1

A NOTE ON SOCIAL FORMATIONS IN NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER REGION

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THE North- Eastern Frontier Region of India is said to be unique in many ways. Scholars have endeavoured to show its links to south-east Asian lands on the one hand, while on another, strenuous efforts have been made to prove that this region had been the part of India since mythical period. We propose to accept the region with its present specificity and structural generality within the process of the political economy of the present Indian political system in which professed State ideology of socialism and planned economy permit almost unrestrained expansion of capitalism. In this *note* we take the British period of over a century as a backdrop and try to identify the dominant trends of social formation evident in the lives of the communities in the region during the last four decades of the Indian Independence. We frankly acknowledge our lack of originality at the outset. The issues discussed elsewhere and on other forums are being examined with a view to a meaningful academic dialogue. They are taken as indicative and not exhaustive. Though we may refer Assam time and again, our intention is to examine the social formations in the hill areas. We feel it will be advisable on our part to limit ourselves with the dominant trends rather than cases even from the hills. In the final analysis, we the academically alert and concerned citizens, may take stand on

some of the disturbing trends threatening the professed pattern in our national life.

A serious analyst of the contemporary Indian social scene such as Srinivas stops his examination of Indian social transformation on the eastern border of West Bengal (Srinivas, 1977). Perhaps historians, Raychaudhury and Habib, tried to rectify the wrong done in this North-Eastern region by putting the medieval history of Assam in the appendix of their celebrated anthology (Raychaudhury and Habib, 1982). In fact, the geographers have been much fairer to this region. Spate identified it as one of the 34 regions of India with three-four Sub-regions (Spate *et al.*, 1967). In this recognition itself lies its diversities. One must hasten to add that besides the geomorphological consideration for regionalization, Spate and his colleagues also recognized the human factors, by that they meant technological base of human endeavour leading to various social formations.

In the aftermath of the sepoy mutiny of 1857, the British consciously felt the need to examine the nature of the Indian society. Alfred Lyall, an important colonial functionary, prevailed upon others to depict the Indian scenario as a confused conglomeration of caste and tribes, religions and sects, language and dialects, races and regions held together by the British imperial presence (Owen, 1973). And that is how Dalton's *Ethnology of Bengal* and various volumes on caste and tribes were compiled. In their mercantile and strategic policy for the defence of the empire, it were the British strategists, who referred to the Indian mainstream (or *core*) against the distant frontier regions to be defended. On this distinctly colonial approach a series of books were written and published in course of time. In many ways, this trend still continues, which baffles an alert mind from the frontier region.

The historians inform us that there were various principalities before the Ahom could establish themselves in the Brahmaputra Valley. The way they organized their water-managed economy through an intricate system of *pyke* on the basis of *khel* and *mel*, was reminiscent of Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* (Wittfogel, 1962). Though the plains were ruled with a heavy hand, frontiers were secured through the payment of *posa* and institution of *Kakoti*. Many of these distant

communities were loosely linked with the Ahom State and at times their services were requisitioned. There was a limited social intercourse, at times Ahom princes used to marry beyond their limits for political alliance. Though there was an economic hierarchy, Ahom Hinduism was largely free from social disabilities experienced in other Hindu kingdoms. At the cultural level, early Assamese was emerging as a lingua-franca for the entire region.

At the formal political level, there were three dominant models available in the region: (i) Hindu and Hinduized kingdoms such as Manipur, Ahoms, Jaintias etc, (ii) Buddhists like Chakma, Khamtis, Bhutanese etc. and (iii) tribal polities such as Khasi Syiemships (Sinha, 1987). Then there were a number of insipient state formations such as Mizos (Lushais), Angamis, Konyak and others. The basically subsistence hill economy generated an extremely limited surplus, which was too insufficient for the maintenance of a state structure. On the other hand, the region was on a difficult and agriculturally unsuitable locale, where possession of a plot of land was not preferred to an extensive topographical niche for hunting, grazing or transhumance. The basic character of a hill man is that of defiance and struggle against the natural obstacles and human intrigues (Lattimore, 1962). Thus, if a surplus was not generated locally, it was considered imperative to acquire such articles of necessity and luxury by force leading to raid, feud, invasion and even war.

After 1824—1826 Anglo-Burmese war, Lakhimpur district which touched all the sub-regional variations to a great extent, was considered an ideal location for colonization of the white settlers. As luck would have smiled on them, a stray and insignificant vegetation of the region—tea, caught the imagination of the then technologically advanced British entrepreneurs. This resulted in an organized expansion of the plantation economy on an entirely technologically primitive base. The natural resources—land, forest, minerals, and wild life were considered inexhaustible. The key word was expansion—through adventure, intrigue, trade, treaty and treachery. Among the *posa* articles, bottles of rum, opium, tobacco, were the items gifted to the hillmen (Sinha, 1986). Still the hillmen were referred as barbarians, savage, uncivilized,

wildmen, headhunters and what not. In this way, while the valley land in the region was being transformed into one of the most progressive plantation economy in the world, the newly emerged formation was causing havoc to already stagnant indigenous economy.

In case one makes very broad generalization on the pre-British hill formations, the scenario presents relatively simpler contour. The hill communities possessed too extremely crude technology with their sparse population and abundance of natural vegetation, were engaged in hunting of the wild animals and collecting of the forest products for their subsistence. A secondary formation was taking shape in the form of family community based subsistence farming through slash and burn and less type of rotational cultivation (*jhuming*) often described as the 'Asiatic mode of production'. Ethnographers have described the economy in which there were no roles for the specialists. A few of them were engaged in barter trade in wild products for exchanging them with salt, threads, iron and other necessities. As their legends of migration indicate, hills witness incessant human movements leading to feuds, raids, repraisals and even wars. It appears by the middle of nineteenth century the entire hill tract was closely identified with various ethnic groups. Thus, there was hardly a patch of land in the region, which was 'no man's land'. However, the hills with their almost impregnable forests were no 'isolates'; in fact, there were trails across all the significant ranges.

It is a fact that the British did not directly administer the hill districts as they did in the case of the Brahmaputra valley. But an overall British control on the regional economy and inter-tribal relations led to the freezing of the tribal situation as if their natural process of growth was clipped off. A far reaching process was introduced in terms of capital and house taxes. Slowly and slowly, the entire hill region barring the upper ridges of Arunachal Pradesh was brought within the British capitalist economy. This was secured through introduction of cash economy, petty blue coat jobs, elementary education through the Christian churches and creation of administrative, market and urban centres (Aeir, 1986). What resulted in the process was the scenario in which subsistence

farming tribes were exploitatively linked to the world metropolitan market in which they were reduced to suppliers of the raw materials and consumers of the industrial goods. To the extent that even the *Jhumias* were induced to cultivate some minor crops for cash transaction which were channelled through markets to the urban industrial centres. However, with the carving out of the scheduled districts in the hills the British appeared to be reluctant rulers to some of the naive tribesmen. Though even their paternalistic caring for the tribesmen did not stop inroads of the private commercial establishments, such as Rajasthani wholesalers, timber merchants etc., to the tribal areas.

With the Indian Independence, the tribesmen were induced to participative politics. The electoral politics created a situation in which tribals had to identify their representatives at various levels from the villages to the parliament. This resulted in an emergence of a new category of tribal elite, distinct from the traditional leadership, articulate enough to interact with the larger Indian community. Because of the constitutional safeguards to the tribal property and provision of investment for the planned development of the backward tribal areas, the newly emerged tribal elite in many areas began to appropriate the given resources as their private property. Provisions of bank loan to farmers for improved agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, cottage industries etc., have largely gone in the hands of these newly emerged power brokers. Studies have shown extensively how private ownership was introduced on the communal landholdings in various districts of the region resulting in absentee landlordism, sharecropping, landless agricultural labour. In this context, it may be pertinent for the concerned tribesmen to ask themselves whether the constitutionally guaranted rights are adequate enough to stop these disturbing developments.

The traditional dominant mode of farming i.e. *Jhuming* is slowly giving way to settled agriculture in which various symptoms of agrarian relations found elsewhere are emerging. Collection of forest products and hunting the wild animals as a way of meeting the economic needs are no more viable, because of increased population and dwindling forests. Still forests are cut in such a way as if they are inexhaustive and

timber is supplied to the saw mills. Invariably the timber depots and saw mills are owned by the non-tribal outsiders. The concerned tribals should ask themselves whether depletion of forest in connivance with the non-tribal timber merchants is not a denial of the traditional rights and privileges of the common tribal folk. Possibly there is a need for a grassroot movement for environmental awareness and preservation.

The tribal's genuine apprehensions against the non-tribals, lack of infrastructure and skilled manpower are some of the main reasons for the lack of industrial enterprise in the hill regions. However, industrial establishments are required for a healthy economic development of the region. With the reduced role of the primary sector of production and absence of the secondary sector, are the hill States willingly and knowingly not encouraging the service sector, which is non-productive and parasitic? What type of manpower planning do they visualize in the years to come for their future? Are they not deliberately short-sighted and over dependent on the federal exchequer for managing their administrative structure? Perhaps it is time for them to re-examine their priorities in the light of four decades of planned development and work out a future-oriented industrial policy for their people.

To sum up, the 150 years of tribal exposure to the capitalist *laissez-faire* economy presents a scenario in which a number of formations co-exist in the North-Eastern region. We have a well organized capitalist plantation economy on the one hand and extremely primitive subsistence hunting and collecting one on the other. In between there are various phases of agricultural practices, mercantile and industrial enterprises and a state controlled service sector. In case one looks at the region from the classical evolutionary vantage point, it provides various aspects of formations indicative of various stages of development. However, path of regional development provides enough evidence to the dominant role of the State—the British or the Indian Union in the lives of the people. It is a tribute to the State that the tribal structure continues to be viable and resilient enough inspite of all the demands on it. It appears that the basically community-oriented tribal leadership has no alternative, but to decide

whether to strengthen the institutions and structures of age-old communal existence or go to an easy option of capitalist path of development.

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