curriculums one must think seriously about value education for the future generation – a generation that is so heartily fed on passing fancies not true values, information and not knowledge, mere power and not strength, instant success not true achievement, confusing greed for ambition and lust for love. Living in so superficial a world how can we overcome the problems that plague our country? How can we hope to integrate and work towards a new India that would celebrate its immense variety as the path to greatness and not a hurdle to be squashed into oblivion? Let us begin with the young at the junior school level. The awareness should come early for the tragedy is not only that the wicked are committing crimes but that so few good people are doing anything about it.

Look at the violence inflicted upon the north easterners and the women in the capital. It is a straightforward case of an angst-ridden society taking out its venom on the most vulnerable people around, who they consider "outsiders" and of course, the "weaker sex." Frustrated, unemployed youth stalk the streets waiting to take out their misery for they, too, are helpless. It is tragic and revolting. It is a huge, humungous problem which needs urgent and intelligent handling. Both the victims and the perpetrators need help. Yes, it is not easy to solve this problem.

At the heart of the problem lies an uneasy truth coiled like a serpent...

We are too deeply steeped in centuries old beliefs about caste, creed and gender, especially in North India. Who is better than who, who is the best is decided the day you are born. You can do nothing about it. The tribals know this – the poor educated ones who are enlightened to this fact and know where they actually stand used to suffer in silence. Used to. I have discussed this at length and woven it into the story in my novel, *Shadow Men* (Penguin Zubaan 2010). The non-tribal, excepting a few very evolved and far sighted individuals, did and do next to nothing to balm this grating phenomenon.

Of course there is hope. There is hope if we keep respect as the main emotion to be extended to each other. If we strive to do, half the battle is won: just respect and after that a certain understanding and belief that our strength lies in our innate differences and our ability to transform this into a positive asset and cash on it. What will soon follow is trust.

Why can't every Indian who goes out of his own State, for example either for work or pleasure should first make a thorough study of the new environment he is about to venture into? Customs, beliefs, food habits, way of life and, most importantly, what are the issues that the people of that area are sensitive about should be understood and dealt with. Understand their sentiments, idiosyncrasies and reservations. If this is done and worked upon with the seriousness it deserves, I definitely feel the problems of, for example, that the north eastern youth is facing in the capital will be halved and will slowly disappear. In the same way, people who are posted or travelling to the North-East must also be clued up about the area and the same issues. The sense of alienation and uneasiness that the officers in the government posted in the NE will lessen. The tourists will definitely feel the difference in the response of the local people. Then, living there or visiting for a while would

serve the purpose of communication and integration. This may sound simplistic but I am speaking from my own experiences. It is a formula that has worked! Every relationship needs compromises and adjustments based on respect for and understanding of one another to make it a success. Let us begin on this long trek keeping this in mind.

One of the three precepts of the indigenous religion of the Khasis and Pnars of Meghalaya is Tip Briew – Tip Blei which translates into "Know Thyself - Know God." It is believed that only when you recognize the divinity within yourself and nurture it, will you understand God U Blei, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Omniscient, imageless and formless. It is only then that you become truly religious and not a mere ritualistic worshipper. Each one of us has within us the human and the divine. It is this divinity that guides you on the path of truth and help you soar beyond the chains of *karma* and the illusionary world, *maya*. Recognizing this divinity within will enable one to understand life, the way the great saints and seers have done – a life where everyone is equal and a child of one Creator. It is only then that we will understand the depth and importance of respect for each other and for all God's creations animate and inanimate. This is the highest form of worship.

That is how far as we can progress towards integration...for a long time to come. "It takes the first step to cover a thousand miles." In the hills of the north east people sit and wait for that time to come. They look towards the mainland like a neglected child would look towards an aloof and uncaring parent. And women all over the country are waiting ...for those men to be reborn as women so that they may know the unimaginable pain and horror that they had to face in this life time.

## Can India Look East through the Stilwell Road?

**Jajati K. Pattnaik\***

### Look East Policy (LEP)

Look East Policy in the contemporary world order intended to secure India's foreign policy objectives with its Eastern neighbours based on geographical contiguity and civilisational ethos. As a precursor, disintegration of the Soviet Union brought a tremendous transformation in the global geo-strategic environment entailing innovative ideas in the conduct of bilateral and multilateral relations. As a fallout, globalization was used as a tool for the diffusion of knowledge and technology stretching de-territorialized economic order. India mooted structural reforms in the nineties to deal with the emerging trends and focused on robust economic diplomacy to bring more foreign direct investment, promote Indian investment abroad as well as safeguard its economic and commercial interests in regional and multilateral trading agreements.<sup>1</sup> As a corollary, regional and sub-regional arrangements flourished through cross-border trade and connectivity. The State-centric borders which were earlier treated as barriers for cross-border development became significant for cross-border ties signifying sub-regional cooperation. Subsequently, India's North Eastern region was incorporated in India's Look East Policy to get rid of the hazards of geographical location and the strategy was devised to build up the economic links and connectivity with Myanmar and other South East Asian nations to bring in cross-border cooperation and development.<sup>2</sup>

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India steered its engine towards the East to draw its optimum in realizing LEP. It became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN<sup>3</sup> in 1992 and full dialogue partner in December 1995. Moreover, ASEAN dialogue partnership was propped up to ASEAN-India Annual level Summit in 2002. The policy shifted from exclusivist agenda of economics to strategic and spatial inclusivity.<sup>4</sup> It focused on connectivity and economic assimilation building bridges between the subcontinent and South East Asia.<sup>5</sup> India signed an agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation with ASEAN in 2003 to expand trade, investment and economic partnership among the members; introduce liberal measures and encouragement of trade in goods and services having an ambience for liberal, apparent and smooth investment architecture; eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers on all trade in goods and liberalize trade in services; create a liberal and competitive investment culture to prop up investment between India and ASEAN Regional trade and investment Area; and take steps for increasing economic integration among the members of ASEAN and fill up the gaps in development.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, after six years of dialogue, India and ASEAN signed the agreement on Trade in Goods on 13 August 2009 and operated it on 1 January 2010. The agreement sought to liberalize tariff over ninety per cent of trading goods between India and ASEAN while removing tariffs on over 4,000 goods by 2016.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, India and ASEAN are also working out the parameters for an agreement on India-ASEAN Trade in Services and Investment, and the manifestation of it would lead to an era of free trade regime in India –ASEAN partnership.<sup>8</sup>

### Is Stilwell Road Significant?

The Stilwell road<sup>9</sup> is currently significant for cross-border trade and regional economic integration in the context of India’s Look East Policy and emerging free trade architecture with ASEAN. The road with a distance of 1736 kilometer starts from Ledo in Assam (India) and goes across Nampong in Arunachal Pradesh (India) and Shindbwiyang, Bhamo and Myitkyina in Kachin (Myanmar) linking Ledo-Burma road junction through Wanding and Yunnanyi to the city of Kunming in (China). The road covers 71 km in India, 1033 km in Myanmar and 632 km in China.<sup>10</sup>

Experts working in this field opine that the rebuilding of Myitkyina-Pangsau Pass along India-Myanmar border would

reduce the cost of transport by near about 30 per cent benefitting India, Myanmar and China for bilateral as well as multilateral trade.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, China has renovated its own segment of roadways through six lane highways from the city of Kunming to augment its free trade regime with the ASEAN neighbours. Besides this, Beijing is also looking ahead to connect Kunming with Singapore through three trunk lines traversing Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia.<sup>12</sup> In the event of these infrastructures are fully commissioned, then goods from Singapore can directly reach Nampong, Ledo and other parts of North East India through Kunming - Singapore Trunk lines and vice versa.<sup>13</sup>

Stilwell Road (Ledo to Kunming)	
Road	Distance in KM
Ledo (India)	0
Jairampur	24
Nampong	47
Singbiwityang (Myanmar)	176
Warazup	304
Myitkyina	463
Bhamo	596
Wanding (China)	816
Lungling	901
Paoshan	1049
Yongping	1215
Yunnanyi	1409
Tsuyung	1543
Kunming	1736

Source: “Stilwell Road,” Materials collected by the Author from his field trip to Ledo - Nampong Sector on 1 June 2013. Also Refer, Kishan S. Rana and Patricia Uberoi, “The BCIM Forum and Regional Integration,” *Monograph*, The Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, vol.1, 2012, [www.icsin.org/ICS/ICSMonographs/pdf/1.pdf](http://www.icsin.org/ICS/ICSMonographs/pdf/1.pdf), Accessed on 23 June 2014.



Source: “Map of Stilwell Road”, [www.europeanfinancialreview.com](http://www.europeanfinancialreview.com)  
 Accessed on 29 July 2014

### Viability of Stilwell road vis-a-vis Kaladan Multimodal Corridor

Kaladan multimodal corridor intends to provide maritime access to the landlocked North Eastern States of India to the Sittwe port in the western shore of Myanmar.<sup>14</sup> The passage which covers a total distance of 297 km starts from Sittwe to Paletwa by inland water transport (158 km) on river Kaladan and then from Paletwa to Myeikwa in India-Myanmar Border in Mizoram by road transport (129 km).<sup>15</sup> Myeikwa is being linked by roadways with Lawngtlai in Mizoram and Silchar in Barak valley of Assam being linked to other urban agglomerates such as Nagaon and Guwahati.<sup>16</sup> However, pragmatic considerations indicate that this riverine transport system would accrue benefits to India’s North Eastern region specially Manipur, Mizoram, Barak Valley, NC Hills and Karbi Anglong of Assam and would end the geographical isolation of the region giving an economic passage to Sittwe port ultimately connecting with ASEAN. On the other,

compared with Stilwell road, this riverine transport system might not be economically viable for Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and upper Assam. Indian Chamber of Commerce Chairman, M. K. Saharia said ‘Stilwell Road, if opened up, would serve as the most commercially viable road link and give an impetus to trade with Southeast Asian countries. Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project is being built by India in Myanmar more in view of its strategic importance and less for economic reasons. We need to have proper connectivity with Myanmar and, to my mind, opening Stilwell Road will be the most commercially viable way of doing so. It is an existing road that is also connected by the railways at Ledo in Assam. This would be an added advantage of opening Stilwell for trade.’<sup>17</sup>

### Viability of Stilwell Road vis-à-vis Kolkata-Kunming Corridor

Kolkata-Kunming corridor connects Jessore-Dhaka-Sylhet (Bangladesh)-Silchar-Imphal – Moreh (India) – Tamu-Kalay-Mandalay-Muse (Myanmar) and Ruili-Dali-Kunming (China), and this corridor would link West Bengal, Barak Valley of Assam and South Manipur (India), Dhaka and Sylhet (Bangladesh), Mandalay (Myanmar) and Yunnan province (China) in promoting regional cooperation. The question that arises here is, can this corridor accrue benefits to the North Eastern States such as Assam and Arunachal Pradesh? Can there be ‘Guwahati – Kunming Corridor’ as a supplement to ‘Kolkata-Kunming Corridor’? Argumentatively speaking, Guwahati-Kunming Corridor, if materialized, would connect urban agglomerates of Assam i.e. Tinsukia-Dibrugarh—Jorhat-Nagaon-Guwahati-Tezpur with Kunming in China eventually linking those cities with Hanoi and Singapore in an economic corridor. Further, this passage can connect the whole of Arunachal Pradesh through Trans-Arunachal highways or via Assam through various corridors viz; Ledo-Digboi-Changlang-Khonsa; Tinsukia-Namsai-Tezu-Hayuliang-Walong-Kibitho; Dibrugarh-Along-Tuting-Gelling; Dibrugarh-Along-Mechuka-Monigong; Tezpur-Seppa-Bomdila-Tawang-Bumla paving the way for promising economic corridors or clusters of sub-regional cooperation. Similarly, it can also link Dimapur, Kohima and other urban agglomerates of Nagaland via Assam through Tinsukia – Jorhat-Nagaon-Guwahati corridor. However, the success of this grand perception largely depends on how effectively India deals with its Chinese counterpart. Otherwise it would remain as a dream corridor for any sub-regional cooperation involving India and China in future.

## Perceptions of the Region

The academia, media and political leadership of the region have perceived huge prospects in revamping the Stilwell road for the economic development of North-East India. Prominent intellectuals like Sanjib Baruah have backed 'Kunming Initiative' in renovating the Stilwell road from Ledo in Assam to Kunming in China for regional cooperation.<sup>18</sup> Citing the works of Jayanta Gogoi, an eminent economist of Assam, Baruah reflected 'since Kunming is already connected with Hong Kong by an express highway North-East India, or for that matter as a whole could establish direct road link with Hong Kong if the Stilwell road is well developed.'<sup>19</sup> What is in fact required is to connect Pangsau Pass along India-Myanmar border with Myitkyina in Myanmar. Further, the road can be linked from Myitkyina through south and central Myanmar with Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia and Singapore ultimately connecting India's North Eastern region with the South East Asian countries.<sup>20</sup> Baruah observed 'the Indian Government seems less than enthusiastic about rebuilding the road. On the other hand, there is significantly more interest in building the road to Thailand taking a more southern route away from emerging Yunnan Northern Myanmar-Southeast corridor.'<sup>21</sup> Conversely, eminent journalist Subir Bhaumik has also mapped tremendous potentiality of Stilwell road and contemplated that trade in this corridor would strengthen the economies of both India and China. He remarked 'China has modernized its part of the road and its companies are doing that in Myanmar now. Only 71 km of the road falls in India — so, if the Chinese army uses it to amass troops on the Indian border for a surprise offensive or dump their products in a trade war, they can do it even if India does not formally open the road.'<sup>22</sup> He further viewed 'Economic interdependence is the only sure way of avoiding conflict. It is important for Delhi to push Beijing to change its structure of trade and bring down import barriers to ensure a more favourable trade balance for India. And to build the roads, highways and infrastructure that can bind the two most populous and fast-growing nations in the world to each other.'<sup>23</sup>

Political dispensations of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have also insisted to reopen the Stilwell road for cross border cooperation. Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi has shown positive gesture for reopening the Stilwell road. He said 'the road should be re-opened ignoring security concerns aired by various agencies because connectivity is vital even for security.'<sup>24</sup> Gogoi reiterated 'opening of the road would sure boost bilateral trade between India and South East

Asian nations through landlocked N-E and Myanmar.'<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Pradyut Bordoloi, Minister of Industry and Commerce, Assam has strongly supported the cause of rebuilding the Stilwell Road for cross-border economic cooperation. He has quite vociferously countered the view that if the Stilwell road was reopened, the region would be flooded with cheap goods from China accompanied by AIDS, narco-terrorism and AK 47s for the insurgent groups.<sup>26</sup> He further mentioned 'development is a pre-condition for peace – it is the key requirement. Today we are all honestly hoping that the Government of India will take notice of the combined view emanating from the northeastern region and we must be pragmatic about it.'<sup>27</sup>

Former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh Gen. (Retd.) J. J. Singh has also called for re-opening the Stilwell Road for North-East India's economic development. Singh said 'we need to focus on the opening of the historic Stilwell road that linked Assam, Myanmar and Kunming during the Second World War. Only a small portion of about 150 kilometers needs to be made motorable from Pangsau Pass to Shingbwiang. This road would connect Ledo in Assam with Myitkyina through the Pangsau pass on the Arunachal Pradesh-Myanmar border, and on to the frontier area of Yunnan province of China, a distance of about 600 kilometers. This recommencement of formal border trade will truly give a boost to the economy of northeastern States, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland and Meghalaya.'<sup>28</sup> Conversely, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Nabam Tuki has also appealed the Centre to take adequate steps for reviving the old Stilwell Road to prop up the Look East Policy for cross-border trade and economic integration between India and South-East Asia.<sup>29</sup> Justifying this, Tuki said, 'The pre-requisite for a meaningful Look East Policy is land connectivity and reopening of this road will help the region in manifold ways.'<sup>30</sup> He further opined 'It has been almost two decades since the Look East Policy was adopted and subsequently the *Look East through North-East* doctrine was conceptualized. However, the progress on various aspects, which were originally envisioned, like border trade and commerce, controlling cross-border movement of underground elements, increase in flow of information, cultural exchanges and people-to-people contact has been minimal, and in the absence of such progress, there hasn't been any tangible benefit for the northeast region in particular, though several years since we adopted this policy.'<sup>31</sup>

After carefully examining the viability of Stilwell road vis-a-vis other transport corridors and local perspectives/viewpoints, we may

conclude that India can expand the frontiers of Look East Policy through the Stilwell road. However, Government of India has to weigh the pros and cons before opening the Stilwell road for cross-border trade and economic integration. Pragmatic considerations suggest that India's security dilemma can be removed through back channel diplomacy and steps may be taken to transform the insurgency infested India-Myanmar border into a peaceful corridor through the spirit of goodwill gesture and proactive solutions. Popular aspirations indicate that it should be two way traffic for ensuring growth and development in the region. Our exports should sufficiently balance the imports from China and other South-East Asian nations harnessing resources of North Eastern region in flourishing sectors such as herbal, honey, hydro, horticulture, handicraft and handloom (six H) along with pharmaceutical and petrochemical products to expand India's export baskets in cross-border trade. Otherwise, North-East India would be a dumping ground for the foreign products and it would adversely affect India's long-term economic interests.

## Endnotes

1. Rajiv Sikri, *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009), p.222.
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3. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) came into existence through ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) signed by its original members viz; Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand at Bangkok on 8 August 1967. Later, the membership got increased to ten with the entry of Brunei Darussalam in 1984, Viet Nam in 1995, Lao Peoples Democratic republic in 1997, Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. The objective of ASEAN is to augment 'economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavors', develop 'regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law,' increase 'active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields' and uphold 'close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves.' See, "Association of Southeast Asian Nations," [http://www.aseansec.org/about\\_ASEAN.html](http://www.aseansec.org/about_ASEAN.html) Accessed on 30 June 2012.
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## Rammanohar Lohia and the North-East India

**A. C. Sinha \***

Rammanohar Lohia (1910-1967) was an unusual politician, who was highly educated, committed to the cause of the common people, and was proud of India with its past glory, religious traditions, ethnic diversity and geographical expanse. He had no hesitation in seating, conversing and sharing his social thoughts and political ideas with young and old, men and women, illiterate and highly accomplished scholars, simplest rural folk and sophisticated literati and, in fact, anybody and everybody. He believed in mass mobilization on the issues of common and public interests and he had no time to relax as long as he was alive. He was a restless soul, who was perennially travelling to distant and difficult parts of the country and sharing lives of the co-workers through the length and breadth of the country. He was a mobile dynamo, who was restless to reach each and every corner of the country with his brand of message for the resurgent India. He was a Gandhian, who did not feel obliged to be imprisoned in the creed of non-violence; he was a proud Hindu, whose life centered around Hindu-Muslim unity; and he was a Hindi zealot, who desired healthy growth of all the Indian languages. He began his political career as a Congressman, but soon gravitated to socialist ideology and remained a diehard socialist till the end. He was one of the founders of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), Socialist Party (SP), Praja Socialist Party (PSP), and Sanjukta Socialist Party (SSP) of India. He was one of most vocal critics of the Indian National Congress, the ruling party of the newly independent India and its popular Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

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In 1960's, Lohia expounded a political strategy of anti-Congressism, a joint and common front of all the Indian political parties opposed to the policies of the Indian National Congress, the political party in power in almost all parts of the country. The strategy proved crucial in 1967, when the Congress lost political power in most of the States in north India and 'united front governments' were cobbled by the various political parties strictly on the plea that they were opposed to the Congress Party. Alas, Lohia died soon in that very year in October leaving behind a void in public life.

Lohia was one of the few political leaders of the pre-independent era, who gave importance to distant, difficult, and otherwise ignored region of the North-East India. He inspired a chain of young and youthful political workers, who were proud to be Indians and willing to work under his leadership for the common cause fearlessly. Lohia himself undertook a series of journey to distant and then infra-structurally difficult North-East region; took up the regional/local issues as parts of the national agenda; organized the regional youth for the cause and tried to educate the national leadership on the problems of distant frontier region. For him, the Indian land must be inviolable and for that any sacrifice was considered worth it. In this context, Lohia's instrumental role in some of the instances affecting the region is worth recounting:

**Naga Freedom fighter, Rani Gaidinlieu:** In his visit to Nowgong in central Assam, Lohia learnt about Kacha Naga (Zelingrong) freedom fighter, Gaidinlieu, who was still languishing in jail in free India. This was the same young lady, who had championed the cause of a small Naga community against the British rule in 1920's along with her cousin, Jadonang. And for that, she was sent to jail. When Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru learnt of that, way back in 1937 on a visit to Assam, he had termed her as Naga Queen. Lohia immediately took up her case and berated the government for the lapse. And the result was that she was not only released by the earliest, but she also came to be honoured as a national freedom fighter and honoured as Rani Gaidinlieu, the Naga Queen.

**Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and his Gyanpeeth awarded novel: *Mritunjya*:** Lohia was an inspiring leader, who used to enthuse young people to explore the different parts of the country and produce literature in the Indian languages. Young Birendra Kumar came in contact with the Lohia brand of infectious socialism early in life. The young Birendra got a job of a school teacher in district of Ukhrul among the Tankhul Nagas in Manipur. That was the time; the Nagas had taken to the arms against India, though Manipur was not affected very badly at

the time. Birendra did not hesitate to join the job of a government school teacher in the interior of the hill region of the State. Incidentally, teaching in the schools in the hill region of the State till then was a preserve of the Christian missionaries of American Baptist denomination. When young Birendra reported to the locale of his posting, to his amazement, he found a number of young people like Rishang Keishing working under the influence of socialist ideology of Rammanohar Lohia. Very soon, Keishing was elected to the State Assembly, Manipur in the first general election held in 1952 and since then he has been either a member of the State Legislature or the National Parliament. In this context, it is instructive to learn that the longest serving member of the Indian Parliament is Rishang Keishing, who has been elected as one of the law makers for as much as six decades.

Inspired by the socialist ideology, Birendra wrote his magnum opus novel, *Mritunjya* in his mother tongue, Assamiya, for which he was awarded the highest Indian literary award, Gyanpeeth Puraskar. The novel veers around two Tankhul Naga characters with different political messages for the people: Rishang and Khating. First is a social worker, who desires to serve his people through political education of the masses, and other joined the armed forces to serve the nation by defending it from foreign aggression and then he retired as a member of the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS). Subsequently, Khating was appointed Advisor to the Governor of Nagaland and the Indian Ambassador to Burma. While Kishing held various elective posts in the State such as cabinet minister and the Chief Minister many a times, it was Robert Khating (popularly known as Bob Khating among his friends), who was instrumental in extending regular administrative structure to the Tawang, Kameng division in Arunachal Pradesh for independent India.

**Urvasiam, Policy of Inner line and the National Policy to Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh:** Lohia was an Indian, who took pride in Indian cultural traditions. For him, Indian independence should have ensured a cultural renaissance. He was strongly opposed to continuation of the terms used in the past by colonial masters such as NEFA, Mount Everest, Mount Austin Godwin, Dalhousie, and the like. For then the prevalent term, NEFA, referring to present Arunachal Pradesh, Lohia suggested an Indian nomenclature, Urvasiam. The term means north-eastern extension in Indian languages and at the same time linking the region to the Indian myth of dancing nymphs known as *apsaras* such as Urvashi and another myth spread in certain parts of the country that one of the consorts of Lord Krishna, Rukmini, was a Mishmi lass from Arunachal Pradesh.

Lohia's views on the Indian tribes were very much similar to that of the Gandhian reformists, who believed, possibly on their experience of the tribal communities from the Central India, that tribes should be assimilated in the fold of the dominant Indian ethos. And for that all types of racial, cultural, ethnic and social boundaries were to be obliterated. He noted with concern that the independent India followed a national policy of tribal integration with the national ethos, in which tribes retained/maintained their socio-cultural identities distinct from that of the national life. Lohia stoutly opposed the practice of seeking for entry permit under the provisions of the Bengal and Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 applicable to Arunachal, Nagaland and Mizoram. He considered the practice as retrograde, which continues to create a psychological barrier between the tribal communities of these States and rest of the Indians. This practice further encourages various shades of trouble shooters and foreigners to claim that these regions are the Indian territories in dispute/the communities residing there were not Indian ethnics. He wanted the region to be developed fast and join the rest of India on its course of social transformation. He wrote on March 23, 1963 at Guwahati: "While large scale planning for fruit growing over a Himalayan area, a thousand miles long and thirty to forty miles wide, is a matter of big policy, I suggest that small schemes of agricultural and industrial expansion be undertaken at once. Jhoom (slash-and-burn type of rotational) cultivation must be stopped as soon as possible, not necessarily by law, but by other really big inducements. A vigorous programme of social reform must be put through... There can be nothing so interventionist as the present policy of the government because, forcibly and by law, it keeps Urvashi into a dirty and stagnant pool, even dirtier than the rest of India" (Lohia, R: 2002:98).

The British had put Nagaland and 'NEFA' under the administrative control of the Department of Foreign Affairs and directly ruled by the Governor of Assam and not under the ministry of home affairs, a practice, which continued during the period of Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, who happened to be his own foreign minister. The very idea was repugnant to Lohia on the plea that if these were parts of the Indian Union, then why they should be placed at different levels compared to the other Indian States? In such a situation, the impression one gets that the issue of their being Indian is yet to be settled. Naturally, this provides a handle to some trouble shooters among the Indians and enemies of India to mount a counter argument about territorial claims. He had the same views on the continuation of the national tribal policy to keep the tribes of Nagaland,

Mizoram and Arunachal apart from bulk of the Indian population on the plea that they would be corrupted by the others, as if the Christian missionaries had not corrupted the indigenous tribal traditions. Lohia desired that the tribes' special privileges must be preserved for them, but they must not be segregated from the bulk of the Indian population. He was dead against the Tribal Panchsheel enunciated by Verrier Elwin and Pt. Nehru for the Arunachal, by which a policy of developing the region by 'rushing slowly' was followed. In fact, among others, Lohia made a proposal that various cities and villages from different parts of the country should adopt Arunachal and Naga villages as sister/brother villages and interact with them for social and cultural intercourse.

**Himalaya: Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal:** Lohia was a visionary politician, who saw Himalaya not only as a geographical expression to be shared with others, but also as a cultural repository of the Indian traditions. His Himalaya consisted of Kashmir, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Tibet, Burma and Thailand. He proudly quotes the great Indian immortal bard, Kalidas' couplet on the Himalaya from Kumarsambhava, figuratively describing the great Himalayan expansion and challenges anybody, and especially the Chinese, to produce similar literary piece on the Himalayas to justify its claim on the Himalayan region. Lohia declares that these are parts and parcels of the great cultural entity of the Jambudweep, which our ancestors had been invoking on all auspicious occasions. Lohia was all for people to people contact and brotherhood instead of the formal political levels of States. Lohia arranging funds for procuring arms for Nepali Congress' Mukti Yoddh against the Ranas, his chiding B.P. Koirala for his alleged favour to his kinsmen, his entreaty to Jaiprakash Narayan to reach Pt. Nehru to save ailing B.P. Koirala in Rana jails are some of the examples that he did not see the Himalayan region distinct from that of India.

Young Chandra Das Rai (C. D. Rai, a retired I A S officer and father of the present member of Lok Sabha, Prem Das Rai (P.D. Rai) ran into Lohia in Varanasi, where he was a student. Lohia reached for him and asked who he was. When CD told him that he was from Sikkim, Lohia asked him to organize people's movement against the local zamindars, the Kazis and autocratic king. When CD told him that he was alone from his State, prompt came the answer that he should not shirk his responsibilities to his illiterate and poor villagers as he was equal to a thousand persons. That small incident enthused CD so much that he went back to Sikkim with a view to do something for his people. And that was the time, some of the political activists from Sikkim were thinking of

making a political move. It was December 7, 1947 and the locale was Polo Ground, Gangtok, where three Sikkimese socio-political fora got together to form a political party: "On 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1947, all roads led to the polo ground, where the peasants of Sikkim were holding their first public meeting under the auspices of political parties. And on that day the people of Sikkim heard their first political speeches. And speeches were no baby talk...And people released their pent-up feelings by lustily cheering speakers after speakers....Appearing with these stalwarts was a young man, Chandra Das Rai, 24, from Namchi. He was asked to read the Nepali version of the paper, 'A Few Facts about Sikkim' (a description of the excesses committed by the ruler and his autocrat aristocrats), which he did with gusto, lacing his reading with witty remarks. The crescendo of applause that followed his speech marked him as a budding hero in the inchoate politics of Sikkim" (Basnet, L B: 1974: 76-77). In May 1949, the first five member popular government of Sikkim was formed, in which young C.D. Rai was one of the ministers on behalf of the Sikkim State Congress. This popular government was dismissed by the Indian Political Officer, Harishwar Dayal after 28 days on the name of the Government of India. But a grateful CD, then known as Sikkim-na Nehru, now 89, continues to fondly remember Lohia and his magnetic personality.

Nepal, Nepali Congress and its leaders such as B.P. Koirala, K.P. Bhattarai, Ganeshman Singh and others were very dear to Lohia and, in fact, he had directly contributed to their cause (Koirala, B P: 2001). The armed anti-Rana struggle in Nepal was fought with men and material support from the Socialist Party of India against the approval of the government of India. Role of Jaiprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia in that struggle was memorable. In spite of all that, when the occasion came, Lohia did not mince words to sound caution to inexperienced Nepalese leadership: "Politicians of Nepal should not try to be clever...Prime Minister Koirala and other Nepalese leaders say that Nepal has been under the influence of China and India equally. It is not true. Many Nepalese (including B.P. Koirala, the then PM of Nepal) went to jail in India's struggle for freedom and many Indians suffered for Nepal in the same manner. Why it did not happen in regard to China? It is obvious that in matters of language, script, culture, religion, physical feature etc., Nepal is akin to India...For the last many years I had not spoken about Nepal because Nepalese leaders of both the opposition and the government had worked with me at the time of the Nepalese rebellion against the Ranas, while other Indian leaders had either kept aloof or

opposed the movement. Yet the ideals for which we had fought have been forgotten, ideals of people's government and equality. India also is following an important and seemingly clever policy. In both the cases the reasons are the same. In Nepal, as in India, a few English educated upper caste people are ruling the country. Instead of the rule of the 90 per cent common people – Rai, Gurung, Dewan, Chhetri, Limbu etc., it is the government of the 10 per cent upper caste Nepalese. Until and unless the poor people of Nepal takeover the country, defence of Nepal will be difficult: (Lohia, R: 2002: 109-110). None of the Nepalese leaders learnt the above blunt advice, which only a person like Lohia could unhesitatingly volunteered.

It is difficult to bind a personality such as Lohia in the boundary of nationality, discipline of the party, or the written laws of the land against the experience earned through the struggles. Unlike most of the mono-profile self-seeking leaders, Lohia was unconventional in his approach, thinking and style of work. His biggest asset was his instant rapport with the masses through the length and breadth of the country. He was a visionary leader, who did not live for self-aggrandizement; rather he was an iconoclast in politics. He had an unshakable commitment to the country and its people and for that he was ready to make any sacrifice possible. Unlike men (or politicians) of the establishment, who clung to the chair and its privileges, Lohia was always on the move to reach the masses, learn from their experience, understand the common man's problems at first hand and reach the power to be for solving them. Along with all these, he was a thinking leader, who read, thought, and wrote on a variety of issues. He was one of the few national leaders, who had a vision for India, in which North Eastern Frontier region and the Himalayas had a unique place. In this year of his centenary celebration, one way to pay homage to him is to remember some of his contributions to the cause of the national solidarity.

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# Migration, Memory and Politics in North-East India

Sarah Hilaly\*

## Introduction

Migration in its broadest sense implies spatial mobility, which is as old as human civilization itself. Research on migration came to be institutionalised since the 1960's in the Western academia. The colonial states twin projects of state building and development led to the emergence of entirely new forms of migration, which were firmly rooted in the political economy of the colonial state and were highly gendered. Labour migration occurred within the confines of the colonies, in the emerging urban centres, mining and industrial sites and commercial farms became an important site for migration studies. The large-scale human movements at the behest of the colonial state, whether voluntary or forced, constitute an arena for the migration researchers. Researches on migration have focussed too on early migrations, in terms of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the Americas. In the past two or three decades, however, also the African dimensions of the Atlantic slave trade, "African slavery" and the "oriental slave" trade have been increasingly well researched.

In recent scholarship the concept of trans-nationalism has become increasingly popular as a way to theorize modern migration.<sup>1</sup> Migration and mobility have always been central themes in scientific discourse, during the early European expansion and early colonial encounters. Many of the ethnographic texts created categories in which the ethnic communities, both in Asia and Africa, wherein they were placed at a lower scale of civilization. Ethnic groups engaged in livelihood practices

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based on shifting cultivation were constructed as mobile which in turn was representative of instability and elusiveness. These studies sought to allude to the historical waves of migration in an attempt to explain the "racial" composition of African peoples and the distribution of language families across Africa.<sup>2</sup> In cultural terms, "mobility" or "migration" are not mere empirical categories of reference, but constitute a part of wider processes of the production of meaning and thus assume important imaginary and symbolical dimensions.

The exigencies of politics, economics and culture which mediated these movements across nations constitute the core of the study. Migrations and its memories assume a sacrosanct place among a majority of the ethnic communities in North-East India, which has witnessed successive waves of migration from Tibet, Southern China and Southeast Asia. These traditions in pre-literate societies are expressed through oral tradition renditions in the myths and legends. All of genres tradition constitutes a formal vehicle for transmission of culture, cast in rigid forms, enacted through a set of rituals, striving constantly to preserve its pristine forms. No doubt there is some loss in transmission, yet genres of legends which are enacted through priestly ritualised renderings are generally reliable forms of knowledge.

Therefore, in my study I would try to explore how among certain tribes of Arunachal Pradesh the rootedness to the current cultural and social geographies has a strong presence in their myths. The migration stories here are derived from exploring oral traditions, except those found referenced in historical texts. I would also try to look into the legend of recorded historical migrations in Assam and the mythmaking as a part of that process creating a special position in the mindscapes of the population as they evolved into a ruling class. Simultaneously, I would try and explore on migrations during the colonial period into Assam and how the rights to these people's memory is not allowed as they are demonised in their everyday lives.

## The Geography

In the recent anarchist treatise in James Scott's *Art of Not Being Governed*, North-East India is geographically viewed as a natural extension of Southeast Asia. Scott alludes to this region called Zomia as the place from where migrations took place into the entire north-eastern region.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of specific dates of migration substantiated by written sources, broad generalizations about the general pattern of movements are hazarded.<sup>4</sup> His whole thesis is an attempt to

view this vast conglomeration of terrains like mountains and plateaus was inhabited by populations who endeavoured to flee the coercive 'rice producing' valley states.<sup>5</sup> Within his schema the complexities of the migration which takes place over a millennia resulted in an incomprehensible ethnic reformulations and multiplicity in subsistence patterns over this area. The initial movements might have been along up a terrain, yet the subsequent movements could have been for a variety of reasons like – "competition with other hill peoples, shortage of land for swindden, intra-group friction, a run for bad luck indicating that the spirits were ill-disposed, evading raids and so forth."<sup>6</sup> The bewildering array of identities – within this ungoverned territory where historical documents on migrations are scarce to come by – is a result of the "mixing and reconstitution of the hill people in their migrations."

The spatial dimensions of Arunachal Pradesh comprises largely of mountainous territory straddling the southern slopes of the Eastern Himalayas. Bordered by Bhutan on the west, its territory follows the natural watershed of the Himalayas along the southern slopes of the Tibetan Plateau. At its extreme east, the tri-junction where India, China and Myanmar meet the territory, runs southwards along the older formation of the Patkai range, till it reaches the borders of the present Tuensang district of Nagaland. The valley of the Brahmaputra skirts on its south. There are numerous passes along its eastern and western frontiers which has helped population movements from both the north and the east, rendering it a melting pot of diverse cultural groups sharing the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. This is evident in populations displaying elements of shared cultural and religious affiliations with ethnic communities living on its fringes.

The Eastern Himalayas where the Arunachal Pradesh is straddled is home to numerous tribes. The current count is 26 major tribes and 106 sub-tribes as identities continue to coalesce as well as segregate. The tribes inhabiting the central portion of Arunachal are the Nyishis, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Tagins, Adis and Galos who claim ancestry from a mythical cultural hero Abotani using the nomenclature of the Tani group. Though they claim that there is an overarching commonality in their linguistic traditions, yet remains an awareness of distinctiveness in culture. Outside this there is the Mishmi group (Idu, Miju, Kaman) and the Akas, Mijis and Buguns who constitute their individual ethnic identities. The northern section is peopled by the Monpas, Sherdupens, Akas, Mijis, Khoas, Membas, Khambas and Nahs. The western section bordering Myanmar is inhabited by the Noctes, Wanchos and Tangsas.

## Migration Narratives of Arunachal Pradesh

The medieval sources from the Tibetan and the Ahom states allude to the presence of population pockets in present Arunachal Pradesh prior to the fifteenth century. The idea of tracing ancestry, of establishing roots and origins, is a universal concern with many patterns of expression. Largely Tibeto-Burman in linguistic affiliation the tribes inhabiting its central highlands trace their ancestry from a common figure of *Abotani*. He forms the central character of their oral traditions.<sup>7</sup> Linguistically, too, the *Tani* languages form a discrete group within the Tibeto-Burman family. With one exception, as the tribes of the region speak a Tibeto-Burman language, it is conjectured that their origins lie either north of the Himalayas, or east, beyond the Patkai Hills which separate Arunachal from Burma. Scholars in Arunachal Pradesh are divided on their attempts and try to locate these original homeland either in the Tibetan plateau in the north, or in the east, where northern Burma touches southwest China. The Burma/China hypothesis, an older and dominant discourse is largely derived from the writings of early scholars on Tibeto-Burman languages and peoples, which have found fresh focus among ethno-linguists. By the late eighteenth century, Calcutta based British scholars assumed the "cradle of the Indo-Chinese races," coterminous with the Tibeto-Burman people, to be northeast Tibet, from where waves of migration flowed over Asia, including the Assam valley.<sup>8</sup>

Memories of migration are strong among all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, and most people have a clear sense that they are not native to the region, and that they arrived from "somewhere else."<sup>9</sup> Almost all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have migration myths embedded into their collective consciousness. They encountered an earlier population in the area and the contest for space ensued. The previous settlers were finally driven by the Apatanis.<sup>10</sup> The migration routes are said to follow the north-south direction from the Tibetan plateau with places like Mongolia considered as the original homeland.<sup>11</sup>

Once a tribe moves to its current place of settlement they get rooted to the universe, which gets transmitted through their oral narratives in terms of myths and legends. The early spatial movements of the Apatanis are all encapsulated within discourse on the evolution of life on earth and hence in the realm of mythic time. It is within this mythic time that stories of how people found the way to their sacred homeland are located. As the tribe settles into the sacred homeland the oral narratives get assume rigid contours, transforming into a set of

rituals, the whole being carefully and zealously guarded to ensure preservation. Narrative and ritual in indigenous societies are as inseparable as spirit and flesh. Much traditional ritual recreates myth, bringing the story's power into everyday life. The myth serves in the structural-functionalist interpretation of Schöpfung as a "way of organizing history, so as to make sense of it for a particular community."<sup>12</sup>

### Migration Narratives of Assam

The ethnic community of the Tais – rice raising and water loving – who according to James Scott represented the first wave of migrants into the Zomia is my area of concern.<sup>13</sup> The Ahoms of Tai-Shan lineage migrated through the eastern passes on the India-Burma divide to upper Assam in 1228. The Tais according to Scott were distinguishable from most of the Zomia people as a state making people. The aspect facilitating of their state making credentials were due to the long practice of wet-rice cultivation, the social structure of autocratic rule, military prowess and a world religion. The Tais being the most numerous were spread across large swathes of valleys as the Thai, lowland Lao, Shan of Burma and the Zhuang of Burma and various related groups all the way to Assam.<sup>14</sup>

Though spread across varied landscape in Southeast Asia, the Tais who were known as Ahoms in the Brahmaputra valley had their myths. Their early pre-state, history were encapsulated in their myths and legends in their early chronicles called *Buranjis*. The cosmological story of genesis forms its core. The narrative weaves its way through the emergence of a supreme being *Phra* from whose body emerged a being, in the form of a crab and subsequently all life forms that roamed the earth.<sup>15</sup> The story of the destruction of like forms in a deluge and fire, and the survival of the eastern branch of the community which flourished forms the second narrative.

The traditions mention of all life forms then being entrapped inside a gourd, pleading to the deity *Lengdon* to release them from captivity. Here there is a clear overlap of within the realm of the spirits and humans. *Lengdon* then sent his son Aiphātān to strike the gourd by lightning to break it open. Every time he aimed at a spot on the gourd it got directed at particular species' who entreated him to aim elsewhere. An old man Thāophiling offered to sacrifice his life for other fellow creatures which Aiphālān followed. Aiphālān then took upon himself the task of teaching men different occupations as well as the animals to

support themselves. The third strand of the narrative signifies the segregation of the spiritual and human worlds, an era when possession of land and defining of occupations for livelihood occurred. Though *Lengdon* was the primary deity, but the sacrificial act of Thāophiling elevated him to the status of a deity too.<sup>16</sup>

The origin myths of the Ahoms closely linked to the Shan legends in upper Burma. Since the Tais in their state-making enterprise were incorporated within the fold of Brahminical ideology at a particular juncture in state-making, there occurred a distinct enmeshing in the origin myths with Hindu legends. The progenitor of *Lengdon* named Thenkam was asked to make his sojourn to the earth and establish a kingdom there. On his refusal he asked his younger sons Khunlung and Khunlai to proceed. He gave them an ideal of *Somdeo*, a *Hengdan* (magical sword), two drums for invoking the divine and four cocks to be examined for omens. While the elder one was to be the King, the younger was to be his Councillor. Descending with the aid of a golden chain they emerged on the earth at a place called Mungrimungram – the first settlement.<sup>17</sup> The rest of the legend traces the journey of the two brothers, their segregation, creating a new settlement at Mungkhmunjao by Khunlai. A genealogy tracing origin from Khunlung of over three centuries elapses according to tradition till they reach the Assam. The founder of the Ahom state Sukhapa entered Assam following a dispute with brother, the ruler of Magaung in Burma was assigned the chosen status for possessing the idol of *Somdeo*, representing the original sacred link between the creator and the Ahoms. The cosmologies therefore marks a move from a tribal social order to a feudal one.

Sacredness is generally located in and defined by office and status in a society. In such cases the role and function of the Chief or King carries a sacred meaning because it is seen as an imitation of a divine model, which is generally narrated in a cultural myth; it may also be thought to possess divine power. Offices and functions of this kind are usually hereditary and are not dependent on any specific or unique personality structure in the individual. The legends through its different layers meanders across a variety of landscapes linking the primary deity to the chosen people and assigning a sacred position to its rulers. The Ahoms pride in their links to sacred landscape and their mandate to rule a land where there was a power vacuum. In spite of not being natives to Assam the Tai – Ahoms with a small population migrated across the Patkai and initially entrenched themselves in the south-eastern corner of Assam. Consequent to two centuries of assimilation of

peripheral communities, the state-making process was set in motion with the ideology of Hinduism permeating all aspects of their socialisation and consequent abandoning of the Tai identity. Adoption of a new religion altered their original affiliations largely represented by absorption of all its elements and consequent Assamisation.

There is a great pride in their historical tradition of chronicling and their dominance amidst other state formations in their neighbourhood. The fact that the memory of their migration is distinctly chronicled, attempts are made to represent them as unique. The incorporation of the larger identity of the Ahoms – though as the ruling class they retained their distinct identity – with the dominant linguistic and cultural aspects of the existing population, led to their valorisation in the annals of the region for unique state-making skills. There were migrations of their cognate groups like Aitons, Khamjangs, Phakes, Khamptis into Assam continued till the late eighteenth century. Though territoriality was substantially fixed, yet these migrations were not viewed as threats to the State, to the social order and its resources.

### **The Politics of Memory**

The legends are just referred to, as part of an ongoing conversation, in fragments, as an anecdote of oral history. The migration myths are kept alive through their renditions in funerary rites of the belief that the souls of the dead must be led back through time and space to the supposed tribal nidus, the abode of the original patriarch transferred to the spirit world from which all mankind originally came. The origin myths and the migration legends link communities to a sacred landscape, where their ancestors emerged either from the bowels of the earth or descended from heaven. Though abandonment of an original homeland in the contemporary world is associated with the alienation of the self, on the contrary for tribes it means the creation of shared identity in kinship.

It is in this context that I wish to view these narratives as a site of the production of memory. In the process of remembering the details of the past, people do remember certain kinds of knowledge about kinship in considerable detail though it gets altered in transmission. There are variations of migration myths are found in communities, yet the essence remains unchanged. From this point of view, memory becomes the means by which the past is acknowledged and advice is transmitted; an instance where people reconfigure their subjectivities and the bonds of belonging that connect them, their ancestors and the physical world.<sup>18</sup>

The practice of both remembering and forgetting represents is therefore a politics of people's own culture of relatedness. Sacralising memory involves an intertwining of ancestral presence, spiritual power and totemic landscape.

Around 1963 the Lisus followed the migration routes, which circled the Great Snow Mountains either to the west, through the easily travelled river trenches of the Salween, Mekong, Yangtze or Yalung rivers to enter Arunachal Pradesh. The legends talk of the community having entered Arunachal Pradesh in search of musk deer and land for agriculture. Batches of the same community entered this region after 1965 in various batches, numbering between five to six thousands, settling along the Burma-India divide at the Vijayanagar.<sup>19</sup> Though they are considered to be citizens of India and because of the remote status of the area are provided with essentials through airlifting. Alternately known as Yobins they are not enjoying the Scheduled Tribe status enjoyed by all communities within the State. The debate among the public rages as to whether a sharing of their resources in terms of their constitutional status should be permitted. Another argument is that their migrations took place after territoriality was defined by the colonial state and the post-colonial state. Since the tribes here had migrated in historical time and have no memories of it except mediated by their sanctified myths so their claims on the geography of Arunachal Pradesh is legitimate. As Lisu migration are post territorialisation by the states hence their claims are contentious.

In the case of Assam, a small group of migrants formed a state and practically culturally assimilated into the dominant religious and linguistic affiliations. Hence, their status is highly sanctified, though during colonial rule the Ahoms became marginal in the political space. Within the boundaries of the nation state the marginality of the community continues evident from recent moves by these mediaeval state-makers for a reserved status under the Indian Constitution. If we again look at the discourse of nationalism in Assam, it is directed against migration of peasants of East Bengal who migrated in large numbers. As they were linguistically, culturally and by faith distinct from the Assamese population, hence all ills pervading the society of Assam is attributed to them. The demographic alteration on account of such migrations and the contestation for resources continues to fire the imagination of the people. An entire galvanisation in the form of the Assam movement in 1979 against "foreigners" has been against this human movement in the colonial period. The issue of immigration

continues to permeate all political and social discourse to this day. It is not that migration of peasantry had not taken place in other parts of India under the colony. Yet here the recentness of this migration contrasted to historical and thus sanctified migration of communities from various regions of Southeast Asia makes it a 'politics of memory.' The migration of Khamptis in the late eighteenth century is not considered within the discourse of usurpation of resources though the Ahom state had substantially territorialised.

On the other hand the later migrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century from the districts of Eastern Bengal are not allowed the status as diasporic communities. They are unable to essentialise their identity in the newer space where again and again despite their contributions to the state and early identifications in the censuses as neo-Assamese, is a constant tale of survival insecurity and trauma. It is through these cases that wish to show how memory becomes a site of politics. The second level I wish to point to is that territorialisation, a core of state-making serves as an instrument for the claims and counter claims of memory.

## Notes

\*\*This is a revised version of a paper presented at an International Conference on "Culture, Politics and Economics of South Asian Migration" organised by the Indian Formation, University of Delhi, 27<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> November, 2009.

1. Arjun Appadurai and Saskia Sassen have begun to examine this transnational movement of people in more global contexts.
2. These "great migrations" particularly the "Bantu expansion" and the (putative) north-south migration of "Hamites" – were very much imagined along the model of the "Völkerwanderung" the migration of Germanic tribes into the Roman Empire and closely linked to contemporary diffusionist theories about cultural change as well general ideas about race shaped by "scientific racism" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Willem van Schendel in an article published in the geography journal *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Vol. 20, 6, 2002, has named it Zomia. A term for highlander to several related Tibeto-Burman languages in the India-Bangladesh - Burma border area. 'Zo' in relational term means "remote" and 'Mi' means the "people".
4. The first movement to the 'shatter zones' according to James Scott was of the rice raising, water-loving, Tai tribes and the second movement of mountain roaming, fire-field or shifting agriculturists. In course of time they adapted to the mountain environment, developing social structures and subsistence routines to avoid incorporation to the states.

5. James Scott, *The Art of not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009, p.3.
6. Ibid, p.141.
7. Legendary characters are usually human, or anthropomorphic with superhuman origins.
8. Stuart Blackburn, *Memories of Migration: Notes on Legends and Beads in Arunachal Pradesh, India*, in *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 25/26: 15-60, 2003/2004, p.15.
9. Ibid.
10. Tage Habung, *Gorra: A Socio-Religious Institution of the Apatanis*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Rajiv Gandhi University, 2009, pp. 20-22.
11. Ibid.
12. Schöpflin, George: *The Nature of Myth –Some Theoretical Aspects*, In: Schwandner Sievers, Stephanie and Bernd J. Fischer (Eds.): *Albanian Identities – Myth and History*, Bloomington 2002:26.
13. James Scott, op.cit., p.139.
14. Ibid.
15. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Bina Library, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reprint, Guwahati, 2008, p.72.
16. Ibid, p.74.
17. Ibid, p.76.
18. In the specific context of some Mapuche families who decided to recover lands in Argentinean Patagonia that were disputed by the Benetton firm, memory became a central subject of reflection among those involved. The theoretical implications of two main demands of collective memory in the local arena: the truth about history and autonomy in the practice of remembering and forgetting in order to create people's own culture of relatedness.
19. J.N. Chowdhury, *Arunachal Pradesh: From Frontier Tracts to Union Territory*, Cosmo Publication, New Delhi, 1983, p.308.



# The Past as Present: Partition in Assam politics during independence and beyond

**Binayak Dutta\***

## In Lieu of an Introduction

**Incident 1** - On the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, 2013, two members of the Assam Gana Parishad snatched a copy of the 119<sup>th</sup> Amendment Bill to the Constitution of India from the hands of Salman Khurshid, the then External affairs Minister, Government of India, as he tried to introduce it in the Rajya Sabha. The Bill related to the formalization of the land Swap agreement signed between India and Bangladesh during the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Bangladesh in September 2011.

**Incident 2** - On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 2013, the Meghalaya Public Service Commission came out with an advertisement for recruitment of two posts of Assistant Conservator of Forests in the Department of Forest and Environment, Government of Meghalaya, where it was stated that "applications from citizens of India who are bonafide residents of Meghalaya will be considered and displaced persons from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) permanently residing in Meghalaya or intending to reside permanently in Meghalaya possessing Indian citizenship certificate may also apply." This perfectly legal and innocuous advertisement set off a strong protest from the Khasi Students' Union, the biggest and most powerful pressure group in the Khasi Hills Districts of Meghalaya, who termed the advertisement as one with "objectionable conditions" and aimed at "provoking the sentiments of the local unemployed youth of the State." The advertisement was withdrawn.

**Incident 3** - On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, 2011 the Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi pointed out that he would seek refugee status for Hindus who fled East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) fearing persecution. On the

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10<sup>th</sup> of September, 2013, he reiterated the position of 2011 and pointed out that 'we feel that their case should be considered on humanitarian grounds.'

Despite the three independent stories, they shared some common threads. Apart from the fact that they were concerned with an area that formed colonial and post-colonial Assam,<sup>1</sup> there is little doubt that they were the outcome of partition of India. Though these reports were of incidents that took place in 2013, they prove that partition continues to affect the lives in North-East, despite the lapse of more than six decades since the event of 1947. Over the years, the question of unresolved boundary in north east India and the continuous acrimony over the legality of migration across the created state-nation boundaries has become a pointer to the assertion that partition is not an event but a process which is far from its closure. Though its impact on the lives of the land and the people of India remains persistent, attempts to write-off its history are fraught with grave risks. On the one hand, there are fears of rekindling old wounds, that the state-nation claimed to have healed, and on the other is the danger of such scholarship being accused of undermining the dominant State ideologies and the national interests of "unity" and "integrity."<sup>2</sup> Official pedagogy reflected in texts sponsored by the Government of India, continued to glorify its nationhood by skillfully suppressing tales of violence.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, scanty are such negotiations in texts sponsored by the Assam Government.<sup>4</sup>

For the Sylhetis, their absence in statist history was never an indication of their lack of violent experiences and uprooting. Genocidal violence of the 1980s helped to revive debates on the violent experiences of 1947 and the years that followed. Scholars like Urvashi Butalia,<sup>5</sup> Gyan Pandey, Paul Brass and Ian Talbot, to name a few, along with many more scholars<sup>6</sup> have worked through riots and alleged genocides in contemporary India to revive debates on partition of India. Though engagement with partition violence and displacement in India, these have been limited to emphasise on the western experiences at the cost of the east,<sup>7</sup> recent efforts have attempted to correct the imbalance.<sup>8</sup> But they present only partial correctives, for their major focus is on Bengal at the cost of Assam and North-East India which continue to be undermined. But the Assam story, though part of eastern experiences in history,<sup>9</sup> centred around Sylhet referendum and what followed, despite its subversion, continued to cast its shadow on the lives and politics of the people in north east India till the present.

## The Event – The Sylhet Referendum

Though Assam formed an inseparable part of all Pakistan proposals that emerged within the Muslim League and their sympathizers since 1937,<sup>10</sup> it was only at the end of the Second World War, when the election took place to the central and provincial Assemblies that the Assam Pradesh Congress leadership came out clearly in favour of separating Sylhet from Assam.<sup>11</sup> When the Cabinet Mission arrived with the Grouping Plan, the Assam Congress leaders opposed the Grouping Plan of the Cabinet Mission for placing Assam in Group 'C' along with Bengal, but pointed out that they had no objection to the transfer of Sylhet from Assam to Bengal.<sup>12</sup> When the partition proposals came in May-June 1947, the situation in the Assam Congress and the attitude of the Assamese leaders had not undergone any change.<sup>13</sup> When the Muslim League led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah demanded the inclusion of Assam in Pakistan, the Congress leadership rejected the idea but agreed to the referendum in Sylhet, a Bangla speaking district in the province and to Sylhet's amalgamation into East Pakistan in the event of a vote in its favour. When negotiations began on decolonization, the Colonial Government in its wisdom decided to partition Punjab and Bengal and hold a referendum in the Mussalman majority district of Sylhet, in Assam. Thus, despite being part of Assam, which was a non-Mussalman majority province of the district of Sylhet was drawn into the vortex of partition politics and campaigns. When Lord Mountbatten announced the decision of the Colonial State to organize a referendum in the district of Sylhet on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 1947 the contending parties, the Congress, the Communists and Jamiat-ul-ulama-i-Hind on the one side and the Muslim League and the Jamiat-i-Islami on the other, jumped into the campaign. It was this battle which decided Sylhet's fate after 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1947. While the first group was in favour of retaining Sylhet within Assam and in India, the second were in favour of detaching Sylhet from Assam, which was predominantly a non-Muslim province. Both the sides were allotted symbols that represented their position before the voters, as they cast their vote in the referendum. While the Pro-Partitionists, i.e., those who favoured Sylhet joining Pakistan were allotted the "AXE", those that opposed partition were given the symbol of the "HUT". The Muslim League leadership represented by Abdul Matin Choudhury was originally desirous to have the "Crecent moon" as their symbol, which was resented by the nationalist Muslims as it "nourished a communal feeling".<sup>14</sup> Aggressive campaigns accompanied by rhetorical slogans were constructed around these symbols. There

was little doubt that by 1947, the Pakistan Movement had become predominantly communal, with religion playing an important part in the campaign. As Muslim League leaders arrived in Sylhet from Bengal, they were determined to espouse and establish the case for Pakistan at their campaigns which had aggressive religious overtones.<sup>15</sup>

Despite being the last, it was not an even battle; contest was keen and the battle lines were clearly drawn. But there was little doubt in the minds of people on the field, including colonial official that the Muslim League had an upper hand in this battle.<sup>16</sup> While the Congress-Communist-Jamiyati volunteers spared no effort at getting their message across to the voters of the referendum, their message was lost in the hustle-bustle of the campaign on most occasions.<sup>17</sup> The anti-partitionists kept their hope that the referendum could be won by them by ensuring the overwhelming turnout of the Hindu voters and the votes of a substantial section of the Mussalmans who had voted in favour of the Congress supporters in the elections of 1946. As against the 15,000 Muslim League volunteers who had moved into the interiors of the district,<sup>18</sup> well in time for the referendum, the police force was only about 2,850. The referendum report pointed out, "the national guards penetrated into the remotest villages and created panic in the minds of non-Muslim villagers."<sup>19</sup> The administration was hopelessly unprepared to meet the situation. A report sent to the Viceroy by the Governor in the end of May 1947, pointed out that "present armed strength at the disposal of the province will not be sufficient to deal with the situation effectively.

Despite these serious shortcomings, Sylhet moved into the referendum on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of July, 1947. There was rampant cases of violence and intimidation and the Referendum Commissioner in his report, wherein he honestly reported that, "there were numerous allegations of intimidation of voters, nearly all of intimidation of Hindu voters by Muslim voters and volunteers, and a few cases of intimidation of Muslim voters..."<sup>20</sup> Though the official report tried to downplay the level of intimidation, there was no denial of the same. The Report noted that, "No doubt some non-violent intimidation by Muslim League had begun, but not to the extent claimed by the Hindus."<sup>21</sup> While the extent of the violence and intimidation in the Sylhet Referendum became a bone of contention for the contending parties, the results of the referendum came to be notified by the Colonial Government as the Viceroy telegraphed the report of the Referendum Commissioner to the Government at London. But there was no doubt that the magnitude of

the violence and intimidation indulged in by the League volunteers necessitated the intervention of the security forces. Firing was resorted to and it caused the death of one League volunteer and the injury of three others among the Leaguers and invited violent retaliation on the Congress workers of the area. An IB Report of the incident sent to the Secretary of State reported, "Referendum in Sylhet completed fairly peacefully but firing opened on riotous Moslem crowd in South Sylhet on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1947: one killed three wounded. Leaguers attacked Congress workers near Sylhet twelve injured of whom eight taken to hospital"<sup>22</sup> The firing on 7<sup>th</sup> July, let loose a reign of terror at Sylhet and became the metamorphic moment of Sylhet partition. When the result of the referendum was made public, it came to light that the difference of votes between the two sides was only 50,000. Sylhet was ready to be put on the dissection table of the Boundary Commission. The Congress leadership was extremely apprehensive about the Bengal Boundary Commission. Many Congress leaders both at the level of the province and Central Leadership felt that the Bengal Commission would not do justice to the cause of Assam – the relations between the Bengalis and the Assamese elite being extremely antagonistic in the province of Assam. Nehru, raised this apprehension with the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten and demanded that a separate Boundary Commission be constituted for Sylhet.<sup>23</sup> The Viceroy, on his part, dismissed these apprehensions and rejected the Congress demand for paucity of time.<sup>24</sup> Therefore in the post-referendum situation, the Sylhet question was placed before the Bengal Boundary Commission with the contending sides making detailed presentations. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1947, Sylhet, except three and a half thanas became a part of East Pakistan. What remained in India became part of the Cachar district of the composite State of Assam in post-colonial India.

### **The Burden of Partition: Some Implications**

When partition finally took place, it affected politics and the lives of the people in Assam in many ways. It physically separated North-East India from the rest of the country, save through a small passage of 22 km, commonly known as the chicken neck. Assam lost 4,769 square miles of territory and a population of 28,25,282 persons. But the loss of territory was not as significant as was the loss in paddy fields, lime and cement industries and tea gardens of Sylhet.<sup>25</sup> The adverse impact of the transfer of the Sylhet district to East Pakistan was noted in the Census Report of 1951 which observed that, "the far reaching effects

of this loss will continue to be felt by Assam as well as India for many years to come."<sup>26</sup> Partition disrupted the natural channels of riverine communication, rail and road networks that linked the hill areas of colonial Assam through the Surma valley. One of the scholars crisply noted that, "Assam's rail link with the rest of the country was snapped following partition. It was only in January, 1950 that the rail link was restored by a metre gauge line through the narrow chicken neck corridor of north Bengal. The disruption of the rail link had a very adverse effect on Assam's economy. Partition also resulted in the loss of Chittagong port which was a major outlet for Assam tea."<sup>27</sup> Partition of Assam and the loss of Sylhet<sup>28</sup> made Assam a land locked province as its outlet to the sea since 1904<sup>29</sup> was through the port of Chittagong which became a part of East Pakistan. Partition of colonial Assam in 1947 also adversely affected the social and economic lives of the various tribal communities in the region. It disrupted the traditional links that the tribal communities such as the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos had with the East Pakistani districts of Sylhet and Mymensingh respectively. These tribes were settled not only in the hill districts of Assam but also in the plains of Sylhet and Mymensingh. At the stroke of a pen these people were internally split into Indians and Pakistanis, depending on their residence. The traditional inter-community linkages in the area was so strong that these hill tribes "for ages depended on their trade with the plains..."<sup>30</sup> Centuries old prosperous border trade based economy was killed by closing the borders and erection of check posts.<sup>31</sup> But the greatest impact of partition on Assam was through migration of refugees and demographic transformation. Partition changed the way politics came to be perceived not only in Assam but the entire north eastern India. While interprovincial borders of colonial era became international boundaries, perceptions about population migration also underwent a change. Interprovincial migration which was easy and mostly unrestricted became restricted by the legal regimes governing international population movement. Though there was no restriction of people from East Pakistan to Assam in the initial years after independence, gradually by 1950 the provincial governments and the Government of India began to discourage migration of people from East Pakistan to India. Partition introduced the "foreigners" dimension into politics in North-East India with the introduction of passport system in 1952. The situation became critical as the initial trickle of people wanting to migrate to India from East Pakistan became a flood by 1950, as the political atmosphere in East Pakistan became increasingly

hostile to the minority communities. The Census Report for Assam, Manipur and Tripura, 1951 observed, that, "the recent influx of Hindu refugees from Pakistan constitutes the biggest migration stream into Assam during the last decade. Following the Noakhali Riots, in October, 1946, and the Partition of India, there has been a steady and continuous exodus of the Hindus of Pakistan into Assam. According to a census taken in July 1949, there were 24,600 families of displaced persons in Assam or approximately 1,14,500 persons."<sup>32</sup> The migration situation aggravated further as riots broke out in various parts of East Pakistan in 1949 and 1950.<sup>33</sup> The Census Report of 1951, observed that, "Soon after the 1949 Refugee Census occurred, the incidences of Soneswar and Habibganj, the oppression of the Hajongs in northern Mymensingh and the atrocities committed on the Santhals in Rajshahi, in East Dinajpur, etc. Then came the gruesome incidents over large areas of East Pakistan in February-March 1950, especially Dacca. These led to the inevitable result, viz, the desertion by hundreds and thousands of Hindus in East Pakistan of their hearths and homes to seek shelter in the neighbouring districts of West Bengal and Assam whichever was nearer..."<sup>34</sup> The number of displaced persons almost touched half a million by April, 1950. The grave situation led the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan to meet in April and come up with an agreement, popularly known as the Nehru - Liaquat Pact. But despite the pact there was no improvement in the situation on the ground and a large number of displaced persons preferred to settle down in Assam. The Census of 1951 revealed that as many as 2,74,455 persons were settled in Assam, predominantly in the plains. While 2,59,946 persons settled in plains areas, only 14,509 persons moved into the hill areas.<sup>35</sup> Partition of Sylhet from Assam and its amalgamation with East Pakistan had a major impact on the flow of refugees from East Pakistan to Assam. The Census report pointed out that "most of the refugees come from the bordering district of Sylhet."<sup>36</sup> As community lives were disrupted in post-colonial Assam by the operation of partition, migration of refugees from East Pakistan had an adverse impact on intercommunity relations both in the plains and the hills of Assam.

Settlement of these refugees in the various districts of Assam was viewed as a threat to the idea of political homogenization of spaces. In Shillong, in the Khasi Hills district where about 66 acres of land was requisitioned by the Government of Assam in two blocks of Bhagyakul estate and Umpling village for the settlement of 351 families, tribal, non-tribal relations deteriorated as the non-tribals came to be perceived

as 'Dkhars' or "foreigners" for the first time. Inclusion of non-tribals in the District Council established under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution led to staging of black flag demonstrations on 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1952 at Shillong.<sup>37</sup> The situation in Assam plains was no different. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee leadership were in favour of the separation of Sylhet from Assam since the elections of 1945-46 as a step towards ensuring the homogenization of the province of Assam. When Sylhet was amalgamated with East Pakistan, the Assamese elite perceived partition as a realization of their desire of homogenized province. The official position of the government, articulated by the Governor was that, "the natives of Assam are masters of their own house... The Bengali no longer has the power... to impose anything on the people of... Assam."<sup>38</sup> After partition of India and with the separation of Sylhet, the number of people who returned spoke Assamese as their mother tongue rose from 31.4 per cent in 1931 to 56.7 per cent in 1951.<sup>39</sup> The aim of carving a predominant Assamese State had almost come to reality. But refugee inflow from East Pakistan including the district of Sylhet was perceived as defeat of the fruits of partition. The offshoot of this perception was the difference of opinion between the Central and State governments over refugee rehabilitation in Assam. Conflicts arose over the Assam Government's decision expressing its inability to part with any land for refugee rehabilitation. Nehru wrote to Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam that the decision of Assam Government was earning it a bad name.<sup>40</sup> Matters came to a head when Nehru, as the head of the Central Government threatened to curtail the central financial assistance to Assam, if the government did not adopt a favourable attitude to rehabilitate east Pakistani refugees.<sup>41</sup> Bordoloi's reply to Nehru was firm and clear that it was not feasible for him to give more land to the refugees, as the government of Assam had to accommodate the existing demand of land from local cultivators and "Assam was a purely agricultural economy, it was impossible for a popular government to ignore these facts in the face of continued industrial backwardness..."<sup>42</sup> On the ground, public reaction to the presence of refugees were extremely hostile. Riots broke out in Guwahati on 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1948 which began as a clash between railway workers and students but acquired communal proportions. Pressure groups and political parties like the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha led by Ambika Giri Roychoudhury began to make demands for dual citizenship. Situation became more critical over the issue of unchecked illegal immigration from East Pakistan to Assam. The government of Assam called for the

introduction of a permit system as early as July 1948. As nothing came of these demands from the State government, the political situation in East Pakistan only contributed to the inflow of more Hindu refugees into Assam. As against 2,73,000 refugees in the Census of 1951, the number of refugees returned in 1961 Census was 6,28,000. The influx of refugees contributed to social tension in Assam. Assamese elites feared danger to their economic, political and cultural life. Situation became more critical as the Census Superintendent observed in his report of 1961 that "After independence, the Bengali Muslim immigrants into the Assam Valley have, almost to a man returned their mother tongue as Assamese whether they know the language or not."<sup>43</sup> This was alarming as these immigrants had also done the same in the colonial period as "what they want is land in the valley, and if knowledge of Assamese language helps them to become 'indigenous' they do not mind about their mother tongue."<sup>44</sup> The culture conscious Assamese elite who welcomed these immigrants began to be wary of them. As these immigrants became vote banks of the ruling party in power,<sup>45</sup> they became more assertive. In 1962, they flew Pakistani flag with cries of Pakistan Zindabad in villages near Tezpur and Morajar area of the Nagaon district. In the backdrop of the Chinese invasion, the government launched the Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan Scheme (PIP) to check and deport infiltrators from Assam. Though the government of Shri B.P. Chaliha began to vigorously implement the scheme, cries of harassment by the Jamiat-ul-Ulama-e-Hind and opposition from two of the cabinet ministers of Assam, viz, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed and Moin-ul-Haque Chaudhury ensured the slow death of the scheme.<sup>46</sup> The birth of Bangladesh on the partition of Pakistan in 1971 made the situation worse. It added the "Bangladeshi" dimension to the "foreigners" imbroglio. By late 1970s, the issue of "foreigners" in electoral rolls had come to become a major issue in Assam politics. The Assam anti-foreigners agitations were launched in 1978 and which came to a close with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The question of presence of "foreigners" of Bengali origin in Assam had, despite the signing of the Accord never dissipated from Assamese popular imagination, taking the form of anti-foreigner demonstrations from time to time. The threat to Assam from across its eastern border never really disappeared from popular and administrative debates in North-East India. By 1998, the "foreigners" issue again came to the centre stage of politics with the publication of a report sent to the President of India by the then Governor of Assam, Lt. Gen S.K. Sinha

which pointed out that, "Failure to get Assam included into East Pakistan in 1947 remained a source of abiding resentment in that country. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in his book, *Myths of Independence* wrote, 'It would be wrong to think that Kashmir is the only dispute that divides India and Pakistan, though undoubtedly the most significant. One at least is nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute that of Assam and some districts of India adjacent to East Pakistan. To these Pakistan has very good claims.'"

Even a pro-India leader like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, it is said that thus SMR is different a journalist & writers? In his book: *East Pakistan: Its Population and Economics* observed, 'Because East Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral resources, coal, petroleum etc, Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong.'

Sinha's report legitimized the dormant apprehensions of Bangladeshi aggression in Assam. His observation found place in most of the judicial pronouncements and popular discourse on illegal migration in Assam.<sup>47</sup> When Justice B.K. Sharma observed in 2008 that "... large number of Bangladeshis present in the State of Assam... have become the kingmakers,"<sup>48</sup> the ghost of partition, Pakistan and Bangladesh came back to haunt the politically sensitive elite who had felt that the "foreigners" issue had never really been buried for good. In 2012, massive demonstration was organized at Guwahati to re-launch the anti-foreigners agitation. The recent violence in the BTAD area in May, 2014 also revolved around the Bangladeshi "foreigners" question. It was evident that despite the passage of more than six decades since the creation of Pakistan and the partition of India and Assam, partition continued to hover over the lives of the people like a phantom. But there is no doubt that despite its impact, partition of India in 1947 and of Pakistan is something that we are yet to fully recover from. The economic, political and psychological consequences in various manifestations continue to haunt the NE and Assam, even spawning identity related violent movements. The latter have to a large extent militated against resolving the issues and burying the ghost of partition.

## Endnotes

1. Meghalaya was carved out of the post-colonial composite state of Assam in 1972.
2. N. Bhattacharyya, *Predicaments of Secular Histories*, Public Culture Vol. 20, No. 1.

3. Gyanendra Pandey, In *Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu Muslim Riots in India Today*, pp. 5-7 in R. Guha (ed) *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*, OUP, New Delhi, 2006. (Rep).
4. Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1999, pp.386-95.
5. *The Other Side of Silence Voices from the Partition of India*, 2000.
6. See works of scholars like, Anita Inder Singh, Veena Das, Madhav Godbole, Stanley Wolpert, Patricia Gossman, Pradip Dutta, Suranjan Das and Ashutosh Varshney, to name a few,
7. and texts like G. D. Khosla's 'Stern Reckoning' (Second Impression 1999) or even Stanley Wolpert's 'Shameful Flight' (2006) being equally deficient on this count.
8. In works such as Joshodhara Bagchi and Subho Ranjan Das Gupta edited, 'The Trauma and the Triumph Gender and Partition in Eastern India', or 'Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal' by Gargi Chakraborty,
9. Renuka Roy, *MY REMINISCENCES* p.141.
10. Rahmat Ali evolved a scheme called "Bang-i-Islam" that roughly corresponded with Bengal and Assam in 1940. By 1939 Dr. Sayyid Abdul Latif of Hyderabad came up with the proposal of dividing the subcontinent into four cultural zones for the Muslims. Assam together with Eastern Bengal formed the North East Block. In 1939, another proposal came up under the title, "Confederacy of India" authored by a person using the pseudonym of "Punjabi" which divided Indian subcontinent into five "countries" joined together in a confederacy. Incidentally this proposal proposed for the creation of country named and styled "Bengal" incorporating the Muslim predominant parts of Bengal and parts of Assam. In the same year emerged two more proposals which also included Assam or at least the predominantly Muslim division of Sylhet in their proposals. The first of these two proposals was authored by the Chief Minister of Punjab, Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan in his pamphlet entitled, *Outline of a Scheme of Indian Federation*, where it was proposed to divide the subcontinent into seven areas and the first area discussed was "Assam plus Bengal plus Sikkim." The other proposal was entitled *Problems of Indian Muslims and its Solution*, authored by Professors Zafar ul Hasan and Muhammad Afzal Husain Qadri from Aligarh Muslim University who proposed to divide the Muslim predominant areas into three separate, sovereign and independent states, ensuring complete freedom from the domination of the Hindus. Here again reference could be seen to Assam as the authors proposed for the creation of sovereign Muslim state incorporating Bengal excluding the districts of Howrah, Midnapur and Darjeeling, the Purnea district of Bihar and the Sylhet Division of Assam.
11. See Sujit Choudhuri, *Godsend Opportunity*, Seminar, No.510, 2002.
12. See P.Moon, *The Viceroy's Journal*, p.233.

13. See the Report of the Governor of Assam, Hydari to Viceroy Mountbatten dated the 1st July, 1947, Acc.No. 5123, NAI.
14. Governor of Assam's Report to the Viceroy dated 28th June, 1947, Mountbatten Papers, Acc. No. 5123, NAI.
15. *Star of India*, 4th July, 1947, NMML.
16. Annexure C to Referendum Commissioner's report on the Sylhet Referendum in Private Secretary to the Viceroy Papers Acc. No. 3471, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
17. Peter Hardy in his *The Muslims of British India* (p.245) argues that despite building up a viable critique of the Pakistan proposal, the Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Hind failed to transmit their nuanced arguments to the masses.
18. *Star Of India*, July 8th, 1947, NMML.
19. Referendum Commissioner's Report, Mountbatten Papers, Acc. No. 5123.
20. Referendum Commissioner's Report, *Ibid*.
21. Annexure C, Referendum Commissioner's Report, *Ibid*.
22. *Political History of Assam*, File No. 169, ASA.
23. *Transfer of Power Vol. XII*, pp. 167-68.
24. *Transfer of Power Vol. XII*, p. 168.
25. *Census of India, 1951, Vol.XII, Part I-A*, pp. 2-3.
26. *Ibid*, p. 3.
27. Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, IIAS, Shimla, 2000, p.148, ft.nt. no.2.
28. Almost the entire district of Sylhet was transferred to East Pakistan except only an area of 709 square miles and a population of 2,91,320 persons in the three thanas of Bararpur, Ratabari, Patharkandi and a part of the Karimganj thana which was joined with the district of Cachar and formed a new subdivision. See the *Census of India, 1951, Vol.XII, Part I-A*, p. 2.
29. Since 1904, a rail link linking Dibrugarh with Chittagong was set up to carry the bulk of the tea trade from Assam. See Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, IIAS, Shimla, 2000, p.115.
30. *Ibid*, p.115.
31. *Ibid*, pp.115-16 and 149 ft.nt.3.
32. *Census of India, 1951, Vol.XII, Part I-A*, pp.356-57.
33. Binayak Dutta, *Violent Parting: Recovering the History of Violence in Sylhet on Partition and After.(1947-50)* in *The Heritage*, Vol-IV, Issue-1, 2013, pp. 20-36.
34. *Census of India, 1951, Vol.XII, Part I-A*, pp.356-57.
35. *Ibid*.
36. *Ibid*, p. 358.
37. *The Chronicle, An English Daily*, dt. 25th July, 1952.
38. Sujit Choudhuri, *Godsend Opportunity*, Seminar, No.510, 2002.
39. H. K. Barpujari, *North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects: Since Independence*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1998, p. 46.

40. Nirode K. Barooah, Gopinath Bordoloi, 'The Assam Problem' and Nehru's Centre, Bhabani Print and Publications, Guwahati, 2010, p.393.
41. Ibid, p.394.
42. Ibid, pp. 394-95.
43. Census of India 1961, Vol III, Assam Part I-A, p.204.
44. Census of India 1961, Vol III, Assam Part I-A, p.203.
45. Nirode K. Barooah, Gopinath Bordoloi, 'The Assam Problem' and Nehru's Centre, Bhabani Print and Publications, Guwahati, 2010, p.393.
46. B.K.Nehru, Nice Guys Finish Second Memoirs, Penguin Books, Delhi, 1997(2012) Rep.pp.542-43.
47. AIR 2005 SC 2920. And 2008(3) GLT 272 Mustt. Sarabari Begum vs State of Assam.
48. 2008(3) GLT 272 Mustt. Sarabari Begum vs State of Assam, para 208.

## North-East Today: Tales of Illusion and Reality

**Sanjeeb Kakoty\***

As a historian, writer, documentary film maker of and from the North-East and also as an academic; I am often invited to speak at different forums. As I look back in retrospect to the various lecture requests I have received, I notice a certain pattern. A pattern that clearly demonstrates the perspectives with which the region is viewed and the inevitability of how the picture is shaped and coloured by the particular perspective.

In broad terms, there is both a geographical and an ideological slant to the perspectives as becomes evident by the theme of the lectures. Within the region, a lecture request may vary from highlighting the region's contribution to the country's freedom struggle, to the theme of whether the region is treated as a colony by the successive Central governments in Delhi, or may even seek to eulogise the cultural and religious contribution of the region to the larger Indian Civilizational process.

At the national level, there are different kinds of lecture requests. While many would try and understand the region with all its complexities, others may seek a perpetuation of stereotypes that have developed over time. So, the requests may vary from talking about ethnic conflagrations to the knotty problem of large population migrations especially from the plains of Bangladesh, to the lack of economic development of the region. Symposia and workshops have been organized to examine what should the State do, to reign in an insurgent North-East, or to examine the much publicized India's Look East Policy.

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At the international level, lecture requests may either stem from a desire to know about a lesser known region of India with all its nuances and traditions. One may also discern a genuine interest to learn from the living traditions of extant indigenous communities, or it may even emanate from a sense of curiosity about a region that is largely populated by a tribal population, (something that is fast disappearing in the global village of Coke and McDonald's) and hence something of an anthropological oddity, or to highlight the "plight of Indigenous communities" to highlight the failure of the Indian State and its experiment at democracy!

In the midst of all these perspectives, what is the real perspective? Is it even possible or desirable to have a single point of view or a mono perspective? Probably, what would enable a better appreciation of the region would be to accept the fact that there does not exist a single entity called the North-East, and there are as many cultures and languages spoken in this region as in the rest of the country combined! Hence, a simplistic reduction of issues and problems of the region as being of a pan North-East character and hence having a simple and single solution, is gravely erroneous, as the half-century and more of the failed planning process has clearly shown.

So, where do we start our understanding of the region? We should probably start with its history and its geography. In doing so, the first thing that strikes one is the sheer geographical and cultural spread of the region. From the snow clad mountains of the eastern Himalayas to the flood plains of the Brahmaputra, the Patkai mountain ranges and the Khasi plateau to the valleys of the Bark and the Imphal rivers, this region can boast of both prehistoric man as well as advanced civilizations. So, how far back does the antiquity of the region go?

The stone age tools and implements, be it from the Daojali Hading and Sarutaru in Assam, the Daparijo, Kamal, Kurung and Parsi Parlo finds in Arunachal Pradesh, the Nongpok Keithelmanbi and Napachik sites in Manipur, Michimagri, Selbalgiri and Pynthorlangtein in Meghalaya, Chungliyimati in Nagaland, easily takes back the history of the region to the stone age.

By taking back the antiquity of human habitation to the stone age also establishes region as one of the early cradles of civilization. The fact that the Brahmaputra, meanders some three thousand kilometers from the lofty Tibetan plateau onward to Arunachal and onto the plains of Assam and Bangladesh before finally mingling with the waters of the Bay of Bengal creates one of the largest and most diverse river

systems in the world. The fast flowing waters thereby creates a living connect, that threads together people, cultures and ecology in a bewildering mix of diverse eco systems.

All through its history, the North-East has acted not only as a cradle of civilization but also as a gateway connecting the far east with the rest of the world. Archaeological remains from Assam and Manipur, which includes trademark remnants of Chinese pottery leaves no doubt that the region was part of the famous Silk Route connecting China to the middle East.

At the same time, one needs to give credence to an interesting question that is often asked. Since the region was certainly a cradle of early man as far back as the stone age, how much of the culture and technology that developed here were transmitted to the rest of the world? Seen in this light, there indeed exists the strong possibility that the traditions of silkworm rearing practiced almost universally in Assam and Manipur, the technology of gun powder manufacture that had reached a high level of refinement in medieval Assam, or rice cultivation, with the Brahmaputra valley once boasting of some twenty thousand indigenous variety of paddy, were all born out of local knowledge systems here, some of which may have found its way to other parts of the world. This assertion would stand in opposition to the currently held belief that these ideas were of Chinese origin. However, lending credence to the premise of indigenous knowledge traditions are certain findings of recent researches into rice which shows the existence of a huge number of paddy varieties in the wild form in the region which points to the origin of those rice varieties as being indigenous to that particular area.

Be it as it may, that the region was a confluence of races and cultures is a living reality even today. Indo-Aryans, TibetoBurmans, Mon Khmers, Shans, Negritos, Santhals, are some of the major groups that inhabit the region. It is said that more than five hundred tongues are spoken in the region and almost all religions have a few adherents here.

Religious texts and the epics, be it the *Joginitantra* or the *Kalikapuran*, the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*, all make frequent reference to this region. The people often referred to as Cinas and Kiratas. The Pandavas during their exile lived in the region and it is a matter of legend that Bhima got married to a Dimasa damsel called Hidimba, while Arjuna established his matrimonial ties in Manipur. The ancient city of Tezpur even got its name from a war between Lord Krishna and



King Bana, after the latter imprisoned Krishna's grandson Aniruddha who had come to court Bana's daughter Usha prompting the war. The river ran red with blood and hence the name of the city, Tezpur or the city of blood. In addition, it is also likely that the Hindu tradition of *Shakti* worship is essentially Austric in origin and hence may be traced to the region. The most sacred of the *Shakti pith*, the Kamaykha temple, is in all possibility the temple of Ka Mei Kha, a Khasi term denoting root ancestress. The Durga temple in Nartiang, in the Jaintia hills of Meghalaya is also considered one of the oldest Durga temples that has remained functional over the centuries.

Travellers and pilgrims have visited the regions all through history and many have left behind memoirs and accounts of their travels that makes interesting reading. The Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang visited the court of King Bhaskaravarman of Assam and wrote minute details of his travels in the kingdom in his book *Su Yu Ki*. He attests to the well-being of the common man, the enlightened nature of the rulers and the economic prosperity of the kingdom. He also recounts the fact that King Bhaskaravarman accompanied him to the Buddhist council organized by King Harshavardhana of Kanauj. In Kanauj, Bhaskaravarman was accorded a grand welcome and given a pride of place in the assembly.

These are small instances which demonstrate that the region lying to the north-east of the country was civilizationally, and economically developed. It is probably no coincidence that the ancient kingdom was called Pragjyotishpur or the Light of the East, a testimony to its accomplishments in both material and spiritual culture. In the sands of time, numerous dynasties wrote their names and established their hegemony over the land and its people. Mention may be made of the Vermans, the Salastambhas, the Khens, the Koch, the Baro Bhuyan, the Chutiya, the Dimasa and Ahoms, the kingdoms of Manipur, Tripura, and the Jaintias as well as Chiefs who led the Khasi, the Garo, the Lushai, the Kuki, the Naga, the Singpho and other tribes.

The geographical spread of the regional powers extended much beyond the present day political boundaries that define the region. It included parts of the present day West Bengal, including Cooch Behar, which derived its name from its Koch rulers. The descendants of the Koch call themselves as Rajbongshi and Kamatapuri, and the present day strife for a separate State of Kamatapuri can be better understood when seen in this historical perspective.

While in its southern flanks, the sway of the Khasi Chiefs extended to the district of Sylhet in today's Bangladesh. The loss of Khasi lands during the partition continues to evoke strong sentiments, more so because of the fact that a few lakh Khasi population continue to reside in Bangladesh, facing an uncertain future, as minorities in an Islamic country. The capital of the erstwhile Jaintia Kingdom, Jaintiapur, is a part of Bangladesh today. It is surmised that the acute identity and existential problems faced by Khasi tribe in these areas was one of the major triggers of the growth of the insurgent separatist movement here.

The beginnings of the Ahom Kingdom in Assam is traced to the year 1228 AD, when a band of Tai speaking warriors came through the Patkai mountains and entered upper Assam and made the Brahmaputra valley their home. Soon through a policy of conquest and consolidation, they emerged as the most powerful kingdom in the region. It is interesting that the establishment of Ahom rule in Assam roughly coincided with the Mughal ascendancy in the rest of India. Interestingly, while the Mughals succeeded in establishing their hegemony over most of India, their eastward expansion did not proceed beyond Bengal due to the Ahoms. Their continuous effort to conquer Assam reached a peak under Aurangzeb, who despatched his trusted commanders Mir Jumla and Raja Ram Singh resulting in the famous Battle of Saraighat in 1671, which was won by the Ahoms. The name of the legendary Ahom Commander Lachit Barphukan is credited with this victory and the Battle of Sariaghat is considered one of the most strategic naval battle fought in India. What is also hardly known is the fact that the total span of Ahom rule was longer than that of the Mughals, and that they were the only major regional power that succeeded in withstanding the might of the Mughals.

The year 1826 is considered a decisive year in the history of the region. Most insurgent groups refer to this date as the turning period in their history. It was on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, 1826 the Treaty of Yandabo was signed between the English East India Company and the Burmese that ended the First Anglo-Burmese War. According to the terms of the treaty, the Burmese agreed to cede to the British, Assam, Manipur, Rakhine (Arakan), and Taninthayi (Tenasserim) coast, south of Salween river, and also desist from any kind of interference in Cachar and Jaintia and also pay an indemnity of one million pounds sterling in four instalments. In other words, the treaty marked the exclusion of Burma in the affairs of the region and the formal entry of the British. This was the beginning of the process by which the region irrevocably lost its

sovereignty. This happened through various stages that included both co-option, punitive expeditions and annexation. The success of the British policy can be gauged from the fact that before the turn of the century, most of the region had come under British control.

The struggle for Indian independence saw the active participation of the region. Assam was a key theatre of Congress activities. Peasant revolts and tribal insurrections, followed by the Congress agitation, regularly challenged the legitimacy of British rule. One such revolt that finds scant mention in the history texts is the Patharughat massacre where 140 unarmed peasants were killed when J.R. Berington, Commandant of the Frontier Police, ordered his troops to open fire against hundreds of protesters who had gathered at Patharughat in Darrang district on January 28, 1894, to protest against the British government policy of imposing exorbitant taxes. Ballads are still sung in Assam to commemorate the martyrs. It is another matter that the rest of the country is hardly aware of this massacre even today!

Annexation was also often met by revolt, be it in the case of the Khasis, the Jaintias, the Singphos, the Naga Tribes, the Lushais and others. But like the rest of the country, the quest for independence had to wait till 1947 to be quenched. But in the north east of the country, 1947 opened up a Pandora's box that remains to be resolved even today. This is because of the peculiar historical and geographical situation that prevailed.

In the case of Assam, the portent of things to come became evident with the deposition of the Ahom King Purandhar Sinha in 1838, following which the administration was taken over by the British. Interestingly, though under the Provisions of the Act xxix of 1837, and Section 337 of the Criminal Procedure Code, the language of the soil was to be used in Judicial and Revenue Proceedings, it was seen that the language that was used in Assam was Bengali! It is suggested that this happened as the majority of the clerks who were employed under the British regime were from Bengal. Be as it may, it created strong reactions from the Assamese and two prominent Assamese, Maniram Dewan and Anadoram Dhekial Phukan, strongly objected to this. This was followed by the efforts of the American Baptist Missionaries, who went about establishing the credentials of the Assamese language as an independent language in its own right. In 1848, Rev. Nathan Brown published his monumental *Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language*. This was preceded by the monthly Assamese magazine called *Arunodoi*, that was being edited and published by Rev. Brown since

1846. They succeeded in establishing Assamese as the language of the courts. This lasted till 1905, when Bengal was partitioned, whereby the province was divided into two new provinces. The post-partition *Bengal* would comprise of West Bengal, the provinces of Bihar and Orissa; while the new province of East Bengal would consist of Muslim majority and the province of Assam with Dacca as the capital. In the new scheme of things, the Bengali speaking Muslims of East Bengal were numerically much larger than the Assamese not surprisingly, the official language of the province of East Bengal and Assam would be Bengali, something that was deeply resented by the Assamese. Thankfully, popular protests forced the government to revoke its order on the Partition of Bengal and provided a reprieve for the language predicament of Assam. Nonetheless, the problem of language has haunted Assam all through its modern history.

The Cabinet Mission Plan that grouped the provinces of India into Three Categories, A, B and C, once again clubbed Bengal and Assam together. Assam under Gopinath Bordoloi strongly opposed it and called the plan "sinister". The statements, correspondences of the leaders, and official records of the period make riveting reading. As has been aptly commented that "these are crucial passages of history for they indicate that the entire Congress leadership barring the Mahatma and the Assam leaders, were prepared to sell Assam to the Muslim League and Pakistan." The Governor was quoted as saying: 'this was definitely a climb down on the part of the Congress: but for the good of the people of India, principles have sometimes to be swallowed for the sake of expediency. In a political game, compromises have to be made... surely the whole of India cannot be plunged into a civil war for the sake of Assam.'<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately for Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi sought and received the support of the Mahatma to oppose the Grouping plan. They fought long and hard and finally succeeded in saving Assam. In the process the Central leadership of the Congress accused Bordoloi and Assam as being a spoke in the wheel of India's effort to gain quick independence. Subsequent developments in post-Independent India clearly reveals that leaders including Prime Minister Nehru, adopted a blatantly discriminatory attitude to Assam and to its Premier Bordoloi.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, be it in matters of fund allocation or the liability of Assam to look after millions of refugees from East Bengal, Assam's concern has never been heard by Delhi in the right perspective. For instance, Nehru, in a letter to Bardoloi dated August 7, 1949, states 'If

Assam wants to follow a narrow provincial policy excluding others, there are bound to be reactions against Assam in other parts of India. It will be difficult for the Central government to have any major scheme in Assam. I want you and your government to consider carefully the consequences of this policy.<sup>13</sup> Was it as a consequence of this thinking that made the Government to lay a pipeline of more than a thousand km from Assam to Bihar to refine Assam crude or the largest tea producing State of the country having to auction it not within Assam, but in West Bengal?

The grievances run deep, and these are not confined to Assam alone. The neighbouring State of Nagaland has one of the longest running insurgency in the world. The beginnings of this insurgency can be traced to the memorandum dated 10.1.1929, submitted to the Simon Commission by the Naga Club expressing its opposition to the fact that “our Hills included within the Reformed Scheme of India without our knowledge” prompting the British government to place the Naga hills under the “Excluded Areas.”<sup>4</sup> It is also often said, that a delegation of Naga leaders met Mahatma Gandhi in 1947, and he assured them that nobody would be forced into the Indian union under duress.<sup>5</sup> This promise of the Mahatma supposedly died with his assassination and Nagaland became a “troubled area” which not only questioned its inclusion into the Indian Union, but fought it bitterly. The insurgents also sought and secured help from China to create one of the longest running insurgent wars in history!

In the case of the other disturbed State, Manipur, the circumstances were different. It is interesting to note that Manipur was the first State in Independent India to have conducted election based on universal adult franchise and passing the “Manipur State Constitution Act of 1947 (which) introduced for the first time a constitutional Monarchy in the State.”<sup>6</sup> The constitutional monarchy ended with the Merger Agreement between the Governor General of India and the Maharaja of Manipur in 1949. That the constitutional Monarch did not take the approval of the democratically elected Assembly was seen as unconstitutional and thus did not receive popular support. The lack of legitimacy of the King’s act, resulted in resentment and opposition ultimately spawning insurgency.

The signing of the instrument of Accession with the Khasi Kings too has been mired in controversy often leading to sporadic outbursts.

The case in neighbouring Tripura was again different in nature. The Kingdom of Tripura had Kings that were of the Tripuri tribe. They

had zamindaris in the plains of Bengal, such as the famous Chakla Roshanabad estates. Following independence, the Zamindar, the King of Tripura, remained in India, whereas the estates remained in East Pakistan. This created huge problems which included the migration of large numbers of the ryots. These migrations ultimately reduced the tribals of Tripura to a state of being minority in their own State. This prompted violent insurgent movements in the State. Thankfully, most of these have died down. Interestingly, the example of Tripura and Tripuris are quoted all over the north east, and all the anti-foreigner agitation that the region has seen, has had the slogan that “we do not want to go the Tripura way.”

In conclusion, one wonders at the inconsistencies. At the time of independence, the region boasted of development indices that put it at the top of the list. Today, they languish at the bottom. This region is today termed as backward and an acknowledged backwater of the Indian political entity. Interestingly, a posting to the region is not only considered a punishment but also entitles government employees to a special allowance!

How did this descent to backwardness begin? Was it a lack of understanding of historical realities? Was it the pursuit of wrong policies? Can we start with a clean slate that would begin with trying to understand the realities? It would be wrong to assume the legitimacy of the historical missteps is corroborated by relative peace that is visible in the region today. For peace to endure, the region must occupy the pride of place it did during the time of King Harshavardhana. The first step, at the minimum, would be to make a sincere attempt to understand the region.

## Endnotes

1. Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, Penguin India, 1994, p. 73.
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3. *Ibid* p. 406
4. W. Lasuh, (ed) *The Naga Chronicle*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p. 111.
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## Negotiating Gender and Power: Women's Activism in Contemporary Manipur

Rena Laisram\*

The prevailing armed-conflict situation and other forms of unrest<sup>1</sup> affecting contemporary Manipur has significant repercussions for the women.<sup>2</sup> As a response to the crisis facing the society, communities of women such as the *Meira Paibis*<sup>3</sup> in the Manipur valley and Naga Womens' Union of Manipur,<sup>4</sup> *Tangkhul Shanao Long*<sup>5</sup> and Kuki Womens' Union in the hill districts have emerged as powerful social actors developing their own agencies and playing significant roles in the society. Through activism the women demand the right not to be marginalized. Although there has been a rapid growth of women's activism in the State, women as equal participants in the development process have been 'missing' and their 'invisibility' is striking. Gender,<sup>6</sup> is often deployed to serve a variety of quite contradictory purposes – the evocation of motherhood commonly used to empower men rather than women, and even as a pretext to keep women in their place.<sup>7</sup> Power is central to gender relations; the 'politics of gender' acting as a means to articulate and enforce the relations of power in the society.<sup>8</sup> The sites<sup>9</sup> of gender relations are the State, the market, the community/civil societies and the domain of family/kinship which are not mutually exclusive but inter-related categories. This paper seeks to examine and evaluate women's activism in Manipur to understand the covert ways in which power is manipulated so as to perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women. It also gives an insight into the history of women's struggle in Manipur to comprehend their journey towards gender equality, in the context of changing socio-economic and political background and values which legitimize inequality.

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While women's resistance in Manipur takes multifarious forms, some of them hidden; 'political motherhood'<sup>10</sup> challenges the confinement of women to domesticity. The view that political activities belong to the 'public sphere' and women by nature and inclination belong to the 'private sphere' implies that women perceive 'politics' as unsuited to their nature. However, this hypothesis of 'politics' being confined to the public sphere has been challenged and scholars<sup>11</sup> maintain that traditional politics legitimizes women's absence from power spheres and also devalues women's concerns. The private/public division is historically and contextually determined, contested and constantly struggled over and redefined. This denial of a substantive divide between public and private, means that there are no specific spaces or places which occupy the 'public sphere'. It is important to note that the spaces from which women's activism is first fostered is a key to understanding the way women's political consciousness develops. The central argument is that women's activism often starts from pre-established cultural domains of female power. These culturally defined domains, or the attack upon them, create the conditions of possibility for the movement of women, and their progressive defiance of authoritarian structures of power, usually controlled by men.<sup>12</sup>

The *Meira Paibis* is among the most known women activist organization in Manipur. The organizers of this movement began as mothers whose maternal role as protectors of their homes and family had been violated and who sought restitution from the State. *Meira Paibis* as communities of women are not a separate group but are representative of women of the society, maintaining vigil against repressive activities of law enforcing agencies and raising their voice on socio-economic issues facing the society. In the last few decades they have been involved in activities relating to atrocities committed by the State, excesses of *The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)-1958* or social awareness against HIV/AIDS and drug abuses, etc. In the hill districts, the Kuki Women's Union and the Naga Women's Union of Manipur have played crucial roles during the Naga-Kuki clashes in late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *Tangkhul Shanao Long* has been particularly active in peace initiatives and in their role to minimise the traumatic impact of violence in the community.<sup>13</sup> They compelled the village elders to broker peace in Churachandpur district in an attempt to stop the inter-community clashes in 1995. These women groups have also been involved in resolving family conflicts, checking and controlling immoral traffic, arresting and punishing persons involved

in drug trafficking, land disputes between neighbours etc. Like other feminist movements in India, such movements 'encompass and link issues such as work, wages, organization, environment, civil rights, sex, violence, health, social relationships..... ; an index of its influence being the extraordinarily large participation of women in the campaigns.'<sup>14</sup> It strengthens self-esteem and develops political consciousness and a sense of personal agency.

Women in Manipur may be understood within the change and continuity of the historical processes.<sup>15</sup> Initial acts of organized women's activism against the State was noticed as early as March 1893 in the agitation against the system of providing paddy in kind to the members of the *Cheirap* courts during famine. The new measures of economic integration to the colonial<sup>16</sup> economy such as introduction of copper coins were also successfully resisted by the women vendors of Sanakeithel market. In the case of the Manipur valley the first collective direct action of women in anti-colonial resistance took place in 1904. The first *Nupilan* (*nupi*: women; *lan*: agitation, war) was closely linked with the rapid changes which took place in Manipur since 1891. In July 1904 the women reacted violently when Manipur faced artificial scarcity of rice. The burning down of the house of the British Assistant Political agent by some miscreants was considered a major threat to the colonial regime. Mr. Maxwell, the British Resident ordered the local populace to contribute labour and material to rebuild the same. He further declared that if the inhabitants of Imphal defied the order, a punitive force would be posted in the town and they would have to bear the monthly cost for maintenance of the force. At this juncture, it was the womenfolk who dared to protest against what they believed was unjust. In view of the spontaneous massive agitation, the British authorities had to withdraw the order. Manipur witnessed women's agitation again in 1925 against the increase of water taxes. The authorities were compelled to reduce the taxes.

The second *Nupilan* of 1939 was another collective protest by the Meitei women which was a direct fallout of the malpractices and irregularities of the colonial government. Excessive rains during July-August 1939 and hail storms in November in the same year had severely damaged the standing crops in various parts of the valley adversely affecting agriculture. The Marwari traders took advantage of the situation and resorted to hoarding which disturbed the business of the women grain dealers and the common people alike. The traders set up rice mills and systematically exported rice outside the state. On 12 December,

1939 several hundred women demonstrated in front of the office of the Manipur State Durbar where the members were having a meeting demanding an immediate ban of the export of rice. The members of the Durbar were not unanimous in its decision and sought a formal approval from Maharaja Churachand who was then not present in Manipur. The President of the Durbar, Mr. T.A. Sharpe was *gheraoed* by the agitators forcing him to go personally to the Telegraph office to communicate to the Maharaja about their demand. The women agitators could not be pacified and kept waiting for a reply from the Maharaja. The crowd had become restless and some of them started indulging in stone throwing. This compelled the authorities to requisition a platoon of the Assam Rifles and the agitators were dispersed amidst shouts of *Bande Mataram* and *Manipur Mata Ki Jai*. The collective uprising by the women forced the authorities to comply with the demand of issuing an order to stop both the working of the rice mills and export of rice. In this event some twenty-one women got bayonet wounds and the women even had first-hand experience of jail. Though the immediate cause of such movements was economic in nature, the aftermath of the movement had great implications for political change in the State.

The *Nupilan* thus represented not just a popular movement against the exploitative colonial authority but also the collective tradition and inherited legacy of the women. Gaidinlieu (popularly known as Rani Gaidinlieu) who belonged to the Zeliangrong (Zemi Naga) tribe became famous for taking part in the national struggle against the foreign rule inspired by Gandhi's message of non-cooperation and civil disobedience.<sup>17</sup> Under her leadership, the tribe inhabiting a long stretch of hilly tract spread over Assam, Nagaland and Manipur launched a movement in 1925 to free their land from the British control. Between the years 1931-32, she led a 'No-tax' campaign when the British imposed collective fines on the villages which were active in the campaign and seized both licensed and unlicensed guns. The movement created widespread unrest among the tribe resulting in the British authorities decision to suppress the movement and arrest her. Gaidinlieu was arrested and jailed in 1932. In 1936 the Indian National Congress acknowledged her as a patriot fighting for India's freedom and adopted a resolution demanding her release.

The *Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947*, initiated democratic governance in the State and elections to the State assembly were held in the following year. Manipur had its first democratic government with the Maharaja acting as the constitutional head and this was much

before other States of the Indian Union experienced the democratic process. This democratic government continued to function till the *Manipur Merger Agreement, 1949*. In fact, Manipur joined the Indian Union only on October 15, 1949. In 1954 and 1959 the women took to the streets demanding a responsible form of government and Statehood for Manipur. A significant impact of the uprising by the women was the demand in the later phase, of the introduction of a democratic form of government in Manipur. As the women moved into public political activism, however, they became targets of State violence: they were jailed, kidnapped, raped and tortured, and lives threatened. In fact, this experience brought about consciousness of the democratic rights among the people giving them a political direction. The circumstances under which Manipur was initiated into the democratic process notwithstanding, some the legislations which have had serious ramifications for the State include *Disturbed Areas Act (1976)*, *National Security Act (1980)*, and the *Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958)*.

In the 1970's opposition to mainstream integration led to flashes of insurgent violence and with it began the era of armed conflict in the Manipur valley. Insurgency has affected women either as victims or as social actors.<sup>18</sup> Apart from direct impact in terms of violence, loss of property and livelihoods, displacement and trauma, armed conflict situations has serious implications for women and girls because of their status and sex.<sup>19</sup> The harshness of economy and lack of venue for reasonable employment opportunities led to many poor families begin the sale of local made liquor. Manipur as the transit route for sale of drugs opened up avenues of drug addiction, alcoholism etc., leading to degeneration of the society. Domestic violence, wife beating etc., came to be commonly heard and the crisis in families led to the movement by women called the *Nisha Bandh*. The association was formed in 1975 in various localities with the sole objective of controlling the consumption and sale of liquor. In this anti-liquor campaign gender relations came to the fore when the targets of women's actions were the liquor shops in the localities which women perceived as adding oppression against them by the menfolk. In everyday fact of life, many women are victims of domestic violence and male oppression, a manifestation of the patriarchal attitudes. *The Domestic Violence Act 2005* which came into effect from October 2006, is primarily meant to shield women from violence.

Women's movement has the vibrancy to speak and mobilise on behalf of and in conjunction with other marginalized groups such as

the poor, the elderly and the less privileged.<sup>20</sup> Irom Sharmila Chanu<sup>21</sup> has caught the attention of people from all walks of life for her determination to carry on the protest against the AFSPA through peaceful means of fasting for the last ten years. The alleged rape and murder of Th. Manorama by the security forces had provoked a dozen middle aged women to protest stark naked in front of the Kangla Fort on July 15, 2004 – 'a desperate act that was simultaneously a cry of rage and of pain.'<sup>22</sup> In essence, activism in Manipur like other womens' movements in South Asia<sup>23</sup> has a broader social context which is closely linked to a crisis of the State power. That the State can no longer ignore women's activism is indicated by the fact that many organizations, political parties including the insurgent groups and even security forces seek their support on various issues facing the State.

The State has always been an ambiguous and difficult issue in feminist politics. Feminists have revealed gendered states and continue to debate the irony of appealing to a 'masculinist' state for protection from, for example, male violence. Women in Manipur are marginalized in institutional politics and electoral politics is completely dominated by men. The gendered state of democracy questions the very credibility of the functioning of democracy in Manipur.<sup>24</sup> This despite the fact that the women enjoyed the right to vote in the first election itself (1948). Between 1949 and 1969, in the Territorial Council elections, some women participated as candidates but only one won an election. Between 1963 and 1969 there were female members in the Council by virtue of being nominated. Since Manipur attained Statehood in 1972, the electoral performance of the women candidates is dismal. The local self governing institutions such as the municipality and *panchayats* also do not reveal any significant women representation. Thus, political consciousness as such among women can hardly claim to be translated into an articulated political action.<sup>25</sup> A citizen's perspective is based on the assumption that rights belong to people because they are theirs and not from charity. Citizens use participation as a way to communicate their aspirations and needs, and a technique to strengthen democracy. Lack of ability to participate, therefore, implies lack of full membership within the system.

The issue of women's representation in political offices has been one of the most debated issues in recent politics.<sup>26</sup> Proponents of democracy believe that it offers the best hope for justice in any given society. Yet there is very little discussion on how that state of justice can be achieved. One of the main positive claims made towards

democracy is its supposed harmony with development. The broader definition of development also links it with better social justice and guarantees of basic universal human rights. Developments require good governance. In the troubled-torn State of Manipur, the role of the State legislature as policy/law makers is increasingly being questioned along with devolution by the State assemblies of powers and responsibilities upon the *panchayat* (implementation of the 73rd Amendment) with respect to the preparation and implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice.

Any discussion on women in Manipur will necessarily have to understand the structured nature of gender relations in the society. Like other social relations, gender relations too are constituted through the rules, norms and practices by which resources are allocated, tasks and responsibilities are assigned, value is attached and power is allowed. Women in Manipur play crucial roles in the economy but do not enjoy substantial property rights.<sup>27</sup> In fact, they are the largest group of 'landless labourers' with little real security in case of break-up of the family through death or divorce; inheritance laws and customs discriminating against them. Women's lack of property rights may not have been as significant in earlier periods when community ownership over natural resources prevailed over large parts of the State. Classical Marxist Feminists suggests that the oppression of women is closely connected with the institution of private property.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, access to and more importantly control over resources is one of the major variables affecting prestige ranking of women. Property is a bundle of powers.<sup>29</sup> For the Meiteis, inheritance is traced through the male line and the female issue (*ningol*) is always secondary to that of the male issue.<sup>30</sup> Meitei women after Hinduisation are today supposed to enjoy significantly greater inheritance rights in land than they did earlier under the Meitei Personal Laws. *The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 – Section 14*<sup>31</sup> has conferred heritable properties to women. But the real issue is the wide gap that exists between law and practice and the bogus reality of a 'voluntary' giving up of claims. She does this at the level of real-life processes, marriage systems, post-marital residence and control over sexuality. The women of the hill tribes in Manipur also do not inherit immovable property, being governed by their respective customary laws.<sup>32</sup>

It may be mentioned that within the patriarchal social set up, women have always negotiated space, private or public, for assertion of their rights. That the Meitei society is perceived to be much liberal towards

women is on account of the absence of social customs like use of veil, the privilege to initiate divorce, the right of residence of widowed or divorced women in the natal home, right of widows to remarry and the privilege to choose a marriage partner by the method of elopement. This is not unusual in a community which evolved out of and retained several tribal features. However, the notion that Meitei women do not suffer the rampant evils of gender discrimination and related crimes is far from reality. The *Domestic Violence Act 2005* which came into effect from October 2006, is primarily meant to shield women from violence. Yet, in everyday fact of life, many women are victims of domestic violence and male oppression. Socio-religious taboos still hamper the way to woman's road for gender justice. The *Ima Keithel* (Women's Market)<sup>33</sup> in Manipur is seen as a reflection of the laborious Meitei woman with a high sense of work culture. In reality majority of them are forced to take to the trade due to large-scale of unemployment of the male members and therefore the women are actually subjected to male exploitation. Today, a Meitei women is becoming increasingly aware of her rights especially on account of the bitter experiences in the insurgency affected society. The central issue, however, is that along with awareness and other legislations, Acts, etc., there should be a simultaneous change in the mindset of the people in their attitude towards women.

Standard statistical measurements such as sex ratio, higher female literacy figures than the national average etc., claim to reflect a favourable image of women in Manipur. Scholars, therefore, have often argued that women in the State are self-reliant and enjoy a high status. The problem, however, is that reality is enormously complex and this method runs the risk of ignoring significant factors in the real world. Gender disparity continues today as an almost universal phenomena despite the legal acceptance of gender equality. Gender gap permeates nearly all spheres of life to the detriment of the women. In Manipur the women are visible as social actors and in their economic roles, and are expected to be 'torch bearers' of their culture and tradition. Yet as elsewhere in the region, women's participation in public movements have not ensured a place for them in public decision-making bodies. Admittedly, engendering democracy is not just about the issue of numbers alone since numbers are necessary but not a sufficient condition for women's full participation in decision-making bodies. Indeed, a gender balanced representation is a matter of good governance.

## Notes and References:

1. The three dominant ethnic communities in Manipur have a history of competing ethnic identities. The insurgent groups demand separate homelands.
2. Although woman of Manipur cannot be subsumed under one category or taken as a homogenous group, yet patriarchy remains an all pervading concept in the societies. The women are largely governed by customary laws which are more operational than the Indian Penal Code and not all customary laws are gender sensitive. See Violence Against Women in Manipur – A Resource Directory, North East Network, Imphal and UNIFEM South Asia, New Delhi, 2002, p.23
3. From the 1980's when army atrocities began to increase, the elderly women came out of their homes with lamps/torch (meira) to keep vigil of their respective locality, whence they came to be known as the Meira Paibi (meira-torch; paibi-bearer)
4. Formed in 1994, the organization engages in forming alliances with other communities to facilitate dialogues on various issues confronting them.
5. The Tangkhuls are the most populous Naga tribe in Manipur. The East Districts Women's Association (EDWA) was formed in 1979 against militarization in the backdrop of rape incidents in Tangkhul community. Later, EDWA was renamed Tangkhul Naga Long in the same year.
6. Gender refers to a structural relationship of inequality between women and men based on perceived sex difference, which is manifest in society, politics, economy, ideology and in culture. Also see Ian Buchanan, Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory, OUP, New York, 2010, p.198; In recent times, work on gender has been dominated by Judith Butler who argues that society calls upon us to perform masculinity and femininity. Gender is a highly ambivalent category and the crucial point is that we cannot choose not to have any gender at all.
7. Crispin Bates (ed.), Beyond Representation: Colonial and Postcolonial Constructions of Indian Identity, OUP, New Delhi, 2006, p.17.
8. Mary Holmes, What is Gender? Sociological Approaches, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2007, p.111.
9. The State is a larger institution for legal, military and administrative organizations; the market includes farming enterprises, financial corporations etc.; the community is made up of supra-family groupings including neighbourhood networks which exert considerable influence over members of the community; family includes lineage groupings. For analytical framework on institutionalized nature of gender inequalities in India, see N. Kabeer, Reserved Realities, Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 12-13.
10. Pnina Werbner, 'Political Motherhood and the Feminisation of Citizenship: Women's Activisms and the Transformation of the Public Sphere,' in Nina Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (eds.), Women, Citizenship and Difference, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2005, p.231. In coining the term 'political motherhood' Jennifer Schirmer highlights the ability of 'motherist' movements in Latin America not only to break into the public sphere, but to create transnational links beyond the nation state.
11. Ibid., pp.227-228.
12. See J.S. Chafetz, "Gender Equality: Towards a Theory of Change," in Ruth A. Wallace (ed.), Feminism and Sociological Theory, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998.
13. Women Challenge Militarisation – Report on the Conference on State Violence and Women, The Other Media, New Delhi, 2007, p.86.
14. Radha Kumar, The History of Doing, An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India (1800-1990), New Delhi, 2004 (Reprint), p.195.
15. Rena Laisram, 'Meitei Women in Transition: Their Changing Status in Historical Perspective,' in Lalneihzovi (Ed.), Changing Status of Women in North-Eastern States, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2009, p. 33.
16. The defeat of the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur in the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 marked the end of the pre-colonial period of its history. After Manipur came under the British rule, the traditional village economy saw a transformation of a nature and structure determined by British interests.
17. Rena Laisram, 'Reconstructing the Image of a Women Activist: Gaidinlieu and India's Freedom Struggle' Shirin Banu (Ed.), Proceeding Volume of UGC and ICHR Sponsored National Seminar on Status of Women in Colonial Assam, Pandu College, Guwahati, 2010, p.70.
18. Lokendra Arambam, Peace Process in Manipur: Armed Conflict, State Repression and Women, OKDISCD, Guwahati, 2005, p.9.
19. The Beijing Platform for Women, in Roshmi Goswami et.al., Women in Armed Conflict Situations, North East Network, Guwahati, 2005.
20. Uma Chakravarti, 'Persisting Structures, Ideological Manoeuvres, and Everyday Challenges: Reflections on Women's Movements in South Asia', in Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora (eds.), Changing Women's Status in India; Focus on the Northeast, NESRC, Guwahati, 2002, p.35.
21. Subhadra Mitra Channa, Gender in South Asia: Social Imagination and Constructed Realities, Cambridge University Press, Delhi, 2013, p.208.
22. Anjum Katyal, 'Manipuri Theatre's Sabitri Devi: Embodying Protest,' in Kavita Panjabi and P. Chakravarti (eds.), Women Contesting Culture, Readings in Gender Studies 2, STREE, Kolkata, pp. 42-43.
23. Uma Chakravarti, 'Persisting Structures, Ideological Manoeuvres, and Everyday Challenges: Reflections on Women's Movements in South Asia,' in Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora (eds.), op.cit., p.20.
24. Rena Laisram, 'Democracy in Manipur: A Gender Perspective,' Paper presented at the National Seminar on State of Democracy in Northeast India, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 24-26 February, 2010



25. See Pippa Norris et.al., *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Exchange around the World*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003.
26. Rena Laisram, 'Challenges to the Nation: The 'Merger' Question and State of Democracy in Manipur', in Alaka Sarmah (ed.) *Democracy and Diversity in Northeast India*, DVS Publications (India), Guwahati, 2013, p. 93.
27. The key roles of Meitei women in the crucial economic activities viz; agriculture and weaving, and the ritual status of the priestess (maibi) are two unusual features in a primarily male oriented society.
28. Maithreyi Krishnaraj, 'History through the Gender Lens,' in Kirit K.Shah and Meherjyoti Sangle (eds.), *Historiography: Past and Present*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2005, p.125.
29. O. Kand-Freund, 'Introduction', in K. Renner, *The Institution of Private Law and Their Social Function*, Routledge, 1949, p.19.
30. Justice Rajkumar Manisana Singh, *Customs of Manipuri Hindus*, Imphal, 2001, pp. 52-54. Also see S.Raghumani, 'Meitei Personal Law,' in N.Sanjaoba (ed.), *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol.1, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p.343.
31. Ch. Narendra, 'Inheritance Laws and Ethnoses of Manipur,' in N.Sanjaoba (ed.), *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol.3, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1995, p.61
32. J.N.Das, *A Study of the Land System in Manipur*, Law Research Institute, Eastern Region, Guwahati, 1989, p.133.
33. The Ima Keithel (Womens' Market), perhaps the only kind in the entire South Asia is an exclusive market managed entirely by women – both as traders and customers. The shops/plots are inherited by daughter or daughter-in-law and no male ownership is permitted.

## Book-Review

# Little Known Fighters against the Raj\*\*

Amrendra Kr. Thakur\*

The book under review i.e. Sanjoy Hazarika (ed.) *Little Known Fighters against the Raj: Figures from Meghalaya* is an edited collection of the final papers which were initially presented at two workshops/seminars. The first was a one day (6 December 2010) workshop/seminar at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong and the other was a similar but two day affair (7-8 March 2011) organised by Saifuddin Kitchlew Chair and the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia in association with the Department of History of the University. The book contains six chapters including the introduction and an appendix, detailing the agenda of the seminar at Jamia Millia Islamia along with the list of participants. The book has already been reviewed in *The Journal of Social Science and Humanity Research*, 2, 1 (2014): 125-127.

During the last few decades, historiography of modern India has moved from being a discussion of the importance of a particular event/personality to be able to address movements, groups, individuals, and events which might have not attracted the attention of historians otherwise. The second dimension to this visible change in the historiography of modern India is that events which have been paid attention to historically are being looked at from a fresh perspective. This enables the historian to unearth marginalized voices and histories which are not canonized. A couple among the many examples reflecting this change in the paradigms of the study of the history of modern

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\*\*Sanjoy Hazarika (ed.) *Little Known Fighters against the Raj: Figures from Meghalaya* (New Delhi, Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia), 2013, 92 pages, Rs.150/=

India includes Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.) *Rethinking 1857* (2007) and Sagar Boruah (ed.) *Historical Studies in the Context of Globalization: Rationale for Restructuring Curriculum* (2011). This review situates Hazarika's said book within this changing paradigm of modern Indian history in general and the freedom movement in particular. The latter is the thrust area of the book.

Imdad Hussain in the Keynote address delivered at the seminar presents the subject of the struggle against the British in North-East India in a broader perspective. Rightly entitled "The Hill Tribal People of the North-East and India's Struggle for Freedom: Some Historiographical Issues," the address which is based extensively on primary and secondary sources, very comprehensively traces the struggles of the freedom fighters in North-East India. He addresses the struggles aimed at constitutional redressal of the demands of the tribal people as well as the more radical armed rebellions in a large timeframe i.e. till the late 1930s. Though the case of Meghalaya is the main focus of his argument, the examples from the other hill societies of North-East India and even the anti-colonial movements in Africa are appropriate and help in strengthening it. The Address starts by highlighting the historiographical issues concerning the North-Eastern region and the responsibility of the historians to the same. He asserts that they have to provide "... a more powerful perspective on colonial rule in Assam and the hill and frontier areas" and "...ensure that this finds its place in our national histories" (p.1). He provides an excellent historiographical critique of the factors that have led to the neglect of the 'widespread resistance of the hill people to the extension of British control over the territories' (p. 29). Except the role of the church in the freedom struggle in North-East India, every other aspect possibly related to the latter has been discussed comprehensively by Hussain. However, the subsequent papers are more particularly event-centric, compared to the larger historical canvas in which Hussain's address is sketched.

David R. Syiemlieh in his paper "Call of Freedom from the Hills: Tirot Sing and his Significance in the Freedom Struggle" discusses U. Tirot Sing, the Chief of Hima Nongkhlaw, who resisted the British imperial movement in the Khasi hills. Syiemlieh informs us that as the outcome of his resistance and subsequent surrender in January 1833, Sing was arrested and put in jail in Dacca where he died due to stomach disorder on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1834. On the basis of his comprehensive and objective researches, Syiemlieh is certainly able to establish the historical reality (contra popular myths) about the last days of U. Tirot Sing (p. 41).

S.N. Lamare in the next chapter of the book entitled "The Little War – The Jaintias and the British" discusses the struggle of the Jaintias against the British. He treats the subject matter comprehensively, tracing the history of the struggle from the origins to various subsequent developments (p. 43). He is also able to clearly show the unfortunate moves of the British to declare the pre-colonial socio-cultural and political developments among the Jaintias as illegitimate, which became one of the reasons for the Jaintia resistance that they faced. The contribution and sacrifices of U. Kiang Nangbah and others working with him to the cause of the Jaintias are elaborately and objectively presented by him.

Patricia Mukhim in her paper "Freedom Fighters of Meghalaya: The Politics of Appropriation" discusses the contemporary politics of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo societies by highlighting the monopolizing of the events/anniversaries of the life of the local freedom fighters by certain organizations. She is rightly of the view that "Unfortunately these warriors have become a sort of political instruments and a cause for exclusive ethnic pride. Instead of becoming national icons like Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose, the communities to which these warriors belong and the pressure groups of each community have appropriated them" (p.69). At places, the paper appears to be journalistic in nature and lacks the style and formulation that go into the writing of a rigorously academic paper. Barring this minor lacuna, the treatment of its chosen subject through an analysis of the contemporary developments is the most important strength of the paper.

Last but not the least is the concluding paper of the volume by Abhijit Choudhury entitled "What Do We Owe Them? Three Non-Tribal Fighters against the Raj from Meghalaya." Chaudhary is able to reconstruct the works and feelings of the three freedom fighters namely Shri Dharanidhar Mahanta, Shri Manoranjan Nandi and Shri Nar Bahadur Gurung in and about anti-colonial resistance as well as the politics in the post-Independence nation state (p. 88). The first hand information collected by Chaudhary is able to provide a new perspective to the reconstruction of history in North-East India.

However, the book suffers from lack of uniformity in referencing style of the chapters and the full information of the references. Finding typographical mistakes is relatively difficult though. Had this volume also included a few other articles by scholars working in North-East India on say, the Constitutional methods adopted by the leaders of the freedom struggle, the role of the church during the resistance movement

and after, the role and contribution of native and indigenous educated elites to the freedom struggle, role of the press (regional and national), the important contributions of the freedom fighters from the Garo Hills, the participation of women in the entire process etc., its value would have increased manifold. Barring these glitches, the publication of this book is an excellent beginning to the reconstruction of the tribal resistance movements against the British expansion in the hills of North-East India. Though it is a welcome departure from the valley-centric historiography of freedom struggle, the study of some common problems such as economic blockade of the hills as the deliberate British policy to punish the hill tribes, the fortification technology of the tribes against the British aggression, the planned destruction of youth dormitories of the tribes, alliance of the tribal Chiefs against the British, role of the Press etc., needs to be done to be able to fully reconstruct the freedom struggle of the hill societies of North-East India. However, the editor and his colleagues deserve our congratulations and one hopes to see in the near future similar contributions about the other areas of North-East India.