

# Social Change and Extraneous Interventions Among the Hill Communities of North-East India

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The doyen of the Indian sociology, M.N. Srinivas, published his book *Social Change in Modern India* way back in 1966. He states in the book that his analysis of the process of social change in India stops at the border of West Bengal. Thus, the North-East region, where massive social transformation has occurred encapsulating years into decades and decades into centuries, remained un-surveyed all these years for its social transformation. Conscious of its urgency, the Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong decided that "Social Change" will be its main concern of the academic thrust from its inception. I propose to undertake the same theme for my understanding: social change in the North-East India. Briefly speaking, social change arises when magnitude and dimension of the change are such as to result in significant alteration in the given social structure, interpersonal relations and social institutions. There may be a variety of stimulus for inducing social change: individual initiatives, social reforms, state sponsored welfare programmes, voluntary social engineering, ideology, revolutions, conflict, war, struggle for political objectives such as autonomy and the like. Similarly, it is not necessary that all components of the society in change operate at the same time, but may be the elite or a

section of middle class or the traders, or the educated youth that take the initiative for social change. Indian society has changed in a big way since independence of the country, no doubt. However, the extent of social change in the North-East region has been massive in comparison to other parts of the country for a number of reasons and the region remained socially cut off from rest of the country. This change has also heightened the urge, expectations and endeavour among the people of the region to catch up fast with rest of the country, leading to a certain type of social conflict, which in itself deserves an urgent attention. And thus this endeavour to uncover aspects of social change in the region and for that, I propose to clarify two basic issues: one, there is a need to clarify the region, North-East India, and two, the baseline or bench line for uncovering the nuances of social change in the region has to be drawn in terms of its historicity.

### **The Region**

The geographers would regard the region as comprising the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys and Eastern extension of the Himalayan mountain ranges. Historically, the plains in the region were variously known as Prayagjyotisha or Kamrupa/Kamakhya in the early period of the regional history. There are pre-historic and historic sites scattered all over the region right from Itanagar, Bhishmaknagar in Arunachal Pradesh, Garo Hills in Meghalaya, various locations in Assam, and elsewhere. It appears that at least the western part of the Brahmaputra valley and southern slopes of Shillong plateau were in close political contacts with the kingdoms of Gaur, North Bengal, in the ancient period. Among the ruling dynasties of the region in the early medieval period, Koch, Dimasha, Kachari, Jaintiyas, Meiteis may be counted and many of them had ties with the various kingdoms in other parts of India. This was also the time, when upper Assam was visited by the Ahoms in 1228 A.D., who established their sway in the region and ruled over it for the next six hundred years. They were overrun by the Burmese in 1819, who were driven away by the combined Ahom and the British forces in 1824 leading to incorporation of the region in the British Indian Empire. With a view to securing their territories in the Brahmaputra, Barak and Surma valleys, the British slowly and steadily extended their indirect rule in Khasi Hills, Garo Hills, Naga Hills, Lushai (Mizo)



Hills, Chittagong Hills, Hill Tipperah, and lastly Tuensang, Sadiya, Lakhimpur and Barlipara Frontier Tracts (Arunachal Pradesh). We hasten to add that among the many motives for doing that, there were two significant considerations for the British: one, search for suitable topography for tea cultivation and creation of forest reserves, and two, securing the administered territories against the chronic raids by the hill tribes.

In the wake of independence, the British India was divided into two states of India and Pakistan in the year 1947. East Pakistan was carved out of Bengal and parts of Silcher district of Assam province, which led to snapping the natural transport link to the rest of India and making the region a landlocked Indian territory. In the year, 1947, the North-East region consisted for Assam and two princely states of Manipur and Tripura. The state of Nagaland was created out of Naga Hills district and Tuensang Frontier Tract of the British province of Assam in 1963. The region was reorganized in the year 1972 and three new states of Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura and two union territories of Arunachal Pradesh (known as NEFA – North-East Frontier Agency previously) and Mizoram (erstwhile Lushai Hills district) were created by an Act of Parliament. The North-East Reorganization Act also envisaged creation of North-Eastern Council (NEC) for the regional infrastructural development of the constituting seven units of five states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura and two union territories. The two union territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh were elevated to statehood in the years 1985 and 1987 respectively. Purely from developmental and administrative point of view, Sikkim was integrated into North-Eastern Council in 1990s. In this way, there are two North-East regions: one, the formal one, for development and administrative points of view, and other, as the region in the North-Eastern part of the Indian Union, viewed from the point of view of the other parts the country. So, the North-East is a new creation, in which the relatively small states of the region are tagged together for the purpose of resource allocation from the Centre for developmental purposes.

### **Baseline or Bench Line for Social Change**

With a view to measuring the phenomenon of change, it is significant that an imaginary line known as base or bench line in sociological literature is drawn from where the significant institutionalized social



variations are recorded. Social change may be seen as recurrent, repetitive and relatively long term alteration in the human behaviour at personal, interpersonal, group and institutional levels. Societies pass through different phases of relative stability and relative dynamism in their histories. The pre-British traditional communities of the North-East India were marked by relative stability in their social relations. They were in relative isolation and stable at family, clan, village and community levels; they had simple tools and technology; a subsistence economy and there were chiefs or village elders' councils under strong social control at the community level to regulate their social behaviour. They also had extremely simple polities based on reciprocal obligations and exchange of commodities. They did trade in articles of rare necessities such as iron tools, threads, ivory, *agar*, etc. But volume of such commercial exchange was extremely small. Though long distance trade was not unknown, its prevalence was limited among some adventurous individuals.

The geographical extent, variation of the topography, settlement pattern in hills and plains, types of economy and its pattern and overall differential political development in the region suggest that there cannot be a single baseline for social change for the North-East region. For example, long history of political organizations in the Brahmaputra, Barak, Imphal and Surma valleys suggest a complex historical process of social change. Further, relatively recent exposure of various communities in hills and plateaus of Arunachal Pradesh is recent enough to document satisfactorily. So, the point to consider is on what basis are we to draw the base line for examining the phenomenon of social change. The answer to this simple, but significant question, is not easy. However, a working solution may be identified in terms of uncovering the significant moments, movements, events, political interventions such as redrawing of the state boundaries, war, invasion, rebellion, inter-community feuds, etc. human migration, state sponsored programmes, acculturation and conversion to another faith. But it is imperative that before embarking on drawing the base line for charting social change in a particular community/society, as far as possible, a detailed and dispassionate ethnography of the particular society is recorded/is made available. To cut the long story short, as the incorporation of the various communities/territories in the British Indian Empire was accomplished at different points of time, there will be different base



lines for different sub-regions/communities of the region. However, as a whole, the advent of the British rule in the region in 1825 after Anglo-Burmese war appears reasonably sound at least for the Brahmaputra valley and Assam plains. Similarly, incorporation of many communities in Arunachal Pradesh was affected in 1950s and 1960s. So for Arunachal Pradesh bench line for examining social change may be Indian independence in 1947. Another factor for drawing the baseline especially for the hill states in the region may be the advent of Christianity, as in some cases, conversion to Christianity has been almost cent per cent resulting in total transformation of social style of life and the world view.

Social histories of established states such as Ahoms, Jaintias, Kochs, Dimasha Cacharis, Meiteis, etc. are available. Similarly, more than a dozen volumes of 'Ethnography of Assam' series of publications on Khasi, Garo, Cachari, Angami, Ao, Sema, Rengma, Lushai, Lakher and Powis, etc. provide a reliable base line for constructing social history of various communities. Similarly, the British rule worked through an organized officialdom, in which documentation, however limited and biased it was, played a pivotal role. These documents preserved at various administrative levels such as district, state, and central, first in Calcutta and then in New Delhi, may be invaluable to draw a reliable base line prior to introduction of British induced new practices. Church history, mission reports, proceedings of the annual conferences of the various Christian congregations, brotherhood associations, fellowship union reports are another source of base line for uncovering aspects of social change vis-à-vis organized religions in the region. Then, there are travelogues, memoirs, adventure story, reports on the armed/military expeditions etc., which may be used as source materials in the absence of reliable ethnography for drawing baseline for charting the imminent social change in a sub-region/community. Folk literature, myths, legends, proverbs, etc. among the pre-literate communities and various forms of literary expressions in the vernaculars should be culled with a view to picturing the traditional forms of social institutions prior to initiation of significant social change.

The most significant landmark for initiation of social change in the North-East region was that of the creation of state of Assam in the British Indian Empire in 1825 after reorganizing the various sub-regions/communities in a centralized administration. The



administration was headed by a lieutenant governor under the Viceroy of India, and the state was divided into districts and sub-divisions, which were again presided over by the British civil/military/police officials. The entire state was divided into Lakhimpur, Darang, Goalpara, Kamrup, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Silcher, Sylhet districts in the plains and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Naga Hills, Mikir Hills and Lushai Hills districts in the hill areas. This territorial reorganization of the region was secured in seven decades starting from 1826 to 1895, when South Lushai Hills district was united with the North Lushai Hills with its headquarters at Aizawl. Apart from these directly and indirectly administered districts, there were un-administered territories on the fringe of Assam, such as Tuensang Frontier Tracts, Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts which were administered by the Governor of state on behalf of the Viceroy as parts of the province of Assam. There were also two princely states of Manipur and Tripura with their resident British Agents and a number of zamindaris such as Bijni, Kalmalapur, etc., in the region. The point to be noted is that unlike the informal rule of a plethora of local rulers, the British introduced a formal centralized administration, which ran on formal orders duly recorded and such records were preserved as precedence.

In view of Nari K. Rustomji, one of last Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers, trained by the British colonial regime, it was 'the British policy – and herein lay its success – that of one of least possible interference' in the tribal affairs. It was the missionaries, and not the administrators, who were the main harbinger of change in the religious beliefs and ways of life of the tribal people (1983). The missionaries presented the momentous extraneous interventions in lives of a number of regional communities to begin with, and after that, the social scene in the region did not remain the same. Among these, the following may be enumerated:

### *Missionaries*

With the opening of sea route to India from Europe by Vasco de Gama in 1498, not only the traders and adventurers, but also the Christian missionaries turned eastward to India with a view to spreading the gospel of Christ. Many of them turned to the courts of the various rulers in different parts of India and around. For example, two catholic fathers, Casella and Gabriel, travelled to the court of the



Bhutanese Dharamraja, Sabdrung Namgyal in 1626 and were honourably received and provided with hospitality. However, victory of the British East India Company over Nabob Sirajudaula of Bengal at Pallasey in 1757 provided an opportunity to the Christian missionaries to look for new openings under a more favourable regime. And for that they received occasional support from many of the zealot Company functionaries. Soon enough the missionaries realized that as they would not get desired response from the Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists, so they naturally turned their attention to the preliterate communities in the hills, forests, and mountainous regions of India. The government used to issue license to the missionaries to operate in specific territories without competition from sister missions. The Serampore Baptist missionaries had earlier translated the Bible in Assamese, Khasi, and other regional languages. David Scott, the agent to the Governor General in the North-East region invited the Serampore missionaries to open schools in the region. But he expired in 1831 and his successor, Francis Jenkins, renewed the invitation to the missionaries to take up the literacy work in the region. Similarly, Charles A. Bruce, in-charge of the Chabua Experimental Tea Station, approached the Burma Field missionaries to work in upper Assam and for that his family set aside a certain amount of money. And that is how the Baptist missionaries first came to Guwahati and Jeypur in upper Assam, but within a few years, 'they discovered fertile fields in Garo Hills and Naga Hills'. Very soon, missionaries from other denominations like Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Catholics, etc. came to the region and took up literacy, medical and translation of scriptures in the local languages in the Roman script. These steps undertaken by the missionaries led to a total transformation of the tribal social life within a century and a half.

There was another problem: the American missionaries working in upper Assam and Goro Hills were known to be from the puritanical social background. They were teetotallers and were strictly against consumption of liquor among the converts. On the other hand, the tribes in the North-East India by tradition use home distilled liquor for consumption and ritual purposes, and in fact, liquor was part and parcel of their life. That was one of the reasons that the number of converts drastically fluctuated in the yearly decades of Christianity among the Aos. Another concern of the missionaries was that of the keeping a distance from articles and



practices of the community considered immoral and heathen. One of such institutions was that of the Naga youth dormitory (*Morung*) in every village, which was not only the centre of the village communal activities, but it, was also the only shelter for the visitors to the villages. Considered as a centre of all immorality in the villages, the foreign missionaries avoided visiting it. Against the puritanical approach of some of the missionaries regarding the use of the *morung* and rice beer, Rev. Langri Ao made use of the *morung* as his night halting camps and preaching grounds in the Konyak villages and considered rice beer as part of his food and not an article of intoxicant beverage. His pragmatic and innovative approach to the Naga style of life endeared him to his brethren far and wide and he was one of the most popular and successful indigenous Naga missionaries (Sinha, 1993). Similar views were echoed in the expression of Dr Renthly Keizar, Professor of the Old Testament at the Eastern Theological College, Jorahat: 'I am an Ao, I eat as an Ao; I dress as an Ao; I live in an Ao manner; I am also a baptized Christian. In the same way, as I am baptized, so the culture is baptized' (Pruett, 1984).

Arunachal Pradesh, the former NEFA, was exposed to external religions like other social forces much later than other units in the region. However, S.K. Chaube noted much earlier: "A potent source of tension in NEFA is religion. When the Government of India decided to extend administration beyond the Inner Line, the early recruits to the service were mostly army officials and educated people from the advanced hill districts. Most of these recruits were zealous Christians, which made the government clamp down on semi-missionary activities. Local chiefs, as elsewhere, were at first opposed to missionary activities. But, the resources of the missions operating from the Brahmaputra valley largely neutralized the administrative policies aimed at a 'cultural revival' and towards stalling proselytization. In 1967, when the government issued the quit order on some of the foreign missionaries (then totalling 299) in Assam, a virtual cold war started between the missions and the government. The reaction of the official circles produced a cultural parallelism with Hinduism. There is now a conscious effort among some officials to bring the indigenous religious faiths into a close proximity to Hinduism .... The temple of the gods, who in the Adi's pristine religion were not represented by images, was built with much fanfare in a more or less Hindu way. An absurd comparison has recently



been drawn between the excavated site of a seventh century A.D. (?) civilization at Bhismanagar and the legend of Lord Krishna and Rukmini. Buddhism is, of course, a well established religion in Kameng and Lohit, and is encouraged. Islam is absent. No proselytizing mission, Christian or Hindu, is allowed, through Christian officials and army personnel, some Adis and Daflas (Nyoshis), have their private churches ... but it is not allowed to preach" (Chaube, 1999: 196).

### *The Church*

With the introduction of a new pantheon, which was also the religion of the new rulers, the white Englishmen, an alternative faith was made available. Unlike, the indigenous faith, the new religion was brought by missionaries, who tried to reach the common people with compassion, humility and persuasion. Unlike the aloof white British rulers, these new preachers, though White like the British rulers and who also spoke English language, mixed with the people, approached them with holy books, tried to diagnose their sickness, nursed their sick, played with the children and even had something for womenfolk like needle work. They used to dress differently, used furniture at home, lived in different type of buildings away from the habitation and used to pray in evening and morning regularly. The church building itself was a new and alternative symbol of other worldly approach to an unknown terrain of human faith. Christianity brought novelties like prayers, priests, and preachers, and a faith in the holy books, something entirely new to the tribal world in the region. It also brought new set of do's and don'ts; new taboos and still newer approach to old faith. It proposed a new concept of heathen, those, who did not believe in Christianity. It had conception of the Supreme Being, God, the Father, who created the universe.

"Church organizations also brought members of different villages and tribes within common structures for the first time. Villages of the same tribe that had previously been at war with each other were brought together in Associations and Presbyteries and Synods and Diocese. Different tribes were brought together in Conventions and Councils and Assemblies. Thus, evangelism and church structures fostered openness to others that in most cases had not existed before. This in turn, affected life-style" (Downs, 1994). Furthermore, Downs opines that whenever the communities faced a



phase of crisis in life of the people, there was a phase of revival in faith of the Christianity, and the conversion of the heathen to Christianity increased appreciatively.

### *Schools*

Christianity is the religion based on the holy book, the *Bible*. So literacy is a must for the believers to read the scriptures. That's the reason the Christian missionaries emphasize on universal schooling. With the schooling, reading, writing and arithmetic's (the 3R's) were introduced. In this way schools became integral part of the church activities. Another innovation was the introduction of written literature invariably on biblical themes in the Roman script, which was occasionally illustrated again on the scriptural themes. Very soon a situation emerged in which, youth dormitories versus West-oriented schools turned out to be the focal points for the young folk. The Missionaries also introduced new architecture of the buildings in the form of churches, schools, living quarters, different sets of furniture for various purposes such as cots to sleep, tables to write/eat on, chairs to sit, codes of dress and clothing on different occasions and seasons and also introduced a sense of proper dress and etiquettes to be followed in the company of variety of men and women.

The literacy programme of the missionaries had a cascading effect on the life style of the communities. American Baptist missionaries working among the Aos, Rev. Haggard and Perrine, reported on the occasion of 55th annual report: "The (Ao) Christians now have an increasing ambition to dress better, to live in better houses, and to be cleaner. They desire more to learn, how to read and write, and to use knowledge and powers they have for God's glory. For the past two years, the village schools have been self-supporting in the sense that they receive nothing from the mission. They are supported in part by the government and partly by themselves .... The village schools are also becoming self-managing and directing so that we feel that a good start is being made towards self-support ... a sort of Naga renaissance was brought about, and that too by very agency, namely the mere matter of a considerable number of Naga boys and girls learning to write. It would seem as if this alone would do more to show the Naga people the value of education ... (*Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Vol. 79, 1895). Furthermore, the Assam Baptist Mission Conference noted in the year 1907: "... Naga school books were



especially desired by the government .... It fell to my (Rev. S.A. Perrine's) lot to do this, and I have prepared, by means of *pundits* (knowledgeable), primers and arithmetic's in Ao, Lhota, Sema and Mozunger Naga, also an English-Lhota vocabulary and gospel of Matthew in Lhota. The manuscripts of all these have gone to Shillong (capital of the Assam Province): the Government has passed of them and part of them are in (the printing) press. We have been assured by our Naga officials that they will all be approved though ... (Assam Baptist Mission Conference, 8th session 1907: 58).

The schooling for a different age group of the male pupils seating together for the same instruction in the same class room was an experience for the teachers. The students were taught the Roman alphabets on the biblical themes. These were the students, who were till the other day had been hunting in the woods, or working as the labour squads in the agricultural fields, or learning arts, crafts, games, handling weapons of war and defence and learning tribal folklore from their elders. In course of time, the girls joined the schools and apart from learning the alphabets, they began to learn needle work, stitching and tailoring. Note the satisfaction of Mary Clark, the wife of first American Baptist missionary among the Aos: "Instead of congregating promiscuously at different house to sleep at night, singing objectionable songs, telling doubtful stories and engaging in lewd conversations, these young reformers separated themselves and built a dormitory in which purity and holiness should reign. Here, at morning and evening time, the voice of prayer and songs of praise are heard" (Clark, 1978).

### *Healthcare*

Against the traditional background, the missionaries cultivated a concept of causality as part of sickness against the traditional belief in sorcery, malevolent spirits, and evil eyes and so on. New ideas of pills against the illness, injections to cure a sick body fast and an idea of infection from a sore or certain diseases were introduced for the first time in the region. Similarly, medical doctors against the magicians and village medicine men were interposed and an idea of hospital for confinement of the sick people waiting for nursing to health was envisaged. Church historian Frederick Downs informs us about the American Baptist missionaries' medical efforts in the North-East region: "For whatever reasons, the Home Board began to appoint missionaries with professional medical training. In addition to



wide-spread cholera during which they treated people at the roadside and in the villages, the missionary doctors and nurses established hospitals and nursing schools. The first Mission hospital (in the region) was at Tura, the first small building of which was completed with the help of an elephant for hauling timber in 1910. In 1925, a forty-five bed hospital for women was built at Guwahati, and construction of the twenty-five bed general hospital at Jorahat was completed in 1933. In 1934, the first nursing school was opened at Jorahat" (Downs, 1994).

Personal cleanliness and healthy living conditions were also stressed by the missionaries. The motto: "cleanliness is next to godliness" was emphasized for every Christian. It was not an easy task to convince the tribal people to keep their animals away from their living quarters. Similarly, disposal of the dead was another issue, which was hazardous from a point of view of healthy living condition. To convince the hill men/women to bath regularly in their villages situated at the top or higher slopes of the hillocks was not an easy task. Again Dr Downs informs us the terms on which Mission Veng, Aizawl was established by D.E. Jones:

1. All houses must be at a distance of at least ten feet from one another (this was to obviate the danger of fire. Fires frequently occur and the over-crowding of houses in a small space often means that the whole village is consumed before fire can be put out).
2. Animals are to be kept in a separate building (this is never so in the average Lushai village. The cows and pigs are under the house at night between the supporting posts and hens and doves inside).
3. The beams of the houses must be at least six feet above the floor.
4. Each house must have a separate latrine.
5. Drinking water must be boiled.
6. Inhabitants are to go regularly to a place of worship (Downs, 1994).

Similarly, the newly converted tribals were constructing houses that would let in more air and light, village roads were improved, kitchen gardens introduced, as well as new forms of vegetables and poultry. There were occasionally conflicts between the indigenous faith and converts over contribution to the traditional village level worship, *genna* (taboo) days and propitiation to the spirits believed to add to fertility to earth, crops, animals and women. To begin with, as the converts were very few, they were made to shift their settlements away from the old ones to invariably a hunted location, known as



'mission compound'. As the conversion increased in course of time, both the settlements got combined, but the name mission compound continues for long time to come. Way back in 1899, the American Baptist missionary, S.A. Perrine reported on the Ao Nagas: 'They are building better houses for themselves, and with rooms ... . Some of the Christians keep their person and homes and food comparatively clean, perhaps I should simply say, cleaner than the heathen. They do not eat rotten flesh, and the money they once spent for drinks, opium and false worship is making them prosperous. They have adopted a mode of burial and a more decent dress than the heathen' (cited in Downs, 1994). One of the sensitive points with the missionaries had been intoxication in form of rice beer and opium. Opium could be eliminated to a great extent with the help of the administration, but habit of drinking could not be contained to an appreciable extent.

### *Translation Work*

The missionaries hired pandits to translate the holy *Bible* in Assamese, Khasi and other regional languages. After some hesitation, they decided to adopt the Roman script for translating the *Bible* in regional languages. Many of the tribal tongues had neither a script nor a written literature, though they were rich in oral literature. These languages did not have a sophisticated vocabulary to express abstract ideas, concepts and theological prepositions. The Christian missionaries provided such tribal communities with their first written literature in the form of basic alphabets and illustrated them on the biblical themes. Taking help from the knowledgeable tribal 'intellectuals' the missionaries tailored the Christian holy and related literature to the tribal languages in spite of the limited conceptual terms. In this way, the Christian missionaries are rightly credited for creating the first literature in many of the regional tribal languages. However, it goes without saying that they also introduced distortion in the tribal languages by usurping the indigenous tribal terms in the new Biblical context, which they were not intended to.

### *British Administration*

#### *British Tendency to Look for the 'Heads'*

Many of the regional communities were near egalitarian in their simple life in good old days. Many a time, their politics evolved



around regulation of sex relations, clan solidarity, hunting, collecting or harvesting forest products. Such communities regulated their lives through the institution of elders' councils, which could hold its sessions in an open square with all the adult members in attendance. However, with the exception of some communities such as the Konyaks, Lushais, and Semas, most of the regional communities were near democratic in their public spheres. Once the British stepped in, they began looking for the 'headmen', or chiefs of the communities for their convenience. As the British could not follow the local languages, they introduced a novel system of Dobhasis (those, who were apparently dominating tribesmen, and who could follow at least two languages and were well-versed in tribal customs), *dobhasi* courts; political jamadars (PJ: a type of semi-official messengers, who could run between community and the state functionaries), Gaon Buras (literally, the village elders or the Village Headmen) and political interpreters (PI: these were the semi-official local big-wigs, who interpreted the government decisions to the communities and local practices to the state functionaries). Unlike in the districts of the plains where elaborate arrangements were made for an effective land revenue administration, an indirect rule under an officer drawn either from the Army or the Police as the Political Officer or Deputy Commissioner of the hill districts was established. These Political Officers/Deputy Commissioners in the Hill Districts had relatively long innings such as P.R. Gordon among the Khasis, T. Hodgson among the Meiteis, J.H. Hutton among the Angamis, J.P. Mills among the Aos, Plaifaire among the Garos, etc. Many of them developed language skills and wrote monographs on the communities and even recorded the customary laws of the communities. These different political administrative arrangements from the districts in the plains created a gulf between the plains people and the hill communities, which was used by the British to their advantage.

There was another aspect of the tribal settlement in North-East region prior to the arrival of the British. The communities had been on move through wars, feuds, hunting expeditions, for a sheer sense of exploration, and at times, in search of better sites for a relative comfortable settlement through the centuries. The British froze this process, as if, by naming the territories after the communities such as the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Mikir Hills, Naga Hills and Lushai Hills districts and the like and fixing the capital tax and



in course of time, even house tax on the tribesmen, and by appointing a British administrator for each of them. So much so that the village chiefs had to seek permission for establishing a new village from the Deputy Commissioner/Political Officers of the respective hill districts. Once the territories came to be known after a community, such as the Garo Hills or Lushai Hills, other communities residing within the boundaries of the hill districts began to be considered as the outsiders or the alien. This impression got further strengthened, when the administration sponsored volumes on the Assam tribes began to be written on a given format under the name of 'Ethnography of Assam' series of publications. These volumes, written invariably by scholar-administrators/missionaries with long years of experience in the district concerned, normally avoided the ethnographic details of inter-ethnic interactions, conflicts, long distance trade, and their contacts with the plains people.

#### *Introduction of Cash as Medium of Transaction*

The British insisted that the vanquished peoples from the hills must pay capital tax as a token of their subjugation, which was imposed on all male adults to begin with, which was changed to house tax later. But there was no locally available cash, as the communities followed barter system of economy. Thus, a novel concept of wages in cash was initiated for manual work in which the local people were engaged in cutting the village tracts, carrying officers' luggage on tours in the district, building Dak Bungalows by road sides, and offering their labour for building a little urban outpost in the tribal heartland. Consumer goods such as mill spun inexpensive cloth, iron tools, aluminum utensils, glass tumblers, coloured glass beads; tobacco, cheap cigarettes, and bottles of rum were made available to the communities even in the farthest corners of the region. With a view to making these consumer goods easily available even to the most isolated communities, the administration organized a chain of weekly markets on different days at nodal points in the bordering areas of the districts. The tribals were encouraged to bring their hill produce, such as fruits, roots, vegetables, honey, ivory, bark of the trees, hide and leather, natural rubber, birds, animals and the like in the markets for exchanging them with factory produce consumer goods. In this way, even the distant hill communities began to be linked with the market economy.



*The British Efforts to Insulate the Communities*

The British had termed their armed operations in hill areas as 'the task of pacifying and humanizing these primitive hill people' (Fuller, 1977), though their imperial designs were loud and clear. The British felt that regular administration in the hill districts was a costly affair and thus, they avoided regular administration in the hill districts. However, when hill communities mounted raids on tea plantations located on their former hunting and collecting grounds, the British were forced to extend their regular authorities in the hills region first by locating their district headquarters on the fringes such as Chumekedima for Naga Hills, Cherrapunji for Khasi Hills, Singimari in the Garo Hills and so on. As their administrative commitments in the hill areas increased, they were forced to move inside the tribal areas by creating administrative centres for each hill districts such as Shillong for Khasi Hills, Tura for Garo Hills, Kohima for Naga Hills and the like. These newly created district headquarters were invariably located on no man's land, away from local settlement. In fact, these administrative centres led to an intrusion of the European style of life in the tribal heartland by establishing civil lines, cantonments, the police and armed forces and new shops invariably run by a non-local *Kaian*, the Marwari retailers. Such activities in course of time did create new jobs such as those of coolies, blue coats, white collar, constables, soldiers and officers.

We may note social structure of the colonial hill cities in 1993: "To begin with, the hill cities had the Deputy Commissioner as the presiding deity with the Superintendent of Police, Civil Surgeon of the civil hospital, the post master of the post office, the Church Pastor and the Commandant of the Assam Rifles as the significant functionaries. Taxes were levied on houses and were collected by the village chiefs on commission. Entry of plainsmen to the hills was controlled and alienation of the tribal land was discouraged. The tribals were reluctantly induced to offer their manual labour on cash payment for various types of construction and porters' duties so that they could pay the house tax. The clerical staff of the small administration was invariably drawn from the plains and the domestic helpers were then Nepalese and the few shops available were owned by the plainsmen – the Kaians. In fact, these early urban centres were really 'non-tribal towns on tribal settings', functioning as the colonial administrative outposts, without much of urban amenities and style of life. "The



station (of Tura) contains the bungalows of the few residents officials and of the missionaries, a small jail, the public offices, the lines of military police, a market place and a few shops, but it is nothing more than a village and in 1901 had a population of 1,370 souls ... . It is a small, isolated and is generally thought to be unhealthy", wrote B.C. Allen in the District Gazetteer. And this statement might be applicable to most of hill districts towns of the British period with the possible exception of Shillong" (Sinha, 1993).

#### *Paternalistic Indirect Rule by the Traditional Authorities*

Unlike elsewhere in the plain districts, where an elaborate police administration was established under the piercing eyes of the ICS district officers, administration in the hill districts was considered a costly affair, as they did not generate revenue by paying taxes on the land. For that, drawing from their experiences gained from the Rajmahal Hills among the Santals, the British introduced an indirect administration in the hill districts of Assam by leaving the communities under the care of the traditional tribal leaders to govern themselves through their customary laws. Such administration was run under the benevolent gaze of the Political Officer, who was invariably drawn from the armed forces or police service. Apparently, their high handedness was silently noted by all and in a way, as they were answerable directly to the Governor of Assam, they were the lords of their job. These districts were variously termed as the Backward Frontier Tracts, then as the Excluded or Partially Excluded Districts and then Scheduled Districts under the Governor of the Province. With the exception of the Mikir Hills district of province of Assam, all the hill districts have been elevated to statehood in the Indian Union.

"The centre of the hill city was very much reminiscent of the quasi-feudal structure in the form of establishment of the Deputy Commissioner's office, residence, club, church, and his immediate associates (such as the Civil Surgeon, Superintendent of Police, Post Master, Church pastor and the like). The barracks of the armed constabulary such as the Assam Rifles was a little away at a slight distance on a commanding hillock. In between the little shopping centre was located, which had establishments owned by the plainsmen on a crude model of contemporary departmental stores ... The sites of hill cities were selected mainly because of the location,



strategic and administrative vantage. As the hill districts were the British creation, similarly these administrative cities were all the more a British creation. They played significant roles as trend setters in life style of the communities among whom they were located. Thus, Shillong with Khasi, Jowai with Jaintia, Tura with Garo, Aizawl with the Mizo, Kohima with Angami and Mokokchung with Ao got inseparable identities of the above communities" (ibid.).

### *North-East India during World Wars*

During the World War I, the British needed hard labour to carry heavy loads on their backs on difficult terrain and in trying circumstances. Naturally, they turned their eyes to the Assam hills and recruited sturdy hill men to the coolie corps. Once these simple and almost illiterate hill men were exposed to the societies outside, especially the quarters among the white men in Europe and defeated and suffering Europeans, the myth of the white racial supremacy came crashing to their mind. However, there was a much limited recruitment in the coolie corps during the First World War from the region, and it was limited to Khasis and Nagas. However, during the World War II, the region itself turned into a limited theatre of war, as the Japanese in league with the Azad Hind Fauz led by Subhas Chandra Bose mounted attack on the British Indian territories of Manipur, and Naga Hills. Prior to that they had vanquished the 'invincible British army' in Singapore, Malaya and Burma and caused a most disorganized evacuation overland leading to untold miseries to the deserting soldiers, civilian functionaries, and ordinary British subjects. The hill folk saw worst aspects of their white rulers for the first time, when the colonial rulers failed to provide basic security to their subjects. Moreover, they got exposed to the anti-British and the elements hostile to them for the first time in a big way. The defeat of the invincible British forces at the hands of the Asians such as the Japanese gave a lot of moral boost to the otherwise isolated and backward tribal folk. Furthermore, the retreat from Burma and brutalities by the retreating forces on equally suffering Japanese forces diminished the left-over trust and faith in the British claim of justice and rule of law in India. But these developments also caused immense anxieties among the literate and already converted Christian tribal folk for the forthcoming and uncertain political dispensation. Naturally, the collapse of the British rule led



to rising of new aspirations among the exposed people of the region. The impending absence of the British colonial rulers made them face the fact that they had to negotiate with their country cousins for creating new a political space and future dispensations for themselves. This rising awareness of the new political possibilities made them assertive in their outlook. And that is how they opened negotiation for their future in independent India and their status as the tribesmen in the new dispensation.

The World War created new possibilities for the regional tribal elite to emerge as the effective spokesmen of the communities, as by then they were already exposed to a good doze of western education. How it created a new class of operators becomes apparent from Chaube's study: "The (World) War's greatest contribution was the creation of a tiny middle class among the Naga .... A rising middle class is the vanguard of the moderate solidarity movement in the hills. But the solidarity movement being in origin an elite ideology, it suffers from one weakness, the remoteness of the common people from its cause. In Khasi Hills for instance, where detribalization has gone a long way into the social set-up, the traditional leadership of the chiefs and headmen is still a formidable force having direct touch with the people. The emergence of the Naga National Council out of the Naga District Tribal Council heralded the rise of the middle class intellectuals. The NNC's resolution in June 1946 was integrationist and opposed to the 'grouping plan' of the (British) Cabinet Mission" (Chaube, 1999: 153-54). Amalendu Guha informs his readers that student leaders such as G.G. Swell (a Khasi) and T Aliba Imti Ao (an Ao Naga) and the like, who rose to prominence in ethnic, regional, state and national politics in course of time, had even flirted with the leftist politics as students in this period (Guha, 1988: 323).

### **Indian Independence and Acceptance of a Constitutional Welfare State**

The British colonial administration began to treat various segments of Indian population at different levels. For example, followers of Islam were treated as the minorities, who needed protection against the alleged domination of the majority Hindus. Similarly, the British appeared to be especially worried for the future of the tribes on the North-Eastern frontiers and sought opinions of their administrators in the field such as J.H. Hutton, J.P. Mills, William Plaifare, Col



Shakespeare, and the like way back in 1928. Needless to say that many of those consulted were of the view that these hill communities were not part of Indian population and they should be treated differently. A proposal was mooted in 1942 by these administrators and supported by Governor of the province to create a 'Crown Colony under the British Empire' for the tribesmen from Garo Hills to the Upper Burma, which came to be known as Coupland plan. Prior to that, the administration had tried to organize Naga government officers in Naga Club in Kohima to raise their political demands. The Club had expressed its distinct views on the imminent Constitutional development in the British Indian Empire. There was another under-current going on that, if India was to be divided on religious ground among the Hindus and the Muslims, why the Christian tribes should not ask for separate dispensation for themselves. And for that there was a suspicion among the Indian nationalists that the White Christian missionaries did encourage such a move among certain tribes. There was a proposal to consider whether Lushai Hills District should be integrated with Chin Hills in Burma. However, credit goes to the sane elements among the tribal leaders and Mizo Union, who stood for a United India and saw their future safe in the Indian Union. It must be put on record that the Naga National Council did not agree to join Indian Union, and in fact, it declared independence for state of Nagaland a day before Indian independence on August 14, 1947. They did try to negotiate with the Indian Union for a satisfactory solution to the problem with the future Indian leaders. Having failed in their design, the NNC decided to boycott the first general elections conducted in 1952. The relation between the two sides deteriorated further; Naga Hills were declared as a disturbed area and full scale Naga insurgency erupted leading to imposition of Armed Forces Special Power Act in 1958 causing untold miseries to the masses. On the demand of the Naga leadership, state of Nagaland was created out of erstwhile Naga Hills district and Tuensang Frontier Tract in 1962 on ethnic consideration.

It is a fact that at least some of the Assamese leaders looked forward to the British departure from India as an occasion to create a greater cultural Assam by integrating the plains with that of the various hill districts. Though there were liberal leaders with different views from the above, the alleged chauvinists created apprehensions in the minds of the hill communities, especially on the issue of Assamese being made as the official language of the state. Diagnosing



the transformation of the 'enchanted frontiers' to that of 'imperilled' one, Nari Rustomji with a long experience in Assam as an administrator records: "There was a lurking apprehension among the tribal people on attainment of Independence that India's teeming masses would overflow into their habitat, disrupting their traditional way of life and depriving them of their most precious possession, their land .... It is the land that provides him (the tribal) and his family, year after year, with their essential source of sustenance, and it is the land that supports the livestock upon which he depends. While, however, other communities accepted the safeguards enshrined in the Constitution for the protection of their culture and their land, it is significant that the tribes that had suffered most from the impact of the Japanese invasion, the Nagas, were not only dissatisfied with the statutory safeguards, but launched an armed rebellion to break away from the Indian Union" (Rustomji, 1983). The only ray of hope in such a chaotic situation was from that of the India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. He was recognized as an internationalist, an idealist and a visionary; here was no hidebound bigot out to impose the blanket of Hindu orthodoxy upon the rich and varied tapestry of India's multifarious tribes with their freedom from the inhibitions of so-called more advanced societies.

The national leaders in free India were committed to provide constitutional support to 'socially and economically backward communities' in the country. Keeping that in mind, the Constituent Assembly of India constituted G.N. Bordolai Committee under the Chairmanship of Assam Premier, Gopi Nath Bordolai, to examine how best the special requirements of the North-Eastern tribes could be accommodated in the Indian Constitution. The Committee visited various districts in the hills and plains and filed its report to the Constituent Assembly after talking to a cross-section of the tribal spokesmen. The stipulations of the Bordolai Committee were incorporated in the Constitution of India as the provisions under the Sixth Schedule, especially dealing with the requirements of the North-East region. There was a commitment made by the national leaders during the freedom movement to create linguistic states in place of the loosely amalgamated British provinces. And, in course of time, such states were created on the basis of the recommendations of the States' Reorganization Commission (SRC) in 1956. It may be noted here that the North-East region in post-independence phase meant



the British province of Assam, and the two princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Assam was conceived by the SRC as a multilingual state, in which Assamese and Bengali were the dominant languages. However, though the hill peoples in the hill districts of the state did use a type of pidgin Assamese, they desired to develop their own languages and create literature in the Roman script. Once, the Assamese language zealots tried to demand special role for their language in the state of Assam, the hill people rose in unison to oppose the move. And for that they created a joint political forum, All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC), which organized protest meetings, processions, agitations and even demanded separation of the Hill Districts as a separate province away from Assam. Though APHLC had its branches in most of the hill districts except Naga Hills, its presence was strongest in the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district and the Garo Hills district. On the other hand, the state of Assam had a bout of language agitations against linguistic minorities, which further worsened the already volatile situation in the hills. All these resulted in the Indian Parliament passing the North-East Reorganization Act, 1972, by which apart from Assam and Nagaland, three new states of Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura and two Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were created. It was a matter of time that the two Union Territories were elevated to statehood in mid-1980.

The new independent Indian Union had inherited a divided country, devastated economy, and illiterate, poor and malnourished masses mainly residing in the rural areas engaged in basically a subsistence economy. There were very few heavy industries under Indian control and the ill-connected and inadequate infrastructure were owned by the expatriate British capitalists or their Indian counterparts. The newly established Indian Union was yet to be integrated into a single Indian State; there was a tribal attack on Jammu and Kashmir; flood havoc and earthquakes in different parts of the country; and at the top of it all, there was scarcity of consumer goods, especially food items, and for that rationing had been introduced after the Second World War. The resources were limited and national commitment was gigantic. So, the problem was how to utilize the limited resources for the maximum benefit within the limited period of time. And for that the national leadership turned to



the Soviet experience of planned development. The First Five-Year Plan was inaugurated in 1952 with an emphasis on agriculture, rural industries and basic education. The Second Five-Year Plan emphasized on heavy industries and so on. Since then, Indian Union had implemented ten Five-Year Plans and eleventh one is being finalized. In this context, the contributions of the first prime minister of free India, Jawaharlal Nehru, is memorable. He invariably emphasized the scientific temper in the place of the tradition bound religiosity. A number of centres of higher learning such as universities, engineering and medical colleges, Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, scientific laboratories, academies of arts and crafts, and scientific research were initiated. A series of heavy industries such as steel plants, machine building plants, machine tools factories, fertilizer factories, chemical factories, petroleum refineries, power houses and a strong industrial foundation for the national development was laid out.

On the side of the social sector, there was the component of social welfare schemes, especially tailored for the socio-economically backward tribal areas. The entire country was divided into various development blocks below the districts in the states under the Ministry of Community Development and Panchayati Raj and within that, there was a special provision for the Tribal Development Blocks for the predominantly tribal areas. These Blocks were envisaged especially to initiate steps for agriculture, handicraft, rural industry, literacy, health and hygiene, and over all improvement in the life style at the grassroots level. Though there was an emphasis on agricultural improvement, construction of the residential houses for the vulnerable segment of population, village roads, health centres with amenities and trained personnel, schools and training centres were established in a big way. As per national policy of not to overadminister the relatively isolated tribal areas of the North-East region, however, the entire country from village to the block, to the district, to the state and then to the national level was linked for the first time in the history so far as the planned development was concerned. It was a fact that the resources were limited in proportion to the task undertaken, but it was an effort not to leave any corner of India untouched from the purview of the development planning. In this context, two points need to be recorded: firstly, creation of a



dedicated cadre of functionaries to work in the difficult frontier region in trying circumstance for the welfare of the Scheduled Tribes (IFAS: Indian Frontier Administrative Service: Elwin, 1964)), and secondly, conception of an especially tailored scheme known as five fundamental principles of tribal development enshrined as 'Tribal Panchsheel' in the publication of the NEFA administration, 'A Philosophy for NEFA' (Elwin, 1964A).

These developmental schemes opened new possibilities no doubt and a number of positive steps were initiated, in which benefits of the schemes reached to the target to an extent. However, among others, the far flung regions of the country was also linked to monetary economy in a systemic way, as there was provision for certain amount of money to be allocated for the various schemes. The availability of money in the region with limited avenues to absorb the cash flow led to spurious development causing exploitation of the people and region in an effective way. This process has been termed by a scholar not as development, but as 'decay of the local initiative' (Aier, 1986). With a view to human development, while the entire region was tagged to the Calcutta University for higher education till 1948, now all the states in the region has at least one Central University, funded by the federal government. Furthermore, apart from about a dozen of the universities, now the region has the centres of excellence such as the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati and the Indian Institute of Management, Shillong providing new avenues for human skills. However, ... 'where education spreads through the intervention of welfare state or voluntary philanthropic organizations, a contradiction arises between the economic goals of the educated and those of the larger society. The social distance between the tribal elite and the others keep increasing and this gets translated into social distance between educated tribals and educated non-tribals, a phenomenon that is seen even in the towns which have come into existence in North-East Hill areas. The opportunities for (social) mobility through education seem to be confined to small segments, if not some families' (Roy Burman, 1977: 417-18).

We have noted above how the North-East region was exposed to political upheaval in the aftermath of the Second World War, how that was the only region of India, on which the war was fought on the Indian soil. Naturally, the relatively small, politically insulated,



westernized through Christianity and to an extent encouraged by the retreating English bureaucracy, some of the tribes in the region expressed the reservation to join the Indian Union. In this context, Naga National Council was the premier one, which came out with the plea that, as the Nagas and Nagaland had never been part of India in the past, so they would like to be independent of Indian Union after the British withdrawal. They opened a discussion with the Governor of Assam for a possible way out to work together and that led to an understanding between the two sides known as Sir Akbar Hydari's nine point agreement. However, there was a difference of opinion on the interpretation of the provision in the said agreement on the point, 'what happens to Nagaland after interim period of ten years?' (Rustomji, 1971). And, the agreement led to nowhere and the Nagas decided to boycott the Indian administration. Consequently, there was no general election in 1952 and 1957 in Nagaland and the Nagas took to arms in an open rebellion. The Assam Police having failed to curb the rebellion, the army was called in under Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958 to fight against armed insurgency leading to untold misery to the people. A section of the Naga leadership pleaded for creation of a separate state of Nagaland by integrating the areas inhabited by the Nagas, which was accomplished in 1962. However, elevation of the Naga Hills district to statehood did not satisfy all sections of the Nagas and insurgency went on unabated, earning it the title of 'mother of all the regional insurgencies'. By then, other tribal areas such as United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and Garo Hills districts were restive and had resorted to the various democratic steps for creation of a separate state for them, which came in being in 1972 as Meghalaya. Five years back, in February, 1967, old Lushai Hills district rose in open armed rebellion against the Indian Union and for that many of the 'disturbed villages' were 're-grouped by the side of the road with a view to providing security' against the Mizo National Front (MNF) insurgents. The MNF insurgency continued even in the next decade and ended with the signing of the peace accord with MNF leader Laldenga and creation of state of Mizoram in 1985. In the year 1962, China had mounted an armed attack on the Indian forces guarding the northern borders in NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) with Tibetan Region of People's Republic of China. The ill-equipped Indian forces were badly beaten in the armed conflict and once the



Chinese withdrew from the area, NEFA was first turned into a union territory of Arunachal Pradesh and then it was elevated to statehood in 1987. However, Nari Rustomji, notes insightfully, 'The constitution of the tribal districts into states on the pattern of the larger states of India may have been satisfying to the tribal ego, but it also resulted in the dislocation and disintegration of the vital fabric of the tribal communities, a fundamental shift in their value-judgements and ever-widening gap between the villagers and their leadership' (Rustomji, 1983).

The creation of new states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh was done on the plea that 17 Naga tribes of Naga Hills districts, three tribes of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo of United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district and Garo Hills district and various similar ethnic stocks of NEFA would develop themselves better 'as per their genius' in the new states of their own. Only the Mikir (now known as Karbi Anglong) hills district opted out of the statehood in 1972. However, the demands for creation of new states on ethnic consideration in the region did not stop. A number of ethnic groups Boros, Karbis, Dimasha and the like have raised similar demands and took up to arms. Many of the smaller ethnic groups came with all types of territorial demands. On the other hand, on the alleged 'colonization of Assam' by the outsiders, a segment of the Assamese youth organized themselves under the banner of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1980s and went on armed rebellion, which is still festering. The region has seen a plethora of ethnic formations: there have been ethnic fragmentations among some of the ethnic groups, while others have further amalgamated themselves in larger identities. Mizo, Zoro, Zomi group of communities provide one type of example. On the other hand, some combination of the communities such as Chakhesang, and Zelinangrong came in currency. Arunachal provides another type of example; a series of communities such as Galong, Padam, Minyong, Pasi, Panggi, Shimong, Boris, Ashing, Tangam, Ramo, Bokar, Pailibos etc. joined hand to form Adi group of communities as the most dominant social formation in Arunachal Pradesh. So, the region is ethnically speaking in turmoil, and formation of smaller states on the ethnic ground does appear to have brought prosperity, development, contentment and end of the ethnic conflict. One way to look at these phenomena is to view the ethnic ferment as small ethnics' efforts to come to terms with the



process of the Indian nation-building. It appears that every ethnic group in its eagerness not to be left out in the onrush to the national efforts to march ahead with the time does not want to be left behind. And perhaps that is why, they evolve a variety of strategies in the garb of political demands to attract national attention and stake their claim of the national pie so to say.

Barring the Naga boycott of the first two general elections and the phase of the MNF insurgency in Mizo Hills district, there have been regular elections to the state assemblies and parliament in the region and the electorate have chosen their representatives for running their respective states and sent their nominees to the national parliament. The democratic process of incorporating the grassroots people's representatives to state level leadership though the electoral process is on since 1952, and the region has not only produced their own chief ministers and cabinet ministers to look after their charge, but also produced leaders at national levels as the federal ministers, state governors, ambassadors and even the high office of the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, the lower chamber of the Indian Parliament. People have formed their own political parties at the local, state, regional and national levels and took active parts in the electoral process. In principle, they run their affairs as per law of the land, but the demographic size of the states does matter in the Indian federal structure. After all, when states like Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra send 80 and 48 members respectively to the Lok Sabha while states such as Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim choosing one representative each appears somewhat odd, but that is what is the counting of individual Indians, may be from Uttar Pradesh, may be from Nagaland. It is the democratic process, in which every body competes against every body for maximizing their benefits and no body is ranged against any body. The major problem is that of the denial of the people's democratic rights through means of violence and insurgency, which must not deny ordinary citizen's role to take part in the democratic process without fear and apprehension. However, the North-East region also represents the case of differential development of nationhood in the country. As the region was late in monetization of its economy, so was it late in social and political development in comparison to other regions. Naturally, politics of violence ingrained in the region for its being on the difficult frontiers with a long tradition of defiance of the established authority



has turned into political insurgency. As many individuals come to believe in short cut through violence to success in their design, they not only take the law in their hands, but also usurp the rights of the ordinary people to make their choice. But it does not work in the long run and the perpetrators come grief at the end. However, the North-East region, of late, has emerged as the thriving theatre of insurgency, in which its perpetrators have turned insurgency into a money-making industry.

### *The Extent of Social Change in North-East India*

#### *Individual*

Tribal people are known to be gregarious in nature in their traditional set-up. The individual tribal does not have a personal/private domain of social activity unknown to the community. They function in public domain from birth to death and all their social actions normally have a socially approved pattern of behaviour. There are various sets of actions beginning with a child's play, to training the teenagers to acquire skills, to the youth to choose their spouses, to the elders to guide the young to earn their living and to the old to instill traditional wisdom, customs, knowledge, faith in the supernatural and folk art, craft and literature among the members of the community. Thus, normally, a tribal moves in a socially approved pattern of actions all through his/her life. There are extremely few deviants among the tribals. Similarly, the harshest possible punishment inflicted on any body among Adis for burning granary or incest among the Konyaks was to banish the culprit from the community. And such harsh punishment was as good as bet in the woods for wild animals, as the banished individual would not be socially accepted by any body, even by the hostile enemy of the community. The traditional communities had age-set and sex-set division of labour for performing various actions leading to earning food and drinks, making shelters, weaving cloths, resorting to hunting, or entertaining the folk and the like. For example, it was invariably the adult male, who hunted in the jungles for games and it was the women, who could collect fruits and roots and cook meals. Similarly, it was the old, who instilled folk traditions, literatures, and myths of origin and stories of migration to the young ones. The average individual in the community followed the vocation, which was repeated by most of the people almost in the same way within the



territory of the community and rarely a person would transgress the tradition bound actions. Normally, a tribal would be born and die while doing the same work all his/her life within the limited radius of the tribal territory.

It were the hunters, story tellers, chiefs, headmen, warriors, and the like, who guided the communities in coping with the crisis, when the white missionaries emerged among the tribes with their guides to preach a new faith or the British decided to invade/pass through the tribal territories. It was the marginal men/women in crisis, who turned to the missionaries; or terminally sick individuals, who had lost hope in life, who sought the white men's pills as a cure. Barring some specific cases, the chiefs and headmen were opposed to the British intrusion in the hills. Even among those of the tribals, who were attracted to the missionaries, they began to distance from the missions, when the missionaries insisted on prohibition of drinking country liquor, worship of native spirits, community dances and the like. Thus, the number of converts among the Aos kept on fluctuating in the first fifty years of the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries in 1876. The schools attached to the church did miracles by attracting pupils, who in turn joined blue collar jobs in the newly created district headquarters, or turned to be a teacher or a preacher in the mission structure. The British picked up such people or their progenies with some social standing in their communities as *dobhasis*, political interpreters or political jamadars as eyes and ears of the administration. A big boost to the conversion and church activities came, when the administration decided to assign educational budget in the hill districts to the missionaries for education work. With opening of the churches in more and more villages, more and more individuals began to flock to the mission activities, turning the Christian missions in the hills as an alternative organization to the traditional society. The colonial administration too got indirect assistance though the availability of the literate tribesmen as the potential collaborators/functionaries.

In February, 1941, Edna and B.I. Andersons, the American Baptist missionaries reported from their headquarters, Impur, Naga Hills district, two typical cases of conversion to Christianity from the Chang tribe, which influenced positively the spread of the Christianity among the Nagas. A powerful Chang village chief and the head interpreter at the Mokokchng court (*dobhashi*), who had been



the chief proponent of the British power among the tribes for over 30 years. He ruined his health by excessive drinking and he was seriously ill in the year 1940. At the end of his life, he sought conversion to Christianity, and his example was followed by many in future. Similarly, there was another strong Chang tribal chief, who had saved the British officials from an attack in ambush and for that the King Emperor subsequently decorated him. At the fag end of his life, he was converted to Christianity along with the members of his family. He was an effective voice among the community whose opinion was honoured by the government officials. He had taken to the conversion of his flock to the Christian faith. In this context, the example of Rev. Langri Ao's innovative approach to the indigenous Naga institutions cited above may be remembered. How Rev. Ao succeeded as a native missionary among his fellow Nagas and while the foreign missionaries avoided them as heathens.

The educated tribesmen may not be educationally highly accomplished, but they appeared on the tribal scene as the effective and modern spokesmen of their communities in the fast changing first half of the 20th century North-East Frontier India. As the communities pass through various phases of crisis, they turned more and more to the Christian faith. Many of the newly educated tribesmen joined the administration on blue or white collar jobs, which proved very convenient to the colonial administration during the hours of political upheaval. Though these government officials were 'loyal to the colonial administration', they were first and last the tribesmen equally loyal to their tribal communities. Naturally, they had their own anxieties in the fast changing world around them. As the events began to unfold fast in the region in 1940s and the British began to signal that their days were numbered as the colonial masters in the region, the newly educated tribal elite appeared at a loss. They would have preferred to live in hills undisturbed, but with the departure of the British in hills that option was no more available. Now, they were administratively tagged to Assam province, which was further part of the British Indian Empire. Thus, indirectly, they would have to deal with the Indians, which to them meant the Hindu Assamese or the Bengalis. They had come to believe that the colonial administration was a filter against the Indian expansion to the hills. Now in their absence, the tribesmen were faced with an uncertain future, anxieties and personal helplessness. However, by the middle of 20th century,



many of the tribesmen had become politicians, advocates, doctors, professors, church leaders, apart from low level employees and many of them had earned their names in their respective vocations. Such professionals came forward in the days of uncertainty as the effective spokesmen of their communities and negotiated with their counterparts for an honourable place in the new dispensation. Thus, new possibilities were opened for the tribesmen to play a larger role in the body politic of India as equal partners with constitutional guarantee for their special status. Naturally, many of them have worked as the ministers, governors, ambassadors, parliamentarians; educators, businessmen, advocates, bureaucrats and administrators like anyone else in the country. The regional insularity of the tribesmen was being broken day by day and the highly motivated youth of the region is moving fast anywhere in India and world to take up new opportunities and new challenges of life.

### *Family*

The family in the traditional societies such as the North-East region is one of the most significant social units of an individual's identity. Barring the Khasi, Garo and Jaintias of Meghalaya, who happened to be matrilineal in descent, rest of the communities are strongly patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. It is something abnormal for a tribe's man to remain unmarried. The family tradition is such that boys and girls seek their life partners freely from among the socially eligible clans/stocks. Free mixing of the sexes is the norm and there is a marked difference between the treatments accorded to maidens and married ladies in the communities. By tradition, there used be youth dormitories for the boys and girls under the care of the village authorities to train the youth in the art of life and prepare them for their potential roles as valued members of the community. As subsistence agriculture and hunting and collecting used to be the mainstay of the traditional activities, entire social life evolved around the annual cycle of events, festivals, seasons, and calendar. The elders were considered as the repositories of the tribal tradition, knowledge, literature and folklores. They were the models of behaviour as farmers, hunters, warriors, story tellers, soothsayers, medicine men, priests, and what not; all invariably rolled into one, and had, as if, multiple roles to play with. At the level of the family, the head of the family or the father had the last say in the affairs of the family. It was



the father, who represented the family in the village assembly. He would settle the marital alliance of his sons and daughters; once the son would get married, he would make arrangement for his residential accommodation and may even apportion some of his land for his support. In short, the family functioned as a social unit through the father and rest of the members of the family did play their individual roles as mothers, sisters, sons, daughters-in-law, etc. as per tradition of the community in question. It was basically a folk society, where every act of an individual was open to social review. In other words, there was little room for private life as it is understood in urban/industrial societies. Naturally, as the guardians of the culture and repositories of the tribal traditions, they were conservative in their outlook and avoided changes as far as possible.

Against the above traditional setting, one finds now, broken families, deserted couples, uncared children, drunk and drugged individuals in many of the families. Rate of divorce is on the high; drug addiction among the children is turning alarming; and excessive drinking has reduced life expectancy among the promising young men/women in a big way. This has also led to family discord leading to divorce. Another alarming scene is demographic boom in the region. The reasons are not far to find out. Tradition wars, feuds, conflicts have been almost exterminated; chronic diseases such as malaria, cholera, plague, small pox, etc., have been eliminated; and Christianity has removed personal and social unhygienic practices such as burial of dead in the vicinity of residential accommodations. On the other hand, better eating habits, improved medical knowledge and facilities, spread of education, contacts with outside world, exposure to mass communication media, welfare measures adopted by the state, and improved means of transportation has made the life easier and comfortable. In such a situation, birth rate is high and the death rate has been drastically reduced, leading to an appreciable demographic increase in the region.

Family began to change, once Christianity came in a big way. Marital alliances were no more solemnized as per the traditions, but the couple travels to the church for a Christian marriage, which may even be registered as civil marriage. Similarly, the children are baptized by the Christian priest; death leads to a burial in the Christian cemetery, followed by a church service. Now, the *Holy Bible* has an important role unheard and unimagined by the indigenous



traditions. Though the communities continue to speak in its tribal languages, the family life is turning to be formal through the intervention of the Christianity as a world religion. The ceremony in the church, music on various occasions, dress of the individuals, eating and drinking to an extent on festive occasions are turning westernized, of course, there is sprinkling of local flavour. Invariably, the confirmation to the Western style of good Christian behaviour is becoming the norm of the family behaviour, which has further been engendered by the children being sent to the English medium so-called 'public' or mission schools. However, one must add that the ethos of the tribal life is strong enough, which gets reflected through tribal languages, vigorous music and dances, strong kin ties among the siblings, and an abiding attachment to the land to which they belong. In this context, the legal provision of prevalence of the customary rights on the land and the property of the regional tribal communities has ensured the continuity of the traditions to an extent. A few words about the matrilineal Khasi would be in order over here. With conversion to Christianity, employments in the formal sector and exposure to the basically patriarchal societies all over, the Khasi sons tend to adopt fathers' clan titles, while girls go as per the tradition on the mothers' clan surname. There is also a feeble move by some male Khasis for a shift to patriarchy. Many of the Khasi women, who married ethnic Nepalis, Marwaris, Punjabis, and Muslims men, their children automatically, get absorbed among the mothers' clan. And thus, by the end of the second generation, any vestige of the inter-ethnic alliance gets almost obliterated. In spite of all the changes in the life style of Khasis, males are discriminated against at the domestic level.

### *Kinship*

Traditional tribal communities were tied together through the network of kinship. As it is commonly understood, kinship is based on marital alliance and adoption of the individuals/families as the brothers/sisters and one has certain obligations to the kinsmen/women. With a view to avoiding the incestuous alliances within the siblings, every human settlement must have at least two clans of the same community: the wife-giver's clan and the wife takers' clan. As the population grows, the size and spread of the clans also grow leading to intricate system of kinship network. Most of the



traditional communities have a system of ranking the clans in terms of their social status. Accordingly, there are preferred clans for the marital alliances and there are clans to be avoided or given last priority for such an alliance. The stable traditional communities of the North-East region had followed such indigenous practices over centuries uninterruptedly. There were a number of marital ties among the various communities of the region. However, boys and girls had relative freedom to choose their partners. Marriage ceremony was an easy affair in which bride-price was given and community feast was arranged. Subsequent marital affairs were simple and more of legitimatizing ceremony than social celebration. Separation by divorce was easy and children born out of wedlock did not suffer much social ostracism. The most important role of clan solidarity was reflected on the occasion of death. The clans own the bones of their male members and in case a member of the clan dies in a distant place, it is obligatory on the descendants of the deceased to return the bones of to the clan cemetery. With the advent of Christianity, marital practices have been altered. A young men's wedding has turned out very costly to the extent that some of the young men spend years earning and saving money to meet the heavy expenditure on the ceremony, party, and pomp and show.

Compared to the plains folk, the women among the hill tribes enjoyed an open space socially and otherwise. However, this statement needed to be qualified, as even among the matrilineal Khakis and Garos, it was the male relatives such as maternal uncles, who took the significant decisions on behalf of the matriarchs. In most of the tribes, the women had no role in public affairs. On the other hand, there are much repeated sayings decrying the women status, wisdom and dispensability: 'crabs and women never have religion'; 'a women's wisdom does not reach to the other side of the village'; 'a wife or a rotten fence can always be changed'. In such an atmosphere, education of the women was naturally considered as a waste of time and labour. The missionaries placed great emphasis on the education of the women with a view to putting the family relationships on a more egalitarian level. Most of the early missionaries came to the 'field' with their wives and when the husbands got busy with their formal mission work, it were their wives, who invariably volunteered to teach alphabets, health and hygiene, needle work and even rudiments of domestic healthcare to the women. Parallel primary



education among the girls opened new possibilities of nursing, paramedic and evangelic works in course of time, which laid foundation to the higher and vocational education. It is a fact that women status did not change drastically in spite of the extensive conversion to the Christianity in many of the tribes. However, it goes without saying that Christianity opened new possibilities for the women beyond the limits of their tribal cultures and traditions. For example, now marital ties may be mediated through the mission sponsored activities among the boys and girls belong to different formerly hostile clans, feuding tribes or even between tribals and non-tribals. Today one finds educated tribal women of the region in every walk of life competing with their men folk with dignity and honour with the possible exception of politics.

### *Village*

P.R. Gordon, the celebrated author of the monograph on the Khasis, the first authentic ethnography on any tribe written under the 'Ethnography of Assam' series of publications, found a Khasi village like this: 'Khasis build their houses fairly close together, ... Khasis seldom change the sites of their villages, to which they are very much attached, where as a rule, the family tombs are standing .... There is no such thing as a specially reserved area in the village for the Siem and the nobility, all the people, rich or poor, living together in one village, the houses being scattered about indiscriminately .... Generally up to the narrow village street, from house to house, there are rough steep stone steps, the upper portion of a village being frequently situated at as high an elevation as 200 to 300 feet above the lower. In a convenient spot a clear space is to be seen neatly swept and kept free from weeds, and surrounded with a stone wall, where village tribunals sit, and elders meet in solemn conclave. The dances are held here on a festive occasion .... All the villages swarm with pigs, which run about the villages unchecked. The pigs feed on all kinds of filth, and in addition are fed upon the wort and spent wash of the brewings of the country spirit, or rice beer, the later being carefully collected and poured into wooden troughs' (1990: 33-35). This image of a traditional tribal village may broadly be applicable to most of the tribal villages inhabited by communities such as Aos, Angamis, Tangkhuls, Mizos, and so on. In many of the tribal villages in Naga Hills, Garo Hills, Lushai Hills districts and elsewhere, the most



important landmark was the youth dormitory as the focal point of a series of activities. Furthermore, the Nagas, used to erect imposing village gates as a part of their defence device, and gates were constantly guarded against the attacks from the enemies. Thus, the village gate used to be some sort of garrison for the village defence force, consisting of the young men of the village.

Once Christianity came to be accepted as the faith of bulk of the villagers, youth dormitory was labelled as immoral heathen practice. Furthermore, it was not only to be discouraged, but also to be replaced by the mission run schools for the boys and girls, where instead of folk traditions and folk literature, Christian hymns, prayers, religious songs and the *Bible* was taught. The new Mission Compound, consisting of pastor's quarters, little church or prayer hall, and school, was constructed at a distance in the beginning, as the followers of the indigenous faith objected many of the new practices. The new converts also refused to pay their contributions to the village festivals, terming it as irreligious practice. This act at times led to the court cases between the two parties. Once the number of the converts increased in the village, the foreign missionaries advised their followers to settle their villages in more systematic ways by constructing the individual houses at a distance from one another, keeping the animals away from the human residence, making separate arrangements for toilets away from kitchen and providing outlet for the smoke emanating from the kitchen. In course of time, the converts erected imposing churches, schools, seminaries made of reinforced cement concrete, changing the skyline of tribal landscape. Unlike the traditional living structures of thatch and bamboo, the church inspired houses were made of reinforced cement concrete, flattened kerosene tin sheets, and Galvanized Iron Sheets with the roof painted red. Inside the structures, there were separate living rooms, kitchens, toilets, stores at the back and animals kept away at a distance. Very soon, cots, chairs, tables, benches and stools, metal cooking wares, china crockery and iron cutlery were added to the tribal Christian family's proud possession. So was the change in the table manners: the tribesmen/women would offer prayers before their meals; would invite guests for tea and snacks. By then, there was a drastic change in their personal apparel, as the men began to dress in western style in trousers and shirts, coats, hats, shoes and ties. It took time for the women to adapt themselves completely to the western mode of dress.



Frederick Downs found ambiguity in the attitude towards the aesthetic components of life: "In the tribal areas this consisted essentially in weaving, dress and personal ornamentation, decoration of houses and village gates, as well as songs and dances. The missionary and subsequent local Christian attitude towards these depended on two tests to which they were subjected: (1) did they perpetuate the traditional religion? and (2) would they promote immoral practices? The moral question related to both sexual practices and warfare. Because the songs and dances were perceived to be either sexually suggestive or celebrations of war and head-hunting, they were condemned. Because of their association with the old religion, as well as the extensive dancing and drinking involved (and it must be born in mind that most of the early missionaries were opposed to the dancing and drinking that took place in their own culture), the missionaries and early Christians were almost all opposed to the observance of traditional festivals .... There is one area in which the Christians affirmed the traditional culture. That was in relation to language. ... Because of their Protestant and egalitarian backgrounds (both the Baptist and Presbyterian missionaries, the main Protestant groups, came from lower class backgrounds with strong democratic convictions) the pioneering missionaries in the hill regions were firm believers in use of the mother tongue for education, for worship and for literature" (Sangma and Syiemlieh, 1994: 234).

### *Tribal Solidarity*

In view of S.K. Chaube, if the aspirations of the hill people are to be conceptualized on a single scale, the measurement would be called 'a quest for identity'. The steps initiated by the British led to the emergence of contemporary tribal identities in the region in most of the cases. For example, once a region was named as the Khasi or Naga or for that matter Lushai Hills districts, the varied communities residing within the respective districts tend to be addressed/assumed accordingly. The best example one may cite is that of the Naga Hills district. Till today, no community claims as the Naga, and the Naga as a tribe is a misnomer, but Ao, Angami, Chang, Lhota, Konyak, Mon, Sema, Tangkhul, and others all collectively call themselves 'Nagas'. Another example may be that of the Khasi or the Mizo, where varied communities were forced to coalesce to form the larger identity. Secondly, the efforts on the part of the missionaries to write



the dominant local tongue in the Roman script further consolidated the given identity from linguistic point of view such as Khasi or Ao for that matter. Thirdly, the efforts to write ethnography on various tribes of Assam further carved a recorded image of a community, which turned out to be the recorded reference for the community in question for times to come. And lastly, the British decision to record the customary laws of the 'tribes' further gave shape to do's and don'ts as the future models of tribal behaviour. Tribal solidarity further emerged through the activities of the various Christian missions, which were issued license by the colonial regime to operate in a given territory. Thus, the American Baptists Missionaries could work among the Nagas and the Garos, and in course of time, the Nagas were mainly Baptist Christians to begin with and so were the Garos. Same was the case with the Khasi and the Lushai vis-à-vis the Presbyterian Mission, which helped to two communities to emerge as the Khasi Presbyterian Christians and the Lushai (Mizo) Presbyterian Christians. This may further be seen in the slogan of a section of the Naga dissenters, who called for "Nagaland for the Christ". Similarly, Chaube informs that Mizo church gave support to the Mizo Union against the MNF dictates necessitating them to warn the church that 'the Mizo National Front (rebel) Government will not tolerate any church organization which does not accept the present Government'.

Frederick Downs identifies four ways through which tribal solidarity was achieved by the missionaries: (1) through the creation of a standard language for the various tribes, (2) through its educational work among the tribes, the missionaries opened a much wider horizon to the tribal people, (3) through its ideology of a world-wide Christian theology, and (4) through its ecclesiastical structure (Sangma and Syiemlieh, 1994, 206-7). In course of time, the newly educated tribal elite found a common cause with the fellow tribesmen from far away hills in the region because of his English education and also acting on theological or missionary plank. Thus, in spite of all the diversity and ignorance of one another, they could constitute forums such as Synods of the Presbyterian Church of North-East India (PCNEI), Council of Baptist Church of North India (North-East India: CBCNI or CBCNEI), and similar councils for late comers such as the Catholics, Seven Day Adventists, and the like. No doubt, such forums turned out to be precursors of the later secular political forums for the region. Prior to proceeding on that line, it will be



instructive to note that many of the tribal Christian leaders had been meeting each other through the mediation of the mission run institutions of the higher education in the region. Thus, formation of the tribal political forums such as Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU), All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC), Hill State Demand Party (HSDP) and various state specific political forums such as Naga National Council (NNC), Naga National Organization (NNO), NSCN, etc. for Nagaland; Mizo Union and MNF for Mizoram and KSU for Khasi Hills etc. may be added.

But even the mission inspired leadership had their limits in the secular domain. In spite of the preponderance of the Christianity in the life of the educated tribesmen, they remain hardcore tribal in their basic approach. Thus, records a perceptive observer of the hill politics: "... The Baptist Church of the Naga Hills was completely indianized by 1955. Most of the Naga pastors came from Ao community. Right from 1955, the Baptist Church threw its weight in favour of peace. The hardcore Phizo faction found the Church's gesture inconvenient and told it to keep aloof from politics. This necessitated the search for a secular foundation for the movement. China's hostility to India, if not its communism, was expected to supply this .... The persistence of the under-ground movement, in spite of the strong disapproval of the Church, showed that the movement was secular in character" (Chaube, 1999: 170). Again, it is the contention of Chaube that "like all-India politics, Naga politics was never based on any monolithic unity. The first Naga national Council of 1946 was expected to be an all-Naga platform. But it was very much an elite or middle class organization dominated by the advanced Ao. Phizo, with a middle class background but personally frustrated, was able to unify most of the Naga groups, through an appeal to tribalism and with the weight of the powerful Angami village Khonomā. His desperate bid to retain control led him to a major mistake, namely, the gradual alienation of the non-Angami Nagas" (Chaube, 1999: 166). Thus, in spite of the apparent racial and religious unity, region-wide tribal solidarity had never been achieved and the tribal remains and proudly retains his/her tribal diacritical marks.

We had organized a regional seminar on 'Youth and Youth Movements in North-East India' at Shillong in 1977. Unlike other



parts of the country, where unemployment, illiteracy, lack of opportunity, regional backwardness, lack of infrastructure, absence of skilled opportunity, etc. were ranked as the most important problems faced by the youth, the youth in the North-East region verged unequivocally that identity crisis was the only problem confronted by them (Sinha, 1995: 216). This worry for the identity loss may be responsible at least partly for the rapid growth of Christianity in the region since independence. 'In India as a whole, the Christian population increased by 69 per cent between 1951 and 1971, compared to a general population increase of 52 per cent. In the North-East, the Christian population increased by 117 per cent, during the same period. Even these figures do not give the full picture .... North-Eastern Christians constituted 16.5 per cent of the total Christian population of in India in 1981, up from 12 per cent in 1971' (Downs, 1992: 8-9). Then Downs proceeds to provide conversion statistics for five states in the region from 1961 to 1981:

**Table 3.1**  
*Growth of Population in the North-Eastern States*

<i>States</i>	<i>% growth of Xian's</i>	
	<i>1961-1971</i>	<i>1971-1981</i>
Manipur	84% (38%)	51% (31%)
Nagaland	76% (40%)	80% (50%)
Meghalaya	75% (32%)	48% (32%)
Tripura	57% (36%)	58% (32%)
Arunachal Pradesh	641% (35%).	

The above table demonstrates that a big churning is on among the tribes of the region. The followers of indigenous faith nestled on the far-flung areas on the distant frontiers appear to be worried that perhaps their indigenous faith may be an obstacle to their search for a convenient passage to modernity, in which their neighbouring Christian tribal cousins were leading the way. As a pragmatic and dynamic community, they perhaps realize that the Christianity with its plethora of mission and NGO sponsored social service and packages of development facilitates their competitiveness vis-à-vis rest of the Indian society in their search for an honourable status in the Indian Union.



*Lifestyle and World View*

Though it is difficult to generalize for the individual tribes, but the tribal society in the region has seen a massive transformation at different levels since independence. Still some broad statements have to be made. At the face of it, average tribal man/women from some of communities such as the Naga, the Mizo, and the Khasi from the region appear highly westernized, modern, educated and competitive to accomplish any assignment given to them anywhere in the world. Again, in spite of all the turmoil, environment of violence, on going insurgency and infrastructural dislocations, they are found all over the country in appreciable numbers struggling with their country cousins in an effort to make a decent living. The casual observers fail to understand how such people/communities can be termed as the backward scheduled tribes. The state sponsored welfare schemes have, again in spite of their deficiencies have gone a big way to benefit the tribes. Naturally, the elite among them have competed in all India examinations successfully and occupy coveted positions in the state and federal governments. Numerically small, but their shares at the national levels in different spheres of life are visible. On the other hand, there are individuals and small communities in almost all states of the region, who are so ill-equipped educationally that they have apprehensions to be left out in the onrush of social transformation. Many a time, external observers get puzzled on the rapid march of Christianity in the region. Missionary historian, Frederick Downs identifies fast conversion of the tribes in the Christian fold as revival movements, which follow certain spell of crises in the lives of the communities in question. Fast conversion to Christianity in the post independence phase in the region suggests tribal anxieties and uncertainties for their future in the fast changing democratic India. And needless to add that Indian Union because of some historical reasons was identified by many of tribesmen as the Hindu rule, which meant their Hindu neighbours from Brahmaputra and Barak valleys in Assam. Though it looks simplistic, but it appears that with a view to buttressing their sagging morale, they appear to have rushed to the fold of the world-wide Christian religion.

In such a situation, Christianity provides them with a sense of alignment with a wider circle of human multitude on religious ground. The tribal may not be opting consciously, but this possibility is easily and locally available and it has certain amount of modern western outlook, which appeals to the educated tribesmen/women.



Unlike unknown distant 'Hindu' politicians representing Indian State for acclaimed welfare amenities, the Christian missionaries are invariably their own tribesmen/women from their neighbourhood looking like them, conversing in their languages, and providing even instant solace through a variety of church sponsored social services. It is something like a bird in hand is equal to two in bush situation. For a time, the newly converted tribal gets confused how to negotiate between his age old faith and the newly presented gospel of Christianity, but he/she is a die-hard practical person, who knows how to make his or her best of the choices in trying situations. Within no time, he picks up external western style of dress, material culture, English language, and a plethora of mission approved ways of doing things as the Christians do. Now, the die is cast and the former tribal is reborn, as if, as Christian tribal, who tries to imbibe world-wide Christian pattern of behaviour.

We have summarized the North-Eastern social scenario in the following broad generalizations: "Firstly, a number of hill communities such as Khasi, Mizo, Angami, Sema, Konyak, Wanchu, Apa-Tani, and Monpa had a tradition of social stratification, private property, individual ownership of land, forest, animal, etc. Such practices, which have the constitutional approval as part of the tribal customary rights, have of late eroded the claimed tribal solidarity as egalitarian systems and provided impetus to social inequality. Secondly, the progenies of the Khasi *Bakhrav*, Mizo *Sailos*, Apa-Tani patricians, Konyak, Sema, Wanchu chiefs and the Naga *dobhashis*, who emerged first as a rudimentary middle class and then provided their communities with an incipient upper strata. Thirdly, post-independence period in the lives of the hill communities brought in the concept of planned development and the welfare schemes resulting in flow of substantial cash effecting traditional barter system adversely. Since secondary sector of production is not available to the hill communities in an appreciable way, most of their savings are being invested in land, turning the communal control into private property. Fourthly, emergence of private property has resulted into a number of associated trends in *lassaize faire* economy. Among them mention may be made of absentee landlordism, wage labour, share cropping, landless labour, agrarian tensions and exploitation. Benefits of various welfare and rural development schemes do not reach the grass roots. Finally, in place of the traditional tribal 'notables', an aggressive set of neo-rich



contractor-politician elite has emerged as the most significant power wielders among the hill communities. They have positioned themselves between their communities and the outside world as the most articulate spokesmen and mediators of the conflicting interests. The real underdog among the tribals have no spokesmen, as they are sandwiched between the fast vanishing traditional system and a new born welfare state" (Sinha, 1995: 113).

We have noted the human variety at the regional level in the North-East. We found that as the impetus to change was received differentially in different parts of the region, there cannot be a single base line for examining the nuances of social change in the region as a whole. Moreover, before the British colonial administrators emerged on the scene, they had already dispatched their advanced party in the form of the Christian missionaries in the region. These pioneering missionaries, with their preaching in the church, teaching in the village schools, literacy programmes for the women and adults male, healthcare and the *Bible* lessons they introduced momentous change in the tribal lives. The British colonial administrators recognized the chiefs, headmen, *dobhashis*, political interpreters, and political jamadars; introduced cash transaction; created tribal hill districts, urban centres and indirect rule of the tribal chiefs and *gaonburas*. During the First World War, the tribesmen from the region were recruited in the coolie corps and went overseas during the operation. The Second World War was fought in a limited way close at home in the region and when the tribesmen saw the 'invincible' British trounced by the Japanese and others and retreated in the most inhuman ways, they, as if, drew their own lessons of defiance. Lastly, with the coming of the independence, the regional society had a number of apprehensions, which were largely and formally taken care of by the constitutional guarantee of the tribal customary laws, provision of the welfare measures, creation of the tribal hill states and various effort to incorporate the tribal elite in the national fold and chalking out special programme for the distant small tribes. All these efforts, formal, the state sponsored welfare schemes, and voluntary ones by the plethora of non-governmental organizations inclusive of the Christian and other missionaries have played crucial roles to make the regional society adapt to the changing times more comfortably and retain their innate tribal ethos meaningfully. As a whole, the society in the region has totally transformed externally,



but its inner core of tribal ethos is virile, resilient and flexible enough to withstand any challenge in its way to dynamism. It will be interesting to examine the nature of trends of social change in the region on the scale of modernization, westernization, urbanization, and industrialization, and at the same time, examine the empirical evidence how the indigenous institutions have coped with the on-rush of social change.

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