



S.T. Das

Tribal Life of North-Eastern India

HABITATE ECONOMY
CUSTOMS TRADITIONS

**TRIBAL LIFE
OF
NORTH-EASTERN INDIA**
HABITAT • ECONOMY • CUSTOMS •
TRADITIONS



DR. S. T. DAS



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PREFACE

The north eastern area originally comprised the composite Assam or old Kamarupa and the two native states of Manipur and Tripura. Assam alone, as it exists at present, no longer comprises the north-east region, is only one of the constituents forming the region. The other constituents are Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

Although Assam of the past or the north-east region as it is called to day, had been known for its own civilization, its geographical position was not known to many people. According to the Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsang, Assam had attained a fairly high degree of civilization under the region of the Hindu King Bhaskara Varman in the 7th century. However, apart from a few copper plates and rock inscriptions, little is known about the Kingdom of Assam after Huen Tsang's visit until the arrival of the Ahoms in the 13th century.

The Ahoms were a tribe of Shans from a land called Pong, lying between Old Assam and Burma, who originally belong to north China. They entered the north-east region for the first time through the Patkai Hills as a small raiding party in 1215 A.D. Taking advantage of the political instability in the country, they gradually became the masters of the whole region and ruled over the land for nearly six centuries.

The Ahoms named the land Meung-dun-chun-khan or the 'Country of Gold' and later changed it to the Burmese name of Sham or Shan. The invaders pronounced it as 'Asham' or 'Aham' from which, it is believed, the Old State of Assam derives its name. The descendants of the Shan invaders were called Ahoms.

Since the Ahoms had a highly developed sense of history, they chronicled their stories on the dried barks of trees. They gradually subjugated the indigenous rulers—the Kochs,

Kacharis and Chutiyas—and organised a feudal system peculiar to themselves.

The north eastern region is very sensitive and important from the strategic point of view. No other part of India than the north-east region has boundaries which are clearly vulnerable to outside powers. The area is surrounded by four foreign countries, viz., Bhutan, China, Burma and Bangladesh. With her diverse population, speaking different languages and professing divergent faiths, may be regarded as an epitome of India. It is the land where waves of immigrants from Tibeto-Burman and Mongoloid stock have met and woven with the aboriginals a pattern of common condition and tradition. The people of hills and the plains have lived long side by side and followed common pursuits of life undisturbed.

The composition of population of the north-east and the immigration to this land throughout history offer a subject for worthwhile academic study. In the composition of its population, there are the Austric or the Austro-Asiatic elements, the Dravidian elements, the Indo-Aryan and the Indo-Mongoloid elements. The people of north-east India are composed of different races, speaking various languages, like Austric or Mon Khmer (one of which is Khasi), Sino-Tibetan representing the Bodo or the Kachari Tongue, and the Rai or the Ahom. These languages have influenced the phonological and morphological characteristic of the Assamese language which has developed out of the Sanskrit language from as early as the 7th century A.D.

India is the home of some 23 million naturvolker, who have lived through centuries their own life in the remote parts of the country and it is these people who still afford opportunities to social geographers and anthropologists to assess the influence of immediate environment on the culture, tradition and the mode of life.

There are many tribes in this north-eastern state. Each has its own culture, tradition, customs and beliefs. But the Mikirs, Dimasa Kacharis Zemi-Nagas and the Manipuris are the most interesting and important tribes. An attempt has been made to present a detailed and in-depth study of the tribes of this region. It is the outcome of my seven years' on the spot study of

habitat, economy and society of the hill people. But greater emphasis has been given to the study of the Dimasa Kacharis, Zemi-Nagas and the Mikirs.

This in-depth study has been written to fill a gap in the literature of social geography and cultural anthropology. Particular emphasis is laid upon the way of life of the tribes which is one of direct response determined by the environment and the queer beliefs of the tribes, which spring from the fertile imagination. The various myths and legends are the result of the natural reaction of the tribes to their environment, a search for an explanation of the mystery of life. There is no set pattern of socio-economic development of the tribes. They are purely and strictly agricultural people, tied to their immediate environment which affords opportunity for cultivation. Though some of their customs are strange to us, others like the social system which functions at all levels are essentially democratic in nature.

In a book like this, I must acknowledge the assistance I have received from various authorities, writers and critics, who have afforded valuable suggestions and those whose books have helped me to draw inspiration. Omission if any was not deliberate.

Special mention may be made to Mr. B. Bhagavati, Mr. B.P. Chaliha, Ex-Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Biman Kumar Dasgupta, Mr. Pradyot Mitra, Mr. P.D. Chaudhury, Mr. Jyoti Kumar Sarma, P. Pugh, Mr. K.P. Bahadur, Dr. K.B. Singh, Mr. T.S. Gangte, Principal, Churachandpur College, Manipur, Dr. H. Kamkhenthang, Sr. Research Officer, Tribal Welfare Deptt., Manipur, Dr. B. Pakem, Reader, N.E.H. University, Shillong, Dr. D. N. Barthakur, Director, I.C.A.R., North Eastern Region, Shillong, Mr. D.B. Ghosh, Deputy Director General, G.S.I., Shillong, Ms. Jaya Hazarika, Tinsukia College, Assam, Mr. Satish Chandra Kakati, Ex-Editor, Assam Tribune, Dr. D.N. Majumdar, Reader, Anthropology, Guwahati University and last but not least to Mr. N.K. Jain, Director, Directorate for Development of Tribes and Backward Classes, Manipur, for valuable material help and friendly suggestions. I am grateful to them.

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S.T. DAS

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CHAPTER I

GLIMPSES OF THE EASTERN STATES

The Assamese have always lived in isolation in a remote corner of India encircled by the mighty Brahmaputra. Nevertheless affinity of language and religion bind the Assamese to the rest of the country.

Since independence the State of Assam has lost territory—the district of Sylhet at partition, the Naga Hills in 1958, Meghalaya (Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills districts) in 1970, and Mizo Hills and Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA) in 1972.

Many States

The Greater Assam state has now been reduced to the Brahmaputra valley, where the State's official language, Assamese is spoken; the Barak valley (Cachar) where Bengali enjoys the status of the officially recognised district language; and the connecting Mikir and North Cachar Hill where tribal languages have official local provenance.

In the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys tribal groups like the Bados and Kachar's lived by fishing and hunting and spoke Tibeto-Burmese languages till about 2,000 years ago when people from Mithila speaking a dialect of outer group of Indo-European language came and settled. The immigrants brought iron tools to hack down thick semi-tropical evergreen forests and to work the heavy soils of the Brahmaputra valley. They produced more food and could sustain bigger population than the primitive people. The immigrants therefore multiplied faster. Their language and their culture ultimately became the language and culture of the valley.

In the Barak valley the Kacharis continued to hold their own till the 18th century when their king was given a fictitious Kashatriya lineage. Immigrants from East Bengal overwhelmed

the Kachari indigenes, but the area retained its name, Cachar. The people are referred to as Kachari, but the district is referred to as Cachar.

Early Society

The Assamese represent the early Indian Society. Untouchability is negligible. Only 6% of the population are untouchables. All Assamese are equals, though some are more important than others and may be called *dangarias*, the respected. The elders enjoy a special status and the village headman is called the *gaonbura* or the village elder. The young are pampered and have rights and freedom of action. Bride capture was a usual form of marriage till recently, and gave youth options which the arranged marriages of other Indian societies denied.

The Assamese lived in a remote corner of India. The mountains which enclose the Brahmaputra valley make of it a blind alley. This geographical isolation of the Assamese has been further emphasised by the area having had a different historical experience than the rest of the country. The tribes, who held on to food gathering or shifting cultivation with the aid of hoes, were expelled into the backyard—the hills.

The natural landscape of Assam is of a naturally wooded tract rendered into a grass land by man's activities. If the grass is not burnt every year, the forest will take over and rob thousands of tourists of opportunities to see the one-horned rhino. Except for four months in the winter it rains throughout the year and it rains heavily, thus providing the optimum condition for forest growth.

The forest is fought back by ploughing. The Brahmaputra valley is thus a man-made grassland. It is narrow (nearly 128 k.m.) wide and long (extending over 800 k.m.). Brahmaputra valley is the third biggest in the world.

Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura

Taking into account of the greater Assam, three of the most strategically situated states : Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura, on the north-eastern border, were the most neglected one.

Manipur and Nagaland, along with Tripura are three of the smallest states of the Indian Union. Tripura and Manipur were

princely states with mythological accounts tracing back their history to the epic age.

Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata, during his wanderings in the forests, is said to have married Ulupi, the daughter of a Naga chief and had a son named Iravant. Later a Manipuri Princess also bore Arjuna a son, Babhravahana. Years later Arjuna returned with a horse for Ashwamedh yaga. Conquering all the areas he reached Manipur. His son Babhravahana came out to receive him. Arjuna asked him to fight as required of princess. In the battle Arjuna was beaten and badly injured. Ulupi the Naga Princess, is said to have arrived with medicinal herbs from the mountains and revived Arjuna.

Nagaland and Manipur have long borders in the east with North Burma, with its proximity to China, while Tripura on three sides is surrounded by friendly Bangladesh. The 8.2 lakhs tribal population in the hills have similarity to those in Nagaland and Tripura while 9 lakhs of people of the valley, owing to different topography, climate and religion have developed an entirely different type of culture.

The people of the Manipur valley are orthodox Vaishnavite Hindus by religion. The people and their houses are perhaps the cleanest in the world. Their greatest contribution to the country is the Manipuri dance, one of the four classical dance forms of India. The women work harder than the men. The Manipuris have developed from ancient days indigenous games and sports. Polo is said to have originated in Manipur. Manipuri is the common language among the people of the valley and the hills, even though the latter have a large number of dialects among the tribes. A Manipuri of the valley does not take meat in any form but relishes fish. Fishing in the ponds and rivers with especially made nets form part of the day's programme for any family.

Tripura with its five low ranges running from north to south has about sixty per cent of its area covered with forests. The tribal people with its shifting cultivation adhered to the hilly regions while the valley has been populated by the Bengalis. In the thirteenth century A.D. King Ratna Manikya, settled ten thousand Bengalis of various professions in Tripura. Surrounded by pre-partition Bengal, the culture and way of life of the

people of the valley have been akin to those of any Bengali village and the tribal people in spite of their own dialects, dances and attire were closer to the people of Bengal.

About 30 per cent of the population of Tripura are scheduled tribes and ten per cent scheduled castes. Land for tribal people has never been surplus. The Jhuming cultivation has been reduced. Special schemes were undertaken to bring the tribal people on to permanent cultivation.

In Nagaland, the population has only a microscopic minority of non-tribals consisting mostly of traders and government servants. The villages are mostly situated on peaks of hills and far away from each other. Jhum cultivation which the hill people are used to from time immemorial continue as the jungles are still quite sufficient for the increased population to burn and to cultivate. They return to the same place after about 12 years.

There are 16 main tribes each distinguishable by its separate dialect, its dance and the colour and pattern of the shawls its people wear. The common language has been a kind of Assamese passed on by word of mouth, today known as Nagamese and used also in the Legislative Assembly. As a state, Nagaland has adopted English as the official language. The tribal people of these regions are perhaps the most musical of all the people of India.

Village Organisation

The hill people of these three states have certain similarities, the most important being an ideal village organisation. From the most democratically elected leadership, there are in some tribes on autocratic hereditary chiefship, which administer the village and dispense justice based on the unwritten traditional laws of the tribes. The village lands are owned collectively by the village. But the highly developed terrace cultivation, the result of hard work of individual, is owned by families who pass them on to their children. Small plots on which homesteads are built are also under individual ownership. Land disputes are almost unknown. But the vast forests used for Jhuming cultivation, the special jungles reserved for fuel and grazing, the trees preserved around the water points are all owned collectively. There are very few boundary disputes between villages and the

traditional boundaries dividing miles of jungles are respected by both sides.

But in Manipur and Tripura there is a large population of tribes of Kuki origin. For hundreds of years these tribes have been migrating but today the villages have become permanent. A strong man with a sense of adventure and ambition went far away into pastures unknown, cleared the jungles and started a new village. He became the chief and those who desired settling in his village had to give him the annual rent in terms of paddy, parts of animals that had been killed and certain other services. These terms differ from tribes to tribes. The chief has his own mantris (ministers), who looked after various aspects of village administration. The natural forests are the most important resources of these three states. Geological mapping of these areas has not yet been taken up systematically though some indication of the presence of oil in Tripura, coal in Nagaland and lime stone in Manipur has been obtained and work on projects has started. Sources of hydro-power are in abundance, particularly prospects for micro-hydel projects.

The people of all the three states are rice eaters. Every family tries to grow rice whether in the valley or the hills. Jampui Hills in Tripura have been producing the finest oranges.

The Manipur oak 'Uyum' takes the Tasser worm. This tree grows wild in the Manipur and Nagaland jungles.

Meghalaya

Meghalaya came into existence in January 1972. It consists of the three districts of the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hill which previously formed part of Assam.

Although there is uncertainty regarding the origin of the Khasi and Jaintias, they are believed to be a remnant of one of the early population movement into India from Indo-China and their language belonged to the Mon-Khmer family of languages of that region. A customary law in the Khasi society is by which property is handed down from the mother to the daughter. The Garos, who inhabit the western segment of the state, are part of the Bodo race of the Tibeto-Burman family, with a matrilineal society as in the case of the Khasis and

Jaintias. They still practice shifting cultivation and their staple food is rice.

Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal (previously known as NEFA or North-East Frontier Agency) also came into existence in January 1972. It consists of five districts, named after the principal rivers that form their drainage. It is bound on the west by Bhutan, on the north by the Tibetan region of China, on the east by Burma and on the south by Assam.

The inhabitants of the extreme northern and western regions have had age-long economic and social contacts with Tibet and Bhutan, so that their language, religion, dress and social habits have strong Tibetan affinities. The extreme eastern region, on the other hand, have been subjected to influence from Burma and there are number of small settlements of people of Burmese origin known as Khamptis and Phakials, who have maintained their identity as Buddhist communities in their adopted homeland. The inhabitants of the southern fringe of Arunachal, particularly the villages along the plains and lower hills, have had traditional economic and social contacts with the Assamese and have also some knowledge of the Assamese language.

The main bulk of the inhabitants in the interior hills, until recently, had little contact with the outside world. Of Mongoloid stock, they speak their own languages, which are mainly of the Tibeto-Burma family.

Until January 1972, both Arunachal and Meghalaya were constitutionally part of the state of greater Assam. Both the areas are tribal. The economy of the two areas is basically not much different. It is essentially an agricultural economy and the people practised mainly shifting cultivation, with rice as the staple crop. Both areas have rich possibilities for horticultural development.

The main charm and delight of the region is its flora and fauna. The significant feature of this area is the democratic process. Laws are framed by the people, sanctioned by the council and promulgated by the president or the chief. The chiefs have no right but to approve and enforce it. Hence, the people propose, the council sanctions and the chief promulgates.

Every evening all the men gather in spacious council room to discuss the topic of the day. The extension of democratic processes from the limits of a village over a wider sphere will provide one of the most exciting challenges to the people of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh in the years to come.

Hot, humid, malarial but also green, mountainous and enchanting ; a land in which pagan worshippers of nature and Christians live in amity. It is Cupid's own hunting ground. In Mizoram love has no limits.

Mizoram

In Mizoram, every person from the plains is a 'Vai', an outsider. In Mizoram, there are two distinct groups—The Mizos themselves (mi=man, zo=hill, ram=country) literally the highlanders and their homeland, and the 'Vais', implying the Bengalis of neighbouring Cachar and all plains men in the rest of the country.

It lies in the north-eastern corner of India. Bounded by Burma in the east, Bangladesh on the west and Cachar and Manipur on the north and north-east. There is little fiat surface land in the state.

Mizoram has three districts—Aizawl, Lunglei and Chhimtuipui. There are many rivers and streams, chief among them being Tlacong (Dhaleswari), Karnaphuli and the Kolodyne. Wet paddy cultivation and irrigation are very limited. Excluding the hot, humid and malarial tract inhabited mostly by the Chakmas, Mizoram has a pleasant climate and beautiful landscape. Rice is the staple food and all manner of meat goes into the Mizo diet. Pork (Vawksa) is the favourite meat.

The Mizo are of the Mongoloid family. One notices difference in stature, complexion, pigment of the eye, hair and other features among different sub-tribes. Among the major tribal groups Lushai, Hmar, Ralte, Paihte, Pawi, Chakma and Lakher deserve special mention. Traditionally, the Lushais were dominant and most of the chiefs belonged to the Lushais clans of Sailo, Rokhum and Zadeng. Barring the Chakmas and Lakhers, who prefer to call themselves Maras, all other tribes speak the Mizo language. The Chakmas speak a dialect similar to Bengali and Assamese while the Maras have their own language.

In the traditional religion of the Mizos, when a man dies his spirit enters the 'dead man's village' with the spirits of all animals and human beings killed by him in his life time. The more numerous the spirit of the slain, the better for a man's spirit after his death. This was a probable motive for head-hunting. A few teasing village belles could send a band of young men on a raid to collect heads as proof of their valour.

In olden days, the Mizos had an institution called 'Zawlbuk.' It was a dormitory for all the unmarried men and boys of the village. The inmates of the Zawlbuk were generally very noisy and the chief alone could admonish them. Games were played, wrestling was indulged in on a large scale, physical fitness was at a premium. The Zawlbuk enabled the chief to summon all young men for the defence of the village against a surprise attack. In some ways, the Zawlbuk was similar to the old 'Kalaris' of Kerala.

The Garos have a similar institution, 'Nokpante', which flourishes in some parts of Garo Hills even today. Now Zawlbuk has disappeared from Mizoram before the second world war.

The Mizo society has always been egalitarian. Even the chief were not particularly affluent. A sense of humour, along with the ability to sing, dance and make speeches, is the most widely shared quality of the Mizos.

Traditional dances like 'Cheraw Kan', 'Chheih lam' and 'Solokia' are popular, and one still hears about some one seeing spirits in the jungles (ramhuai).

The secular traditions are well-preserved, particularly in matters of love, marriage and inheritance of property. The youngman's right to court a young woman (nula) has not been curtailed, though curfew has placed severe limits on its nocturnal manifestation. The custom of a boy meeting and wooing a girl is known as 'Nularim'. In olden days boys would leave their homes after dinner and meet the girl in her house. If she rolled tobacco for him in paper and tied it with her hair, it was a declaration of love. These days, the boys are on the giving end and presents are said to include chocolates and cosmetics.

The Mizo society is tolerant of sexual peccadilloes. This does not mean permissiveness or laxity. The old custom of

paying a price for the bride is still in vogue. The bridegroom pays this money to the bride's father and it is distributed among relatives.

Women bring water and firewood, work in the Jhums and weave clothes, with a rudimentary infrastructure, the economy of Mizoram is still based on the traditional method of shifting cultivation, 'Jhumming'.

From inter-tribal wars and spirit worship, the Mizo has come a long way in a short span of time. Today he is very westernised and restless.

A visual feast awaits the visitor to these Eastern states. Here history has taken a back seat and allowed Nature to enchant the tourist. Game sanctuaries, lakes and waterfalls, miles and miles of tea gardens, exotic orchids and the sheer greenery of hills provide a fitting back drop for the colourful fantastic costumes, customs, and handicrafts of the divergent people.

CHAPTER II

GEO-STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The need for an in-depth study of the geopolitical significance of the north-east region of India is readily suggested by misconceptions and confusion about the country. The people and their problems spread over this far-flung part of the country. The term 'region' is of recent use. In common parlance as well as official discussions the term is used quite often now-a-days, specially after creation of tiny States and Union Territories in about two decades of the post-Independence period.

The north-eastern area originally comprised the composite Assam or old Kamarupa and the two Native States of Manipur and Tripura. In mediaeval times the area was ruled by various indigenous dynasties such as Chutiya, Kock, Kachari or Bodo and later by the Ahom who came from Burma and ruled the country in the east for about 600 years. After the British annexation in terms of the Yandabo Treaty (1826) it was known as Assam more explicitly than before and formed part of the British Empire of India. However, no definite or conclusive explanation is available as to why the Area was called Assam. According to some well-known writers, the name was derived from *asama* bearing a topographical meaning; some others felt that Assam was equivalent to Ahom; still others were of the view that Assam meant 'peerless'. E. A. Gait, author of *A History of Assam*, however, held the opinion that 'Assameis a Sanskrit derivative and is a fair equivalent to Ahom'.

Whatever that be, Assam alone, as it exists at present, no longer comprises the north-east region; it is only one of the constituents forming the region. The other constituents are Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. Their population and areas individually are as follows:

Assam—Population 14,625,159 and area 78,528 sq. km.; Nagaland—Population 516,449 and area 16,572 sq. km.; Meghalaya—Population, 1,011,699 and area 22,489 sq. km.; Manipur—Population 1,072,753 and area 22,359 sq. km.; Tripura—Population 15,56,342 and area 10,477 sq. km.; Arunachal Pradesh—Population 4,67,511 and area 83,578 sq. km.; and Mizoram—Population 3,21,986 and area 2,398 sq. km.; (The population figures are given on the basis of the 1971 census). The area of the entire north-eastern region is 2,36,401 sq. km. with a total population of 23 millions which may have now reached the figure of about 26 millions. The peoples inhabiting the region are in all stages of civilisation. While Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura are five fullfledged States of the Indian Republic, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram are two Union Territories. However, demands for raising the status of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram to full Statehood have been voiced by the peoples and Governments there and it is most likely that their demands would be met by the Centre in the near future.

Although Assam of the past, or the north-east region as it is called at present, had been known for its own civilisation, its geographical position was not known to many people including those with a sense of history and geography. In 1908 Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, revealed a wrong notion about the people of this part of the country whom he mentioned in his *Hind Swaraj* or 'Indian Home Rule' as people like Pindaris and Thugs. During his first visit to Assam in April 1922 Gandhiji expressed regret for the observations he had made in his booklet, at a huge public meeting held in Gauhati. He said, "I have committed a grave mistake in my booklet *Hind Swaraj* in which I bracketed the Assamese with Pindaris and other wild tribes. I have made ample amends to the people. It was certainly a grave injustice to the great Assamese people who are every whit as civilised as any part of India."

Even as late as in 1936 many people in India and outside had no correct knowledge as to the geographical location of Assam and, for that matter, of north-east India. This is revealed in Dr. S. K. Bhuyan's *London Memories*. According to him, "Londoners who have heard of Assam can be counted on the tips of fingers" Dr. Bhuyan said, "When I told a lady that I

come from Assam she greeted me saying 'Oh, I know the place. My brother lives in Bangkok.' She did not know that from Assam it was a long way to Tipperary and Siam. This ignorance is not shocking, as here in India ; Assam is Honolulu to many a University product." He adds, "I told a London grocer that Assam grows abundant tea and the grocer readily said, 'I know it well. I sell Darjeeling tea myself.'" Dr. Bhuyan had to explain to the innocent grocer that Assam and Darjeeling were two separate regions.

Such misconceptions about the geographical location of the north-east region or Assam and its people can be multiplied. But there is little doubt that this region was till recently considered as a land of mosquito, kala-azar, rains, floods, earthquakes, head-hunting, sorcery and, of course, tea and oil. One may believe it or not, Assam was so much identified with, say, kala-azar, that in the admission form prescribed by the Cotton College authorities in the twenties there was a column in the form which said : "Do you come from a Kala-azar area ?" The column spoke for itself and revealed the strange ideas about this part of the country. At present also, there are persons whose perceptions in respect of the geography, history, politics, language, social customs, etc. of the people living in the region have not changed much ; if at all, certain events of the past few years have deepened the wrong impressions of many ill-informed but highly educated persons.

In regard to the geographical significance of the region it is necessary to understand its situation in relation to the world map. No part of India other than the north-east region has boundaries which are clearly vulnerable to outside powers. The area is surrounded by four foreign countries, viz. Bhutan, China, Burma and Bangladesh, touching 4,825 km. in length. The breakdown boundaries figures are as follows : Boundary between Assam and Bhutan—500 km. ; between Arunachal Pradesh and China—1,175 km. ; between Arunachal and Burma—475 km. ; between Mizorm and Bangladesh—275 km. ; between Tripura and Bangladesh—625 km. and between Meghalaya and Bangladesh—400 km. In the context of the Super Powers' hobnobbing with small countries in troubled water the significance of the N.E. region can be overlooked at the peril of inviting troubles of one

kind or another. Students of Political Science and International Affairs would perhaps agree that the area is sensitive and its sensitivity is easily comprehended from another historical fact, that is to say, the population of the area is polyglot and a large percentage of them come of tribes whose links with India during the British Rule were minimal, if not non-existent. And, excepting Bhutan, the three other foreign countries close to India in the eastern part cannot be counted as permanent friends or permanent enemies. China's behaviour in any case is unpredictable; Burma's north-west parts have been found to be convenient hideouts for the Naga rebels while Bangladesh's Chittagong Hills areas are known to be a sanctuary for the Mizo extremists. The problem of infiltration from erstwhile East Pakistan has become intractable and its implications may be better imagined than described.

Notwithstanding their unparalleled capacity for formulating their defence policy the Britishers did not, it seems, have adequate perception about the geopolitical significance or north-east India nor the Government of free India realised after attainment of Independence that the area was ill-defended against foreign attacks. Similarly, the new Government did not properly grasp the political the problems in order to fix priority in solving them. It seems the Government followed the footsteps of the alien rulers in dealing with the problems of the region. A study for the foreign and defence policy of the British Government during the period 1858-1905 reveals that the Britishers were chiefly concerned with the defence of the north-west frontier of India. Britain's main anxiety was to prevent the danger of a thrust upto the heart to Central Asia posed by the inexorable advance of imperialist Russia, commonly described as Britains' Russophobia. The occupation of the Pamirs—the roof of the World was of vital significance in the latter half of the last century. A British military expert had apprehensions that the Russian posts on the Pamirs with Chitral in anarchy would constitute a dangerous neighbour for the British Empire in India.

This brief reference to the north-west frontier at the end of the 19th century is relevant to a study of the present-day position of the north-east frontier areas. It needs hardly to be

stressed that the significance of the geopolitical situation of the region was not adequately appreciated by the British rulers nor by the successor Government after independence. For this lacuna in defence matter compounded by similar leeway in other spheres pertaining to this part of the country the nation had to face an ignoble situation in 1962 following the unprovoked and unexpected aggression of China on the northern borders. After Independence the Government of India should have recast the defence needs of the country in the proper perspective. Unfortunately, India's obsession with the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai philosophy was so deep that the Nehru Government did not apprehend any attack from China. But the events of October-November in 1962 exposed the Government's serious lapse in a vital field like national security. Even the none-too-happy relationship between India and Pakistan failed to suggest to policy maker in New Delhi that the north-eastern region was vulnerable to outside attacks and called for foolproof pre-preparedness for its defence. China's attack in 1962, however, impeded the Government of India to reorient the entire defence policy relating to this part of the country as all others together with building up the necessary infra-structure, specially road communications along the northern border.

Equally, if not more, significant and important are the political problems and issues. It is on record that excepting the people of Assam in the plains districts those of the other constituents of the region did not have any opportunity to join the mainstream of the freedom movement. The British Government had deliberately barred all contacts between the plainsmen and the highlanders in Assam and the neighbouring areas through various devices like introduction of an Inner Line, for instance. Though this system was ostensibly an economic measure to protect the peoples in the hills from any interference in their way of life the measure developed into an impenetrable barrier between the hillmen and the rest of the region which was further tightened by the Bengal Frontier Regulations I of 1873, etc.

The division of the Hills districts into Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas under the Constitution of 1935 was another political device by which assimilation of the hillmen with the

plainsmen was hampered and thus the tribes were kept isolated from the winds of national awakening. This, in reality, constituted a sort of museum policy pursued by the alien rules. Foreign missionaries were also working as handmaids to the British administrators in the tribal areas. The trading community among the Britishers was not lagging behind and, having the monopoly in tea, oil and coal industries besides its hold in river and rail communications, the British commercial section was also giving a helping hand to the then rulers in various ways. This is borne out by the fact that Lord Curzon, the most influential and reactionary among the Viceroys of India, told the tea planters of Assam in 1901 that the identification of interests of all classes of Englishmen in India was his constant endeavour which he repeated in a speech at Barakar in 1903 in the following words: "I look upon all Englishmen in this country as engaged in different branches of the same great undertaking my work lies in administration, yours in exploitation but both are aspects of the same question."

Lord Curzon's exhortation to the Englishmen of all hues serving in this part of the country is self-explanatory. All this had a very baneful effect on the entire population of north-east India. Despite the policy of the British rulers to isolate the hillmen from the others the message of the freedom struggle did penetrate some of the hill areas. This is evident from the anti-British agitation launched by Rani Gaidiliu in the inaccessible jungles of erstwhile Naga Hills district. Still, it cannot be denied that the unrest of the Nagas soon after India's becoming an independent country was one of the results of the then Government's museum policy applied to the tribals. Gradually, separatist tendencies affected the other Hill districts which formed parts of composite Assam for ages. Even, Arunachal Pradesh, that is, the erstwhile North-Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) which was by and large free from the operations of the foreign missionaries and other anti-national forces was separated from Assam. In the process the Assam part of the region was split and two new States Nagaland and Meghalaya were created besides two Union Territories—Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Judged by the historical fact that the alien rule had neglected the region in the matter of the welfare of the people the Govern-

ment of India should have initiated viable and time-bound schemes to develop the region. The answer to the separatist movement did not lie in the fragmentation of the composite Assam. Unfortunately, the Government created, in a huff, if one may say so, a number of States and two Union Territories. But it seems that the remedy has proved worse than the disease.

The problems of ethnicity in north-east India, let it be acknowledged, is a real one. But the problem has been made more complicated by the legacy of the British policy and has been overplayed by detractors of the national movement over the years. In order to take advantage of the situation arising out of isolation of the hills tribes from the rest of the country during the British days, a scheme was hatched by an Oxford Professor, Mr. Reginald Coupland, as transfer of power from the Raj to the Indians was imminent, to create a buffer State comprising the Excluded and partially Excluded Areas in the eastern most part of India to which a slice of northern Burma was to be added through negotiation with the Burmese Government. The Scheme prepared early in the forties is generally known as the Coupland Plan. For unknown reasons the British Parliament did not approve of the scheme and thus a potentially dangerous political design ended. Had a buffer State of Professor Coupland's conception been created in north-east India, the situation would have become internationally dangerous. However, the geopolitical importance of the region was not lost to the Britishers. The Cabinet Mission's Plan of May 16, 1946 to place Assam under Group C was another design by which the British Government in collusion with the Muslim League sought to keep up its hold in the area. Mr. M.A. Jinnah's bid to grab Assam into his projected Pakistan in the forties though Assam was not a Muslim majority Province lends support to the suspicion that some powers were sedulously working to detach Assam and the neighbouring area from India. Even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had an eye on Assam, for he wrote in his book, *Eastern Pakistan : Its Population, Determination and Economics* : "Because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its huge population and Assam will give it full scope for expansion, and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral resources, coal, petroleum, etc. Eastern Pakistan must

include Assam to be financially and economically strong.²²

However, attempts of the aforesaid forces did not succeed. Following the attainment of Independence it was hoped that notwithstanding the harm that the alien rulers and their benchmen had caused to the integration of the various ethnic groups inhabiting the region, an outlook for national cohesiveness and understanding among all sections of the polyglot population would be promoted. That hope does not appear to have been brought to fruition even after three decades of Independence. This is an important aspect of the geopolitical life of north-east India that merits close attention of the Government, intellectuals, sociologists and others interested in peace and harmony among the people.

The unsatisfactory and inadequate communication system between north-east India and the rest of the country is also a relevant feature in the geo-political life of the area. The partition of the country in 1947 left this part high and dry. The only territorial link with the mainland was a narrow strip of land, 56 kilometers wide, spread over between West Bengal and Bihar, but without any rail facility or any worthwhile road. The importance of this corridor on consideration of strategy and transport was soon realised and Assam was linked by a M.G. rail line at Fakiragram within a couple of years. Admittedly, this was a remarkable achievement on the part of the Indian Railways authority. The complete dislocation of the inland and waterways between Calcutta and Gauhati which was the life-line of transportation of goods to and from Assam in 1965 following the Indian-Pakistan conflict added to the transport bottleneck. The construction of a B.G. railway line from Delhi to Gauhati removed some of the difficulties in transportation of goods brought from outside north-east India for the entire region and the construction of Farraka Barrage has solved many long standing problems of this region.

In order to have an appreciation of the affairs of north-east India a reference has also to be made to the vast natural resources the region possesses and how these have been harnessed with fringe benefits to the population. In terms of natural resources the north-east is one of the richest regions but in point of economic development it is one of the most backward. This is an

obvious paradox. To illustrate this point one needs only to refer to two very precious commodities, namely, oil and tea. Oil was first discovered in Assam and a British Company established a refinery at Digboi, the first of this kind in the country, in 1905. After Independence the first oilfield was successfully exploited at Naharkotiya in 1952. In the subsequent years several oilfields have been discovered in Upper Assam and the known reserves of crude oil in this part of the country are of the order of 69,27 million tons according to the Government of India's statistics compiled a decade ago, and the search is still on. The same official source says that there are 42,460 million cubic meters of natural gas in Assam alone. And yet a refinery in the public sector did not come up in Assam till 1962 when the people had to launch a massive agitation for fulfilment of a legitimate demand of theirs. The Gauhati Refinery established in the wake of public agitation continues in its original capacity of .75 tons.

Assam's tea occupies a prestigious place in the world's map of the tea industry. Approximately, 51 percent of India's total production of tea (575.12 m kgs) is produced in Assam. Since the Government of India earns a sizeable foreign exchange out of tea export every year Assam's contribution in that respect is considerable. (India's total export of tea in 1980 was 224.49m kgs. valued at Rs. 412.25 Crores). But Assam does not derive much benefit for a variety of reasons. Jute is another important agricultural produce, Assam produces the bulk of raw jute out of the country's total production of 5.3 million tons (1977), but there is only a small jute mill at Silghat in the co-operative sector. No effort seems to have been made to establish more jute mills. The earlier proposal to set up jute mills at Barpeta and Mangaldoi, the two main jute producing centres in Assam, has not made any progress. Water resources in north-east India are abundant and can meet, if properly harnessed, the entire power requirements of the north-east region. Presently, some schemes have been undertaken such as at Loktak in Manipur and Kapili in Assam.

However, there seems to be a sense of awareness on the part of the Government of India for speedy removal of backwardness of the region, but unless the projects undertaken to that

end are quickly and cohesively implemented the agony of the region with a host of problems, political, economic and social, is unlikely to disappear in the near future. The problems of the north-east people are multi-faceted and complicated and have to be solved in the right perspective. Indeed, the region is a miniature of India where, as in respect of the whole country, unity will have to be evolved in the midst of diversity so that a mosaic of Indian society can emerge.

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