

Looking for Peace in Troubled North East India

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Peace, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, means many related aspects of human actions such as calm, quiet, tranquility; freedom from war or civil strife; a treaty or agreement to end war; freedom from public disturbance or disorder, public security, law and order; freedom from disagreement or quarrels, harmony, accord; and an undisturbed state of mind, absence of mental conflict, serenity. There are two aspects of the above definition: one, pertaining to the individual state of mind, and the second refers to an invisible 'others'. The individual's peace, his/her mental frame of mind, may for the moment be left for the psychologists to tackle. At the moment, we are concerned with the aspects of peace affected by the 'others'. No body will deny that an individual's disposition may be disquieting to other, but the challenge posed by 'others' to the individual's mental frame is certainly more intimidating, as others are represented by a host of very powerful institutions such as society and polity. Coming to the theme of the meet, looking at prospects of peace in India's North East India, individual and society appear to stand together in opposition to the regional polity. One may pose some very basic questions in this regard: Why is it so pressing to deliberate on issues of peace today? Is it so that region is bedeviled by the absence of peace? Who are the actors/ institutions, which pose threat to the peace in the region? What happens when the present state of affairs are continued in future? Is it possible to overlook

issues of peace for the time being and concentrate on remedial urgent concerns of regional economic backwardness and nation-building projects? After all, it is the national priority to speed up pace of development by removing all pervasive regional backwardness.

Looking for peace in the region is a very serious and, at the same time, an important national task, which has to be taken with all seriousness. We take pride for having a democratic constitutional framework, which guarantees fundamental rights of the individuals and we pride ourselves for having an open civil society, in which judiciary can punish erring functionaries. Still India's Northeast region remains on the margin of the national social and political map. Out of seven states five are confronted with armed insurgency ranging from 60 to a couple of years. The region is controlled by the armed forces through infamous Armed Forces special Power Act, 1958. There have been a dozen of official accord/ agreements leading to more discord and disagreements. The regional states continue to be 'governed' mainly by the superannuated officers either from armed forces, police or intelligence wing of the federal administration. The Government has earmarked huge amount of money to be spent on various aspects of development and administration in the region. Still the region is marked by economic backwardness, armed insurgency and other forms of violence. Instead of jumping with quick fix solutions, we propose three steps in our presentation. Firstly, taking cue from Timothy Ash, Fellow of St Anthony's College, Oxford, we propose to write a brief 'history of the present Northeast region of India: from 1947 to 2009'. Secondly, we propose to analyze the aspects of peace, which we should endeavour to cultivate for the region as the minimum requirement of an honourable living condition for the Indian citizens. And, lastly, the people of India have given a flexible constitutional framework to us, which has to be utilized for redrawing new provisions suitable to the changing times for meeting the genuine regional aspirations and providing at least part answers to the reality on the ground. Time has changed and new generation

rightly aspires for decent living conditions with dignity. It is the duty of every right thinking citizen to come forward and create an atmosphere, in which future looks secured. In this context, we plead for re-examining the political and administrative contours of Northeast region within the Constitutional frame of India.

History of Present : North East India between 1947-2009

Imagine seven states of the Indian Union's nestled in its North East frontiers in mid 1940's as the British colonial province of Assam plus two princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Suppose, the British colonial power did not withdraw from its Indian Empire in 1947. Imagine a situation, when the Japanese forces were not defeated in the Second World War and were able to drive the British away from India. Suppose, the Coupland Plan of the 'crown colony' proposed by the Governor of Assam, covering tribal areas from the Himalayas to the Arakan Hills, and Garo Hills to Upper Burma, was accepted as a territorial political arrangement in 1947. Suppose for the sake of argument, Pakistan, and in course of time, its successor state of Bangladesh, was not created on its western frontiers as another sovereign country. Suppose, while leaving the country for good, the British would have handed over their Indian possession to the descendants of the early rulers from whom they had got the territories some more than a hundred years back. Let us presume, Assam with its six districts in the Brahmaputra valley, two in the Barak valley and five hill districts plus the Frontier Tracts of Sadiya, Balipara and Thuensang remained a province as it was in 1947. And for the sake of argument, Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose had managed to defeat the British and driven them away from the region. What would have been the shape of the things politics in the region? Had there been no declaration of independence by the Naga National Council on August 14, 1947? Had there been no provision of the Sixth Schedules for the tribal hill districts of the region? Had the province of Assam been not reorganized in five states plus two former princely states turning into states? Then, had

there been insurgency in Naga Hills and followed by others? Even then, had there been reign of terror perpetrated by the insurgents and the states on the common citizenry in the region?

Let us think aloud for a moment. Today it appears improbable, but one may think of a situation, when the British rule would have continued in this part of the country. How long had the composite British Province of Assam been continued? Had there been no demand for carving out state of Nagaland, followed by others? Had the region remained as it was, say, in 1930's, when there was neither insurgency, nor any form of tribal violence? In case of impending withdrawal from India, the British would have carved out a 'crown colony' in the region, had it been a viable happy home of the regional tribal folk devoid of violence and conflict? How had the regional folk reacted to the possible victorious Japanese forces? There had been no division of India into India and Pakistan, and thus there was no another country such as Bangladesh on its western borders. Had there been still extensive Bangladeshi immigrants in the region causing immense social upheaval? Had there still been an appreciable presence of the Christian missionaries and Christians in the region? What type of interaction would have resulted with other states in the present Indian Union outside north east region? Had region still been following the local barter economy outside the monetized financial world? Had still the traditional tribal leaders such as the chiefs like the Angs, Lyngdohs, Syiems, Lals etcetera continued to remain as effective as they used to be? One wonders why and how the good old world of seven-eight decade old changed in such a way that it is impossible to imagine the region without conflict and violence. What were the options available to the various ethnic groups in the region at the time? Question of individual ethnic groups such as Khasi, Garo, Angami, Ao, Lushai or others like even Tripuri or for that Meiteis (Manipuri) acquiring independence for them did not arise at the moment. Then options were to join Burma, Pakistan, even to some extent China or India. With exception of the

NNC, all others were roped in territorially to India. Even to the extent that the Mizos consciously chose India instead of Burma. May be it time for ethnic leaders to imagine their fate in Bangladesh, Burma or China and then to grapple with the present reality of small ethnic groups in an open democratic system, in which they have an equal stake.

How did all this happen?

The British did vanquish the Japanese forces in the war and there was no hope of the Japanese substituting the British as the regional rulers by the middle of 1940's. Similarly, the British Empire was considerably weakened to the extent that it had no energy to left to rule over India any further and, in fact, it was uprooted from Burma. Naturally, there was no strength left among them to experiment with the grand idea of 'crown colony' for the Assam and Burma tribes. So, the idea of crown colony remains just a historical reference point for an untested hypothesis. Similarly, acceptance of agreement hammered by Sir Akbar Hydari would have been that disastrous for the Nagas and the India state, as both came to a working relation in spite of strong reservation. From the hind side, it appears today that while Nagas were head strong on their non-negotiable uniqueness, New Delhi was callous to ignore local/regional sensitivity at its cost. When the dissenters such as Saikh Muhammad Abdullah, *Dravida Munetra Kazhagam* (DMK) and Lal Denga of Mizo National front (MNF) could be persuaded to work within the Indian Union, it was perhaps reasonable to expect even A Z Phizo to find a way out to be together. However, there was a built in problem with the leadership of the emergent Indian Union: most of them were head strong on their claimed non-violent achievement of independence. It were the heady days of moral superiority, non-violence, heightened putative national pride, a hallow claim of ancient great peace loving civilization and above all, an unrealistic sense of superiority. Look at the fact: the Assamese

leaders should have been the first to be sensitive to the current thinking and acts of their tribal cousins before the distant national leaders, but they had a grand design of a mono linguistic state of Assam inclusive not only the hill districts, but also the two former princely states of Manipur and Tripura.

Another problem sprung up from the initial well-intentional endeavour of the constitutional provision of the VIth schedule for the scheduled tribal districts by creating the District Councils. In fact, leaders from the plains and hills, both, were insincere to let the constitutional provision function for a while so that its merits could be assessed in time. But while the leaders from the plains saw it as victory in denying temporarily the hill men's demands for carving out hill states out of composite state of Assam, the tribal leaders saw the district councils as the transitional arrangement on way to statehood. So the provision of the District Council was never given a fair trail for its success with the result that barring some exceptions, all the areas under the district councils have turned into states. However, the tribals of these states are having their cakes and eating them also, as in spite of statehood they continue to have district councils in the new dispensation. In this way, they take the advantage of both statehood and district councils at the cost of the federal government and no body has time to look in to it. This initial provision for the beleaguered hill peoples of the composite state of Assam has of late been vulgarized in such a way that a number of (district?) councils have been created for small scheduled tribes in the plains of Assam on the one hand, on the another, the concept has been extended to Boro Territorial Council on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra in the plains of Assam. Further, a largely non-tribal community of Nepalis/ demand for the district Council for in the district of Darjeeling. And of late, even a commission has recommended that the entire state of Sikkim be declared as the Scheduled area (Roy Burman, 2008).

Some landmark dates in the present history of the Northeast scenario:

1. Signing a 9 point agreement with Sir Hydari Akberi, the Governor of Assam by Naga National Council (NNC) in June, 1947 and different interpretation of its clause 9 by NNC and Government of India.
2. Declaration of independence of Nagaland by Naga National Council (NNC) on August 14, a day before the independence of the Indian Union.
3. January 26, 1950: Adoption of the Indian Constitution providing special provisions for safe-guarding the interests of the Scheduled tribes through the Sixth Schedule.
4. Boycotting of the first and the second general elections by the NNC and taking to the arms.
5. Holding of the first (August, 1957), second (in May, 1958) and third (in October, 1959) Naga People's Convention (NPC) and agreement a 16 points charter for creation of a separate state of Nagaland.
6. Continuation of the insurgency and imposition of Armed Forces Special Power Act in 1958.
7. Birth of All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) in 1950's. Passing of Assam Official Language Bill in 1960.
8. Creation of state of Nagaland on December 1, 1963.
9. Armed insurgency by People's Republic of Kanglipak (Manipur) in 1960's.
10. Insurgency in Mizoram in February, 1966 by Mizo National Front (MNF).
11. Passing of North-Eastern States (Reorganization) Act, 1971.

12. Creation of States of Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram and establishment of North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1972.
13. Shillong Accord between NNC and the Government of India (GOI), 1975.
14. Formation of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) on December 31, 1980 from across the border in Burma with a view to opposing Shillong Accord and establishing a National Socialist state of Nagaland through armed struggle.
15. All Asom Students Union's (AASU) anti-immigration movement in Assam in 1979.
16. Birth of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), an armed insurgent group in Assam on April 7, 1979 at Sibsagar.
17. Insurgency in Meghalaya and Tripura in 1980's.
18. Signing of Accord between GOI and AASU in 1985.
19. Signing of an Accord between GOI and MNF in 1985 and MNF leader, Lal Denga forming the state government.
20. Creation of state of Mizoram, 1985.
21. Birth of Arunachal Pradesh as a state in Indian Union in 1987.
22. Agitation for regional Autonomy/ Statehood/Insurgency among the Boros in the plains districts of Assam in 1990's.
23. Khasi and Garo join the armed insurrection in 1990's.
24. Flushing out of ULFA rebels by the Royal Bhutan Army hiding in eastern Bhutan in December, 2003.

Genesis of violence and conflict

1. Political culture: Hunting, feuds, revenge; inter-clan, inter-tribal feuds leading to revenge; high values attached to chivalry leading to violence and defiance of difficult natural conditions are some of key ingredient of their traditional system. By definition, frontier peoples and zones have overlapping cultural and social moorings, and in fact, by its very nature, the state cannot control it fully. It is imperative that rest of the country understands frontier character of the region, where violence is not considered unethical. Rather it is considered to be an honourable way of settling feuds/ disputes. Hunting, archery, catching of the games, physical prowess, strength and stamina are considered prized attribute of an individual's leadership qualities. One may contrast this tribal instinctual attributes with that of ahimsa and non-violence. Not for nothing, Verrier Elwin pleaded for Gandhian reformers not to insist on spinning for the tribes men.
2. Sudden social change through the mediation of the Christianity at individual and group levels: Christianity provided a novel world view with its new pantheon, divinity, taboos, ideals, morals, sacred beings, scripture, and a modern/urban/western outlook to judge themselves and others. It as well provided the new converts with a confidence to deal with the world, neighbours, plains folk and outsiders with a sense of confidence, if not superiority, equality.
3. North East as a limited theatre of war during the Second World War: The tribals of the region, especially from Indo-Burmese frontiers, saw the one of worst type of modern warfare during the Second World War from close quarters. They were in a way witness to the most humiliating defeat of their British colonial masters and watched closely their humiliating retreat from Burma. So their awe for the British superiority vanished by the end of 1945. Then they saw the

new rulers in New Delhi getting engaged in War with/in (East) Pakistan/ Bangladesh, which resulted in Bangalis crossing to Northeast in a massive way causing immense misery to local population. Some years back, Indian Union fought a bloody war with the People's Republic of China over north eastern borders. These events made the tribes men extremely anxious of their future.

4. Extension of welfare administration, bureaucratization and over-administration: In spite of the Nehruvian caution, not to over-administer the tribal areas (Elwin, V.1964), unlike the British, the new rulers decided to push the regular administration even to the farthest tribal regions on the frontiers on the plea that as Indian citizens, the tribes as equal citizens of free India, they must be brought at par with rest of their Indian brethren through extent of welfare programmes and democratic process. In the process, the distant tribal areas with limited capacity to absorb so much outside influence was inundated with the various sets of bureaucratic functionaries, causing dislocation normal local life style.
5. Availability of an opaque and strange political system (indirect democracy), in which tribal representatives were strangers and they used to meet and were supposed to work with strangers; inadequate and ineffective voice to convince others of their genuine apprehensions: This refers to the democratic mechanism of choosing representatives for the State Assemblies and the Parliament by casting one's votes and the elected candidates to be accorded special privilege to take part in framing the laws. The decisions in these houses were taken by the majority, in which by nature shy tribes men/ or women contribute in a limited way, but these laws are enforced by the bureaucracy, which the tribals find it strange. In a way for them, old practice of all

powerful bureaucrats continues to be confronted with. So inter-relation between legislative and executive remained a mystery for tribe's men for a long period of time. This create an artificial problem, because in spite of electing their representatives, who are supposed to take decisions, the tribals are confronted with dealing with impersonal bureaucrats, who invariably refer to some vague rules before taking decisions.

6. Introduction of a plethora of nation-building schemes, but absence of accountability of the funds allocated for the purpose leading to frustration among the regional youth: A series of schemes for welfare, development of social and physical infrastructure and nation-building projects were assigned to the tribal regions; funds were allocated; some progress being made was visible, but monitoring of the progress of the schemes and accountability of the funds spent on them was no impersonal and bureaucratic that the tribes men lose all the patience with them. Once their faith in the system is uncertain, they conclude within no time that the entire efforts are being made to cheat them, as they fail to understand when the promises were made; funds were made available, work started, but the results were not visible...
7. Mismatch between the national concern for lack of law and order and backwardness of the region and regional anxiety for loss of distinct identity and real/putative of history: There is a contrast between the national and the regional expectations and concerns. For example, national obsession with empathic law and order prevalent in the region does impress upon the regional psyche, as this has been the normal state of affairs in the 'distant frontiers areas' even during the hay days of the British rule and the administration would ignore it to an extent or send an expedition to punish

the culprits, who might have run across the mountains. Similarly, the national continuous emphasis on regional backwardness does not touch the heart of the people; as they are used to lead a deprived life for ages. So much so that even construction of road in the road less difficult terrain is seen not as the harbinger of commercial possibilities, but as a device of subjugation through armed forces. There is a perception in the region, in spite of its being run by the regionally/locally elected representatives, any formal structure represents an outsider intervention, which does not get instant support. Not for nothing that the elected governments and functionaries may have formal legitimacy, but they do not command universal loyalty. When the issues of regional concerns are being debated among/ along with the regional intelligentsia and aspiring youth, invariably the first issue is tossed in front is that of loss of identity an ethnic group. And for that, they are quick enough to discover some real or putative 'evidence'/instance' of injustice from the past. Whether one likes it nor not, the regional youth does not appear to be convinced with the repeated national concern for regional backwardness, as they see steps for 'development' as precursor of influx of non-local skilled personnel further inundating the unskilled small ethnic groups (Sinha, 1994).

The above provides a synoptic view of the drift of events leading to present scenario in Northeast India. One may find the above schema rather sketchy; in that case further details may be added.

Peace : Aspects of its 'Why' and 'What'

India has a population as per 2001 census 1.1 billion persons with dominance of the Hindus and a strong minority of the Muslims. The Union is divided into 28 states and 7 union territories. However, unlike rest of the country, two states of Jammu and Kashmir and

Nagaland are governed by constitutional provisions of articles 370 and 371 respectively. At the other end of pendulum, there are 474 District (*Zila Parishads*) Councils and 227, 698 Village Councils, which have been empowered constitutionally to manage their affairs (Goswami, N. 2009:62-63). It has a three tier system: Federal, States and Villages. Women have fifty per cent reservation for their representation in their village councils, who participate on the basis of universal adult franchise. States have legislative assemblies directed voted by the citizens of the same principles. However, there are seats reserved for the minority communities in the state assemblies or for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, considered socio-economically backward. The federal structure is the epitome of Indian people's representation, in which people choose their representatives, who form the government. Indian Union is one of the few countries in the world, which has consistently and regularly held elections for the last six decades. It prides itself on its open civil society, trained and skilled man power, vibrant economy, and concern for less privileged segment of its people. However, there are dark aspects of Indian life, which are again universally known: its oppressive in-equality, social discrimination, regional disparity, grinding poverty, and unequal opportunity to its 'formally all equal citizens'.

Among the many dark spots on the Indian national map, one is that of Northeast Indian region, popularly known as 'land of seven sisters'. The problem was in fact inherited from the British colonial period. The then premier of the state, Sir Syed Mohammad Saadulla, in his eagerness to increase the population of Muslims encouraged land hungry immigrants from East Bengal to pour in Assam under his new infamous Land Settlement Policy (Hazarika, 1994 : 49-60), by which they could occupy any land: forest, public or even private property. In his policy to court favour with the colonial regime, Saadulla opened floodgates of immigrants to Assam on the slogan of 'Grow more food', which was aptly termed by the then Governor General, Lord Wavell, as "Grow more Muslims". Even after partition of India, immigration of Bangladeshis has gone

unabated, causing social unrest, economic exploitation and political upheaval in Assam. With the result that for the last three decades, anti-foreigner agitation, initiated by AASU and leading to emergence of ULFA insurgency, is on and not only state of Assam, but the entire region is in the grip of political turmoil.

The policy makers in New Delhi claim to be immensely concerned with the state affairs and would like to remove its backwardness as quick as possible and for that they have envisioned a number of nation-building projects. However, a political observer with long insight in affairs of the region, Sanjib Barua, notes: "The idea that Northeast India is economically backward and underdeveloped and that its ties with the national mainstream are fragile, whatever their validity, lends legitimacy to today's disorder. The democracy deficit, for instance, can be justified as being the result of an exceptional circumstance that would disappear when the region catches up with rest of India—economically and emotionally—whatever that might mean. Yet arguably, the region's informal structures of governance, the underpinning of durable disorder today, are fairly well-articulated with the institutions of the Indian state especially those, through which money for the region's development is channeled. However, whether the insurgency dividend can win hearts and minds and promotes Indian nationhood apart from providing financial foundation of durable disorder, is another matter" (Barua, 2005 : 25).

There is a growing concern that peace is the minimum necessary condition for any honourable social interaction and for a normal social behaviour. Imagine, the contrast, when the person/persons are under threat of physical violence, how will they react in an intimidating environment. Thus, peace is a must, but even on that there are differential views. For example, Ted Gurr begins with the following issues in his famous work, 'Why Men Rebel':

1. What are the psychological and social sources of the potential for collective violence?

2. What determines the extent to which that potential is focused on the political system?
3. What social conditions affect the magnitude and forms, and hence the consequences of violence? Then he recounts: The primary causal sequence in political violence is first the development of discontent, second, the politicization of that discontent, and finally, its actualization in violent action against political objects and actors. Discontent arising from the perception of relative deprivation is the basic, instigating condition for participants in the collective violence. Relative deprivation is defined as a perceived discrepancy between men's value expectations and their value capabilities. Value expectations are goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled. Value capabilities are the goods and conditions they think they are capable of attaining or maintaining given social means available to them. Societal conditions that increase the average level or intensity of expectations without increasing capabilities increase the intensity of discontent. Deprivation-induced discontent is a general spur to action. Psychological theory and group theory, both suggest that the greater the intensity of conflict, more likely is the violence. The specificity of this impulse to action is determined by men's beliefs about the source of deprivation, and about the normative and utilitarian justifiability of violent action directed at the agents responsible for it" (Gurr, 1970:12-13).

Ted Gurr comes to conclude: "There is not much support for the view that political violence is primarily recourse of vicious, criminal, deviant, ignorant, or under-socialized people. Men and women of every social background, acting in the control of every kind of social group on an infinite variety of motives, have resorted to violence against their rulers. Nor is political violence "caused" by pernicious doctrines, or at least by doctrines alone. Discontented men are

much more susceptible to conversion to new beliefs than contented men. Not all new beliefs prove justifications for violence, and most that, are derived from people's own culture and historical experience rather than alien sources. The belief that some kind of social arrangements or political institutions are intrinsically immune to violence or capable of satisfying all human desires is only a partial truth. Political violence is not uniformly and irretrievably destructive of human well-being. Many groups have resorted to political violence at one time or another in their historical development with positive long-range results. Men's resort to political violence is in part unreasoning, but does not occur without reason. Ignorance is almost always among its causes: some times ignorance of its consequences by those who resort to it, more often ignorance by those who create and maintain the social conditions that inspire it. But political violence is comprehensible, which should make it neither necessary nor inevitable, but capable of resolution (Gurr, 1970: 358-359).

So the region needs peace, is it not? But what is peace? At its minimum level, peace means stopping violence, and particularly war, and at a positive level, it means 'overcoming social injustice'. But Ranabir Samadar (Samadar, *et. al.* 2001) raises some pertinent, but basic questions: "Can one rest content with a prevention of war? Or, can one be satisfied with local knowledge at grass roots while working for peace? No, question of peace gets increasingly pushed back to the issues of power, injustice, structural violence and war. Further, to keep peace, democracies may wage war. Therefore, ideology, forms of power, forms of weaponry, technique of war (like covert operations, development of small arms, intelligence gathering), and exclusivity/hierarchy of certain rights, are as important as the formal presence of democracy. Thus, democracy as a theme of peace is thus, not without problem. To put this succinctly, it means that peace as the signature-theme of democracy problematizes democracy. In the era of human rights rhetoric, do democracies advance the cause of peace? Does political participation guarantee tolerance? If not, in the absence of participation rights and tolerance

in promoting peace, democracy, civil rights and political rights may not be an adequate guarantee for peace. And lastly, gross social inequality destroys the legitimacy of a rule. And an illegitimate rule cannot promote the culture of a non-pacific mode of resolution of conflict. In short, illegitimacy dissuades dialogue. Thus, peace is not a settled concept, as it cannot produce a manual of non-violent conduct of men and women that gradually turns men and women into non-violent agencies. Thus, peace studies are not a reformatory. Its pedagogic and programmatic aspects are intensely contemporary, and historically conditioned. Emanating from contexts, peace does not reside outside the reaches of power, an organized power as the state, but in its fault lines, in the contests that this power incessantly produces.

Similarly, Emmanuel Hansen reporting on ambitious studies undertaken at the instance of the United Nations University in 1985 on peace, conflict and development in Africa, records: "The peace question has to be seen in two aspects: peace should be conceptualized and perceived not only in the negative sense of minimizing or resolving conflict, but also in its positive sense of creating material conditions which provide for the mass of people a certain minimum condition of security, economic welfare, political efficacy, and psychic well-being" (Hansen, 1987: 4). For him, 'the basic starting point for the study of peace is conflict and resolution of conflict is only a minimalist condition for achievement of peace'. The first real condition is to understand the nature and the character of conflict in Africa, which implied two things: an identification of the salient issues and adoption of the appropriate methods to eliminate it. Again, removal of conflict is the only minimalist condition for the attainment of peace. For a lasting and reliable peace to be attained, it is important to fashion economic system which can guarantee sustained economic growth, guarantee for the mass of population a certain minimum of material existence or basic needs. This would not in itself remove the conflict, but it will eliminate some of the causes of tension, which lead conflict (Hansen, 1987 : 16).

Barua warns the optimists of nation-building efforts: "The futuristic talk of economic development and of Northeast India joining the 'national mainstream' contrasts sharply with the vision of the militia that mostly hark to history...Such contrasts over history and memory underscores the inherent tensions in all national projects, including the pan-Indian projects. Continuing with the failed narratives of national development and nation-building can be quite dangerous in the present global conjuncture. Policies that continue to be framed and legitimized by these failed narratives can also make the situation much worse" (Barua, 2005:26). And then comes the poser: 'Are there ways of imagining Northeast India's future outside the failed narratives of nation-building and national development?'

Looking Afresh on what we have : The Indian Constitution

Granted that we are dealing with an Indian problem, so one has to limit one's analysis within the constitutional perimeters provided by the Indian Constitution. The Indian Constitution claims to be flexible enough to incorporate emerging demands from its citizens with changing times. It did commit itself to safe-guard the special requirements of the socially, economically and regionally backward units. Here we refer to the constitutional provisions for taking care of special needs of the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and Northeast region. Among them, we refer specially to the provision of the VIth scheduled of the Constitution providing safe-guards to the customary rights, land, forests, minerals of communities and exempt them from paying income tax to the federal government and at the same time, the members of the said communities continue to receive all the benefits entitled to the members of scheduled tribes. Keeping in mind the emerged aspirations of the Nagas, the federal government took steps to create the State of Nagaland, ignoring the demands of the economic viability of creating small state on ethnic ground. This was further extended to the similar demands for

Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, against the recommendations of the State Re-organization Commission, Manipur and Tripura states were created keeping in mind the historical sensibilities of the concerned citizens of the two states. Same is the story of creation of the district councils. To an extent, ethnic demands for creation the district councils have been met, but every big and small community raises such demands and there is no stopping of increasing demand for creation of new states in the region. There must be a bottom line, below which the system will cease to operate and perhaps, we have reached such saturation. Can demands for creation of district councils by small ethnic groups and dispersed communities mixed with others and creation of new states on ethnic lines be indefinitely entertained ignoring the fiscal viability and effects on other communities?

Answers to the above may be yes and no, both depending on circumstances and location of the individuals.

Can we think aloud to re-examine the Indian Constitution in view of the changing times and new demands made for it? After all, Constitution has been amended on scores of times to incorporate the new provisions as per emerging contingencies. The Indian Union has developed in to a flexible system, which has accommodated some of the most threatening demands made on it such as Telangana movement in 1948, DMK separatist agitation in 1950's, Khalistanis' separatist demand in 1980-'90's and the like. Even for accommodating some of demands of the Northeast region, the Constitution has been amended about half a dozen times. In terms of money, material and men, the country has already paid a very heavy price for indecision on this issue ignoring the realities. Can we do something a fresh such as reframing constitutional instrument, recognizing the ethnic groups as the units, and not the territories such as the districts, and sort the conflict out among the social and public leaders and not by

the armed forces and intelligence officers? After all, the Constitution does recognize the ethnic groups as the units. When one looks at the genesis of British administration in Assam, one may note that the Collectors' main job was to collect basically land revenue from the thickly populated and well-cultivated districts in the plains and Deputy Commissioners (who happened to be either soldiers or police men) were responsible for garnering meager capital/house taxes on commission from the hill districts to begin with.

There is another aspect of the seven states *vis-à-vis* national political structure. Barring Assam, which may be compared with Haryana, Punjab, Jharkhand, or Chhatisgarh for its representation to the national parliament, rest of six states in the region send 10 members to the *Lok Sabha* and six to the *Rajya Sabha*. One or two representatives from these small states irrespective of their individual caliber feel lost to espouse their cause in comparison to the states such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Tamilnadu, Andhra, Bihar etcetera, which send more than 40 members each to the lower chamber of the national parliament. S C Jamir, Governor of Maharashtra and long serving former Chief Minister of Nagaland, suggested in May, 2008 to an intelligentsia gathering of the Northeast region at Shillong to devise some mechanism to appear before the other states and the Indian nation as one unit collectively for its representation. One wonders whether a serious thought was given to a sensible suggestion based on political experience. It is high time, the national policy makers realize that by allocating 10 % national budget to the Northeast region and by creating DoNER (Department of North East Region) in the Union Cabinet, unrest, insurgency, distrust, conflicting concerns and litany of conflicting claims will vanish, they are mistaken. The problem is serious and it needs serious consideration by those, who are held responsible for guiding and guarding the destiny of the Indian Union.

In another context, a scholar had suggested some two decades back to re-examine the ethnic issue afresh and consider it for political representation in the formal structure. After all, the Constitution agrees not to interfere with the customary rights over land, forests, other resources of the Scheduled tribes of the region and he suggested Naga model of representation and development (Ao, 1993: 215-235). Prof A L Ao at that moment was concerned with the rot in the Nagaland through his empirical analysis from the grass root. However, the region at large is to be seen as a unit and serious efforts are to be made address the six decade's old problems. May be the regional structure should be maintained as such. After all, states have been created after a lot of struggles by the concerned peoples. Similarly, old migrants such as the tea plantation labour and communities such Bengali speaking communities in Barak valley, tribe's men dispersed in the plains, Indians from other states working in the region, their interests have to be kept in mind. Again, the over-lapping regions between distinct areas of two communities, where mixed population is bound to be found, require special treatment. While according authority to the ethnic units within a distinct limit, care has to be taken of small and very small ethnic groups. Moreover, ethnic groups have been in ferment for quite some time; while some former distinct units have coalesced to form identities such as Adi or Mizo, there has also been fragmentation in many of former larger identities. But there is no reason why distinctly and ethnically compact areas should not recognized in place of faceless districts named accidentally after the important villages/ or *qasbas* (market places). May be these efforts will create further chaos for the time being, but ignoring the remedial steps will not help any body and moving ahead will open new possibilities. And for that regional intelligentsia should come forward and make a plea for peace of their choice. Let us give peace a chance.

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