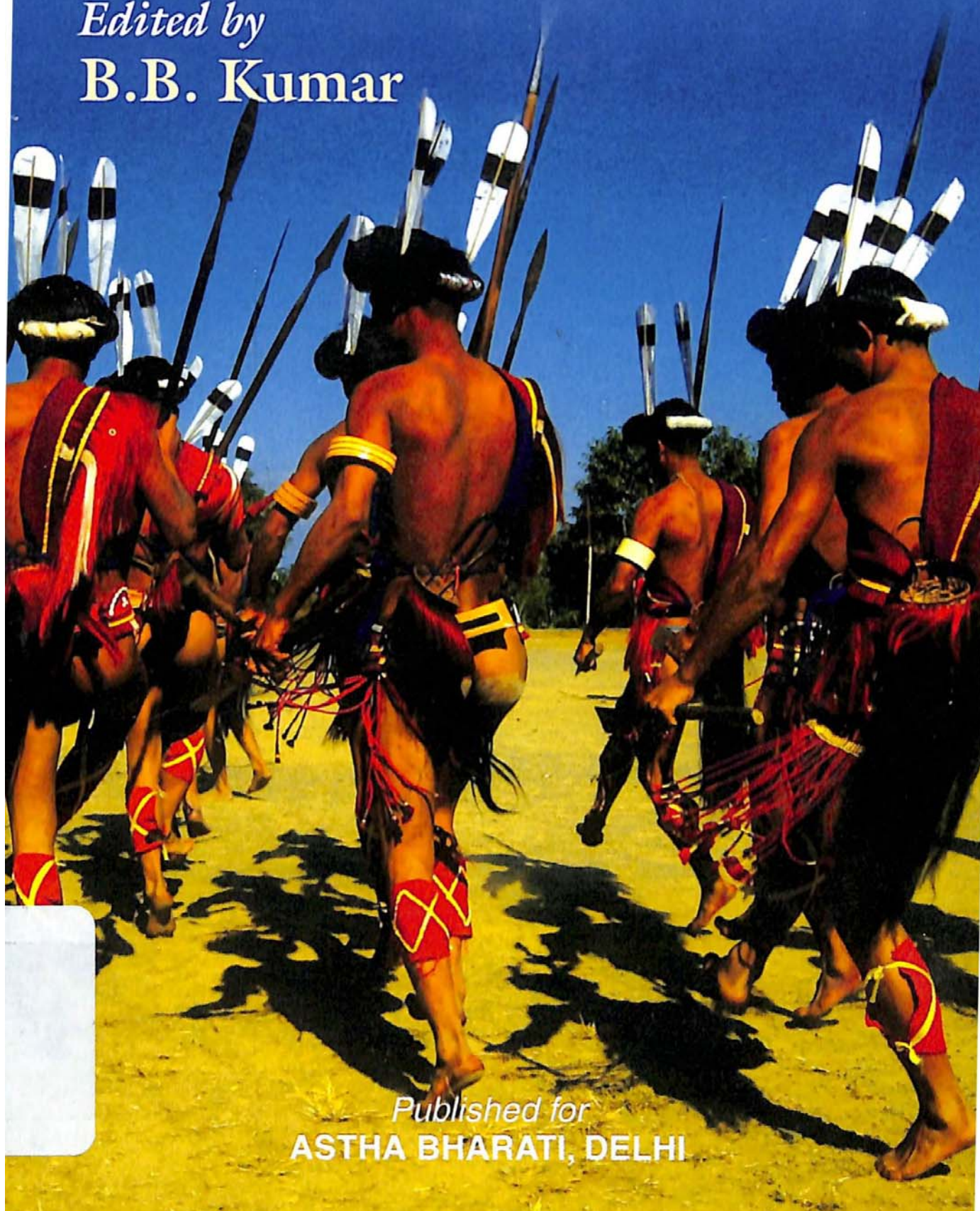


Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India

Edited by
B.B. Kumar



Published for
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Prof. A. C. Sinha

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PREFACE

During over hundred years of inter-face with the British colonial rule in the North-East India divisive trends among various groups on basis of territory, religion, etc., were encouraged and sharpened. The elite driven ethnicity and identity formation got impetus after the creation of Nagaland due to the benefits flowing with it. It led to an obsession with one's ethnicity and connected demands for territorial and political protection and identifications. Result was recognition of such sentiments in formation of a number of states like Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and a host of Autonomous District Councils.

However, the appetite for ethnicity related demands, even new formations, has not declined. Such demands are rooted in a sense of security related to one's land and people. It has, however, led to conflicting demands, overlapping claims and even resort to passage of arms to reinforce one's claims. A stage has reached where neighbours do not communicate with each other and have hostile relations resulting in mutual suspicious and even bloodshed.

The North-East had the state of Assam and the Princely states of Manipur and Tripura when the freedom dawned on August 15, 1947. Today, the region has seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. We had only four Autonomous District Councils in Assam under Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Today, we have more than a dozen of the ADCs and Tribal Councils in the region. Autonomy demands started in the Naga Hills district of Assam. And the Naga National Council was the only insurgent outfit in the region. Nagas got their state in 1963. The problem did not end. Nagaland was replicated elsewhere; the insurgent outfits have multiplied. The problem of ethnicity in the region defies solution. The North-East continues to suffer from insurgency and ethnic problem of various dimensions. Astha Bharati, Delhi, organized a seminar on

“Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India” in July 2006 to deliberate on the same. The senior educationists, administrators, journalists and others, including former Vice-Chancellors, former M.P., University Professors, former Home Secretary, former Governors, former Police Chiefs, editors, etc., presented papers and deliberated on various aspects of the problem. The book is the collection of their scholarly papers.

The publication of the book was necessitated by the need of sharing the informations imparted and ideas generated on a larger scale. Important suggestions have emerged during the deliberations in the seminar, which are also included in the ‘Statement of the Seminar’ annexed in the book. We hope that the book may be useful for the readers. I take this opportunity to thank Dr. Jayanta Madhab, Professor Mrinal Miri, Shri J.N. Roy, treasurer, Astha Bharati and the members of the organization for making the seminar success. I thank Shri B.P. Singh, who gave valedictory address and all the scholar participants, who presented papers. I also thank the publisher, Shri Ashok Kumar Mittal of the Concept Publishing Company, for speedily undertaking the publication of the book. Shekhar Singh Negi typed many papers included in this book. I thank him for the same.

— Editor

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PART I

UNDERSTANDING NORTH-EAST

1 TWO VIEWS OF THE NORTH-EAST

Mrinal Miri

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1. We can say that for the North-east there is a view from inside and a view from outside. Both these views may be nuanced in a variety of ways. But it may be instructive to present them in their unqualified starkness. The view from outside sees the region as a relatively unitary entity, delimited by India's boundaries with other countries such as China, Bangladesh and Myanmar, inhabited by vaguely differentiated "tribal" people who seem "racially distinct" from Indians elsewhere. The view from inside is one of extreme diversity: of tribes, communities, languages, religions, customs, traditions and histories. This diversity in the insider's eye — or at least its perceived enormity — is, one might venture to suggest, of very recent origin. One might even further venture to suggest that there might be a contrast between this viewpoint of diversity and a view likely to be fostered by a close attention to the historical, cultural, spatial and economic closeness within the region. This would be in consonance with the view, held by some, that this closeness is the deeper truth of the region which is now masked by splintered, fragmented face. One thing that can lead to this deeper truth is a close, careful attention to the vast number of languages spoken in the region — their many meeting points, their mythical resources, and the intricate network of resemblances that is their common inheritance. Unfortunately, our linguistic

research so far does not bear much evidence of this kind of close attention. It is clear, however, that this kind of covert closeness within the region is quite the opposite of the outsider's unitary view of it.

2. But, whether or not this kind of closeness is a matter of historical fact, it is at the same time extremely important that separateness and difference are acknowledged with utmost seriousness. It is the recognition of separateness and difference that makes some of the things that are crucial to our being human possible, e.g. love and justice. The possibility of human love requires an autonomous other who is separate and distinct from one. One can of course love supposedly non-autonomous beings, such as infants and mentally incapacitated people. Or inanimate creatures such as trees, sceneries, works of art, books and so on. But human love, at its most fulfilling, requires reciprocity, and reciprocity is something that comes from the separate and different other. Also, while there is certainly such a thing as being just to oneself, the idea of justice is firmly embedded in the recognition of demands that others make on one — in modern language, in the recognition of the *rights* of others.

But an exclusive engagement with the ideas of separateness and difference — think of some of the current tensions within the region — is also responsible for some very crucial errors that humans have made. Let me say a word about one of these errors. A natural ally of an unqualified commitment to separateness and difference is the egocentric view of the world — the view from within the complex of one's own acknowledged and unacknowledged interests; the view from within one's culture; the view from within the framework of one's ideology. The egocentric view of the world has a natural propensity to lead to what might be called the egocentric predicament. The predicament arises when the egocentric view forces out all other views. The egocentric predicament is responsible for some of the most

vicious distortions of human reality that human kind has seen — religious fanaticisms, racial hatreds, horrible repressions in the name of ideologies, linguistic exclusivisms and so on.

3. The egocentric view is somewhat unavoidable in much the same way as what I see now is determined by *my* location in space and time, and, as such, is different from what everyone else in this room sees, although in a global sense we all see the “same” things. There are necessarily as many view-points as there are pairs of eyes to see from. But the egocentric predicament is certainly avoidable. The egocentric view does not rule out the possibility of other egocentric views; nor does it rule out the possibility of overcoming egocentricity in the light of the possibility of other kinds of views. It is the possibility of overcoming egocentricity that is truly distinctive of humanity.
4. Now let us look at the insider’s view of the north-east — a multiplicity of human collectivities each claiming an overriding identity centred on tribal allegiances; linguistic affiliations, community loyalties and so on. The problem of course is that all these markers of overriding identity are fluid and unstable — and in the last fifty years or so we have seen a proliferation of these identities each promoting and attempting to sustain an egocentric view of the world. So we have an incredible multiplicity of egocentricities arrayed against each other: the Assamese against the Bodos and the Mishings and the Karbis; the Karbis against the Dimasas; the Nagas against the Meiteis; the Tangkhuls against the Aos and the Angamis; the Khasis against Garos and so on. I am not touching here Arunachal Pradesh at all which also has the potential of proliferating exclusive identities.
5. The ethnic — for want of a better word — egocentricity frequently collapses into what I have called the egocentric predicament and very often the only relief from this predicament is violence. What has led to this proliferation

of identities? One simple but telling answer to this question is "despair" — a state of helplessness that makes one recede into an illusory shell of inviolability. Paradoxically, but truly, the smaller the shell the more the feeling of inviolability.

6. There is of course no doubt at all that the peripheral status given to the north-east in national life has had much to do with the despair and helplessness I have talked about. The threat of a possible militaristic solution does not help matters. But we have blamed others enough. We must look into ourselves and see if it is possible for us by our own effort to confront our own sense of inadequacy. The first step: look beyond our own egocentric views and take the views of others seriously. Not just the serious stance we adopt at negotiating tables. To take another's point of view seriously is to take all the elements that go into its making seriously — its historical situatedness, the particular articulation that it receives, its cultural specificities, the knowledge that it bases itself on, i.e. its "truths" and "falsehoods" (e.g. the ULFA's "truths" and "falsehoods"), its "rights" and "wrongs", its hopes and aspirations, its loves and hates and the places it accords to views other than itself. Of course, many of these elements are unclear and inarticulate to the owner of the point of view itself. Try asking ULFA what it is to be "free" and "liberated". It is by paying serious attention to one another, by seriously listening to one another and responding to the other that a basis of friendship can be established — the beginning of a process of emerging from our tiny "security" shells and achieving a degree of mutuality.

7. Perhaps the initial step is the coming together of the economies of the north-east. It won't be an exaggeration to say that the economies of the north-east are more or less isolated units — the only link they seem to have is their near total dependence on the economy of the mainland, notwithstanding the efforts of the North-East Council, unit

has its strengths and weaknesses. Our economic self-confidence will come from a reciprocal enhancement of our strengths and a similar overcoming of our weaknesses. Our self-confidence will receive a further boost when we have achieved a degree of mutuality with the economy of the mainland.

8. But the coming together of the economies is only the first step. Much more important is for the points of view to meet and converse with one another informed by a common purpose and a common sympathy. Recovery of the old sense of mutuality which in all probability predated the process of fragmentation; at one level a rich, many sided historical understanding of ourselves — an insight into the deep threads cultural manifestations, e.g. music, dance, folklores; knowledges about human well-being (health), plants, animals, rivers, mountains and so on.
9. If what I have envisaged has any realistic chance, then its eventuality would seem to evoke a vision of the north-east somewhat similar to the present outsider's vision of the north-east — a unitary, singular entity. But, as you will easily see, the two visions are poles apart. The outsider's vision of unity is abstract, empty of content, devoid of insights, based on ignorance. The vision that I have envisaged is complex, not that of a unitary entity. It is that of an entity that derives its sustenance and energy from a mutuality of respect and reciprocity — the complex recognition of a separateness based on the successful overcoming of the barriers of egocentricity.