

SOCIAL TENSION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Edited by J. B. Bhattacharjee

**North-East India Council for
Social Science Research, Shillong**

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Contents

Introduction	i
Acknowledgement	vi
The Task Ahead	<i>B. Pakem</i> ...1
Assam Fosters Assimilation through Ages	<i>P. C. Bhattacharya</i> ...4
Social Tension in Assam : An Impact of Immigration	<i>N. Dhar</i> ...9
Forces behind Tension in North-East	<i>B. B. Kumar</i> ...24
Assam in National Context and Historical Perspective	<i>S. Barua</i> ...36
Social Tension in Meghalaya : Fear of being Swamped	<i>L. S. Gassah</i> ...46
Social and Political Tension in North-East	<i>R. T. Rymbai</i> ...52
The Nepalese in North-East India :	
Ethnicity and Resource Appropriation	<i>A. C. Sinha</i> ...84
Foreign National Problem in North-East	<i>K. Ahmed</i> ...98
The North-Eastern Crises	<i>A. H. Mazumdar</i> ...114
Tension in North-East	<i>T. Bhattacharjee</i> ...123
The Imbroglia in North-East	<i>D. B. Chakravarty</i> .. 136
Foreign Nationals in Assam	<i>M. Kar</i> ...148
The Turmoil in North-East	<i>S. K. Chaube</i> ...166
National Inequalities and Social Tension in North-East	<i>P. Misra</i> ...172
Social Tension in North-East India in Retrospect	<i>S. Sen</i> 181
The North-Eastern Tension : Issues and Non-Issues	<i>S. K. Acharya</i> 190
North East India : Problems of Identity and Migration	<i>D. N. Mazumdar</i> . 197
Stray Thoughts on Easing the Situation	<i>J. B. Bhattacharjee</i> ...206

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Introduction

The north-eastern region of India has been passing through prolonged social tension ever since the agitation for the 'detection and deportation of the foreign nationals' started in Assam in September 1979. In spite of the professed path of 'Gandhian Satyagraha' of the agitators, the sporadic and organised violence, intimidation and assaults, and destruction of private and public property have been experienced in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura. A few hundred lives were lost and several hundred thousand rendered homeless. The students in Assam have suffered the loss of two academic sessions, the routine work in government and semi-government organisations underwent frequent interruptions, and the process of development in the entire region brought almost to a halt. Twelve constituencies in Assam and one in Meghalaya failed to return representatives to the seventh Lok Sabha. Social relations in the region suffered worst casualty. The affected minorities planned 'counter-agitation'. The social scientists cannot afford to ignore such a situation as the intellectuals are endowed with the social responsibility to play an effective role in enlightening the work at large by their objective analysis of the anatomy of tension that the society is confronted with.

The present volume is a modest attempt by the academicians, journalists, public men, administrators and social workers drawn from the cross section of the region's population to study the origin and magnitude of the problem and to suggest possible solutions. It has emerged out of the papers presented in a colloquium organised by the North-East India Council for Social Science Research at Shillong in June 1980. The authors have expressed themselves freely on the theme, and their findings and analysis often based on conflicting data, do not see eye to eye on basic issues.

One set of opinion squarely suggest that the origin of the tension is to be found in the large scale influx of the foreign nationals, particularly from Bangladesh and Nepal, while others put it as an agitation against the genuine citizens from other regions of the country to ensure monopoly of jobs and resources for the dominant locals. Another opinion blames the foreign agencies for fomenting troubles in this sensitive frontier region. Some even believe that origin of the tension is in multi-national India's nationality question and that the more basic issue is the crisis of underdevelopment. On the score of Centre's prolong neglect of the region there is no two opinion.

On the question of influx, the Assamese claim that it has caused considerable demographic imbalance and that it is a silent invasion on their culture. The minorities in Assam, on the other hand, dismiss the idea of any unnatural population growth pleading that the refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan cannot be termed as foreign nationals and that the percentage of growth of the Assamese speakers, since independence, is higher than the total growth rate. They also contend that the 'foreign nationals' slogan has been raised by the Assamese to impose their language on every one in Assam in the process that they manipulated the census figures in the past to swallow the identity of the more indigenous and the late comers alike. The Assamese reaction is equally sharp when they suspect that a section of the non-Assamese returned Assamese as their tongue with ulterior motives. Some argue that there is no scope for influx in the Sixth Schedule areas due to constitutional safeguards, while the tribal point of view is assertive of the fact that the settlement of the non-tribals, particularly of the Nepalis, is definitely causing demographic imbalance.

The views on the character of the agitation strikingly differ between peaceful and violent, mass and sectarian, progressive and chauvinistic, non-communal and communal, nationalist and secessionist, integrationist and divisive, and the like. Some find in the movement a question of regional or ethnic identity, engendered mainly by inferiority complex, while others consider it as a method of gaining concessions from

Delhi. Another set of opinion is inclined to believe that the basic issue is the nationality question and this middle class oriented agitation is a reaction of the local bourgeoisie against their Indian counter-part. While the agitationists in Assam professedly champion the cause of all indigenous people in the region, a section of the tribal opinion consider the agitation as a fresh attempt to impose the Assamese language on the tribals which was at the backdrop of the hill state movement in the sixties.

On the solutions of the problem too, there is no unanimity. One set of opinion is assertive of the fact that the detection of the foreign nationals, deletion of their names from the voters' list and their deportation from the country as claimed by the agitators is the only solution. A section of those who share this view, however, suggest that a line should be drawn between the infiltrators and the refugees, and the latter should be given a fair deal in view of the commitment of the nation to the minorities in Pakistan. This is contested by those who believe that taking the relevant acts and the international pacts and conventions into account there is hardly such sizeable foreign nationals to cause any demographic upset. They have no objection to the deportation of the post-1971 entrants, provided that those charged with such entry are given the benefit of due process of law. There is no difference of opinion on the point that the international borders should be effectively sealed to prevent any more influx. The tribal point of view, however, squarely put that entry of all non-tribals, irrespective of the nationality, into the tribal areas should be strictly restricted and that the non-tribals should not be allowed to participate in the functioning of such local bodies that are supposed to look after the interest of the tribals. Many believe that an accelerated process of economic development shall diffuse tension. Another set of opinion suggests that assimilation is the answer to tension. This is, however, contested by those who contend that the ethnic and linguistic identity of every citizen should be guaranteed and that a large number of the earlier settlers who had identified themselves as Assamese have not also been spared during the violences. Some believe

that the tension would subside once the hands of the foreign agencies could be removed, while others suggest that the recognition of India's multinational character and the granting of regional autonomy to each nationality shall provide a permanent solution. Arguing that the region passed through several spells of tension and violences over the decades due to Assamese attitude towards others, yet another view contended that the reorganisation of Assam on ethnic and linguistic basis is the solution. The method stressed most is the negotiated settlement.

It is beyond the perview of the editor to make any value-judgement. The statements of facts and opinions are purely of the authors. Our only satisfaction is presenting the readers with the conflicting and divergent views in a single voume at a time when in the best interest of the whole nation all heads should be put together to find a way out in this charged situation in the north-eastern sentinal of the country.

The things have considerably changed since these papers were written. The President Rule in Assam first ended in December 1980 following the installation of a ministry, but this ministry which initially survived from a no-confidence motion, ultimately failed to carry the Finance Bill and resigned. This made way for another spell of President Rule in the State and another ministry came to power in January 1982. But the later ministry too resigned in March 1982 when it was to face a no-confidence motion, making way for the President Rule again. The Assembly that was on earli:r occasion kept in animated suspension has also been dissolved this time. The agitation remains suspended. The blockade on crude and plywood has been lifted. Those who were forced to take shelter in relief camps in Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya have returned home. Situation in Meghalaya and Tripura seems to be quiet. The combing operation is said to have curbed down the insurgent activities in Manipur.

The complete normalcy is, however, yet to be restored. The census operations could not be conducted in Assam. The elections in the defaulting parliamentary constituencies are only a distant possibility. A large number of refugees from

Assam are encamping in West Bengal. The agitationists are still holding threats. Several rounds of talks between the Centre and the agitation leaders failed to produce anything substantial. The formation of a Liberation Army in Tripura is known from press. The bomb cases reported from a number of places in Assam have added a new dimension. Tension prevails in all spheres of social relations.

The Central leadership has assured of its concern of the resumption of talk with the leaders of the agitation. The latter have also agreed to talk without any recommendation. The minorities, on the otherhand, have voiced their claim to be a party to any such discussion. The leaders of some political parties and social workers have offered their services in this context.

Although belated the publication, it might not have lost its academic value. If the facts and opinion contained in the volume can be of some use in understanding the problem and working out a solution that would ease the tension, we shall feel our labour amply rewarded.

Shillong

J. B. Bhattacharjee

April, 1982

Acknowledgement

The present volume is a collection of papers presented in a colloquium organised by the North-East India Council for Social Science Research, in collaboration with the North-Eastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, at Shillong on June 27-28, 1980. We are thankful to the contributors for their cooperation without which the publication would not have been possible. The Council is also thankful to the Governor of the North-Eastern States, Shri L. P. Singh, for generous financial support for holding the colloquium.

Dr. B. Pakem, Minister of Education, Government of Meghalaya inaugurated the colloquium, and Dr. A. K. Dhan, Vice-Chancellor, North-Eastern Hill University, presided over the inaugural session. Dr. P. K. Dasgupta, Dr. B. Pakem, Shri W. Syiemiong and Dr. D. N. Mazumdar presided over the academic sessions. The Council is thankful to all those who have helped us in various ways in holding the colloquium at a time when the situation was highly charged with emotion.

The editor is personally thankful to the Governing Body of the North-East India Council for Social Science Research for asking him to edit the volume and particularly, to its Secretary, Dr. B. Datta Ray, whose all out support made the task easier. The editor is aware of his shortcomings and his duty to crave the indulgence of the readers for the errors that might have crept in.

J. B,

The Task Ahead*

B. Pakem

North-East India, historically, used to be a region where so many experiments have been conducted by administrators, military personnel, public men and academicians. The scholars from different streams in humanities and sciences used to visit the region to study and find out the unexplored virgin field of knowledge. That was way back in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, in the twentieth century we have witnessed quite a number of changes in the social and political scenes of the region.

North-East is the homeland of number of social groups and races spreading over the seven administrative units of the region. The racial history of the region is extremely complicated. It is a melting pot of races and communities coming from all directions. The process of migration of tribes and communities in the area is still continuing. Beginning with the last part of 1979 the people in the region have witnessed the opening up of the big question on issues relating to the migration of races and communities. Along with it we have also noticed the trail of social tension of a greater magnitude than ever before.

There are quite a number of causes and factors behind the social tension which we had in the past and are having today in the North-East. The tension here is caused partly by historical reasons and partly due to social, political and economic factors. In any case, tension is only the beginning of any conflict. It is necessary that before any serious conflict comes out into the surface, we should be able to identify the causes of the tension which may appear slightly above the surface of the troubled sea. The tension is just like the tip of an iceberg on the surface of the sea. It is this tip in the form

of social tension that has now appeared in the region. It is the symptom by which we can tackle the problem to avoid conflicts and other deeper problems in future. The problems of this region are indeed intriguing, ranging from social, cultural, political and economic to ethnic and linguistic. The increasing magnitude of such problems have made the North-East a sensitive area where a spark is enough to put the entire region to flame.

Attempts have been made in recent past to solve the problem of social tension in North-East India. But indications are there that, on the contrary, social tensions leading to social conflicts are increasing. It is right time for the social scientists to probe deep into the roots of social tension to help the people in the region to avoid future conflicts. As a matter of fact, the social tension is such a multi-dimensional problem that we require the active co-operation of all sections of the society in eradicating the same. The social scientists have to enlighten the people about the ills and cures.

It may not be totally unfair to suggest that the public men have failed to tackle the problem of social tension in the region. It is also possible that the public men may like to continue with an approach of adhoc solutions to the problems as and when they are confronted with. The public administrators might have also failed because they are supposed to carry out the measures that public men would want them to implement. The majority of the public administrators in the higher cadre in the North-East come from outside the region. They may not have completely and properly identified themselves with the local people and local interests. Further, such public administrators live in the region only for a short period of their life mostly during their career in public service.

In such a situation the people would expect the press to play an effective role as it did during the period of stress and strain in the past. But the press also appears to have failed in the initial phase of social tension we are currently experiencing in the region. Instead of identifying the problem, the press like public men and public administrators resorted to an approach of adhocism. It is time that the press would

also educate and enlighten the people with facts and figures about the real character of the situation so that true public opinion can be moulded for the benefit of all concerned. In this way it also helps public men and public administrators to grasp any situation that may develop during the period of stresses and strains. The information supplied by the pressmen can also be used by the social scientists in their analysis of the origin and magnitude of social tension and in suggesting solutions that might be acceptable to all.

*This paper is an extract from the inaugural address.