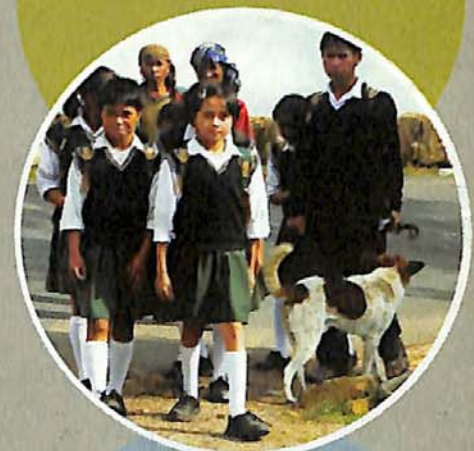


Social Change and Development



Edited by
D.V. Kumar



Social Change and Development

Emerging Issues in the North-East India

Editor

D.V. KUMAR



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Introduction

Social change has been a central concern with sociological theory. Changes which have been taking place in societies engaged the attention of some of the outstanding minds in Sociology since the times of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. For instance, great social transformations in the social, economic and political fields in the wake of the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the Intellectual Revolution (which had inalienable links with the Project of Enlightenment) became the subject-matter of profound sociological writings. In fact, the very genesis of Sociology was located in the context of these transformations. Sociology became the main field of enquiry engaging itself in a study of social changes that were sweeping across Europe. Social change became one of the important preoccupations for sociologists who were trying to understand its ramifications and consequences for human society. Marx and Engels (1968) were deeply engrossed in examining the dialectical nature of transformation of societies from one stage to the other as a result of changes taking place in the forces and relations of production, and visualized the possibility of a just and humanitarian social order emerging. Weber in his magnum opus *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1967) gave us an elaborate account of the growth of capitalism given the right motivational framework embedded in the Protestant ethic. Durkheim (1964) was engaged in looking at the transformation of societies characterized by mechanical solidarity into societies of

organic solidarity through the instrument of division of labour, understood in social terms rather than economic terms (Aron, 1965). They were also intellectually alive to the emergence of 'pathological' tendencies that would accompany these transformations. Marx would talk about alienation, Weber referred to disenchantment and Durkheim pointed to the question of *anomie*.

Questions related to increasing structural differentiation and functional specialization (Parsons, 1966), deepening of the process of democratization, growth of industrialization (Black, 1966; Levy, 1966; Smelser, 1959) and urbanization, growth of rationality (Habermas, 1971), growing instrumentalization of social relations (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Marcuse, 1972) became intrinsically connected to the study of social change following the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Weber.

Social change is a ubiquitous phenomenon and its pace has increased considerably in the modern times. The past looks rather placid by comparison with the present, characterized as *modern* in some of the sociological writings, in terms of the pace at which social change is occurring. Modernity has lent great poignancy to the study of social change. Questions related to how one makes 'sense' of what modernity is have been dealt with elsewhere (Kumar, 2008).

Dwelling upon the nature and characteristics of social change, Moore (1994) would argue that social changes occur frequently or constantly and that they are neither temporally nor spatially isolated. Further, changes in contemporary times are much higher than in former times and it is inconceivable that any part of society would be exempt from social change. S. Vago in his highly lucid summary of different definitions of social change looks at social change as changes taking place in terms of group activity (Gerth and Mills, 1953), structure of society (Ginsberg, 1958), structure and functioning of society (Davis, 1959), social relationships (MacIver and Page, 1949), social structure and social relationships (Nisbet, 1969). Thus, as one can see there are different ways of making 'sense' of what social change is.

The phenomenon of social change has been theorized variously. Different theoretical traditions have emerged at different points of time and sought to engage themselves with an interrogation of the nature and processes of social changes taking place in the societies. In this context, one can refer to evolutionary theories (Comte, 1915;

Morgan, 1964), conflict theories (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959; Marx and Engels, 1968), structural and functional theories (Parsons, 1966; Ogburn, 1964), socio-psychological theories (Weber, 1967; Hagen, 1962; McClelland, 1961). They identified different sources of social change and traced the different trajectories that social changes would follow. For instance, for evolutionary theories of social change, the endogenous factors account for social changes which would assume a gradual and progressive form. Conflict theories would locate class struggle as the main factor responsible for social transformations and look at social changes taking place in a violent and sudden fashion. For socio-psychological theories of social change, socio-psychological factors (McClelland's n Achievement, for example) would be the main source of social changes.

Coming to the situation in India, social change has been the main preoccupation of some of the leading sociologists. They sought to make a systematic sociological study of what are called the basic social institutions in the country such as the caste system, village community and family structure and the changes taking place in them. The study of caste has attracted, quite understandably so, enormous attention of sociologists working on India (Bailey, 1957; Beteille, 1965; Dumount, 1972; Leach, ed., 1960; Mayer, 1960; Srinivas, 1962, to mention a few). Village community and family structure too were studied in earnest. Sociologists have devoted considerable amount of effort to make a systematic study of these structural features of the Indian society. Changes taking place in the village community have been studied both intensively and extensively (Dube, 1955 and 1958; Ishwaran, 1966; Lewis, 1958; Majumdar, 1958; Marriot, 1955; Srinivas, 1955). The nature of joint family and significant changes which have occurred and continue to occur therein have been the subject matter of scholarly sociological writings (Desai, 1965; Kapadia, 1958; Ross, 1961). Along with the above changes taking place at the level of macro-structure such as political institutions, bureaucracy, the processes of industrialization and urbanization have also been studied (Berna, 1961; Bottomore, 1965; Lambert, 1963; Park and Tinker, 1959; Pocock, 1967; Weiner, 1961).

However, one of the important problems of these studies, as pointed by Y. Singh (1973), is that scholars have focused exclusively on changes taking place at the level of structure to the neglect of changes taking place at the level of cultural traditions or vice-versa.

His book *Modernisation of Indian Tradition* (1973) which has made an important contribution to the study of social change in India seeks to rectify this anomaly and interrogate changes taking place both at the level of structure and culture (as a result of both what he calls orthogenetic and heterogenetic sources).

The context of North-East India remains curious in the sense it has been studied more for its spectacular instances of militancy, insurgency, terrorism and social unrest rather than the gradual but important social changes which have been taking place (Baruah, 2005; Chaube, 1973; Misra, 2000; Singh, 1987). Any understanding of social changes taking place in the North-East is an equally challenging task given the enormous diversity that prevails in the region. In fact, some would go so far as to question the very use of the term 'North-East' as a homogenous category considering the immense socio-cultural diversities that obtain here. A systematic understanding of these diversities and changes taking place in them would be of great sociological interest.

Changes taking place both at the level of social institutions, organizations, social groups and at the level of culture demand equal attention. From the point of view of assessing changes in structural and cultural aspects, one of the most critical moments in the context of North-East was the inroad of British administration followed by missionaries. It led to significant changes in the social, cultural, economic and political framework of the North-Eastern societies. Introduction of a different religious world view (Christianity), changes in the land holding patterns, increasing commodification of the land, imposition of the modern system of administration and new political culture, introduction of modern educational system, are some of the aspects of change which happened as a result of the contact with the British. In post-independent India, the emphasis has been on a developmental paradigm which essentially focused on the industrialization of the region, greater exploitation of the natural and mineral resources and the need for transition from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture. It resulted in the growth of a middle class, accentuation of socio-economic inequalities, deepening of regional disparities and changes in the value system, the ramifications of which have not been sociologically explored in an adequate manner. The vanishing significance of the principle of egalitarianism and the gradual entrenchment of the principle of hierarchy could be cited as

one of such ramifications. Further, the introduction of a federal political structure and the deepening of the process of democratization have led to a new dialectic in the political reality of the North-East in terms of traditional political structures coming in conflict with the modern political structures.

A comprehensive treatment of the above would no doubt entail discussion on the trajectory of social changes and the related issue of values. The question of values is integrally connected to the explication of direction of social changes. Social scientists have long remained indifferent and disengaged from the question of values. It is now being increasingly felt that social scientists, given the knowledge base they have, need to express their point of view and spell out the direction in which societies could meaningfully move forward. In the context of the North-East, for example, while some desirable changes have taken place such as growth of literacy, greater health facilities and greater political awareness, other changes have certainly not been progressive in nature. The growth of socio-economic inequalities and greater exploitation in the hands of the dominant sections could be cited as examples.

It is also vital that we need to have a proper understanding of the responses of the communities to both the agencies and processes of social change. While some changes have been accepted quite willingly (the introduction of modern educational system, for instance), others have been resisted quite strongly. The systematic exploitation of natural and mineral resources of the region for the benefit of powerful sections including business people and government contractors, imposition of a developmental model without taking the sensitivities and sensibilities of the people of the region into account, gradual marginalization of their traditional political structures, the continued immigration of outsiders which disturbs their demographic profile, structural/institutional and cultural aspects are some of the issues which have led to frequent articulation of their discontent and alienation. These articulations more often than not assume violent and aggressive style as manifested in the growth of secessionist and separatist movements in the North-East. The granting of political autonomy in the form of states has, to some extent, contributed to diminishing of the sense of deprivation and neglect and greater willingness on the part of communities in the North-East to have a dialogue with the so-called

'mainstream' India. Still simmering fears persist regarding the long-term health of their institutional and cultural features such as family structure and values etc. in the context of influx of 'outsiders' into the region. For example, one of such anxieties expressed frequently by the people concerns the higher rate of inter-community marriages and their critical sociological impact on their very existence as a community. The value of egalitarianism, too, is coming under increasing pressure due to the ascendancy of different structures of hierarchy. The inexorable entry of forces of modernization is also being viewed suspiciously by them as they would constitute a threat to their cultural patterns. The issue of identity which is central to their existence as a community assumes greater poignancy in the context of their belief that it is being increasingly delegitimized by the logic of modernity. This drives them to uncritically romanticize their traditions without looking at the possibility of having an engagement with modernity (Kumar, 2008). Thus, as one can see, any study of social change in the North-East needs to locate itself in the context of the above-mentioned wide-ranging sociological issues in order to be meaningful and relevant.

Considering the inadequacy of the research done on the above issues and the limited knowledge available on the problem of social change with reference to the North-East, there is a long-felt need to bring studies together which would reflect on these issues. It is hoped that this volume would make a meaningful and useful intervention in such reflections concerning social change in the North-East India.

T.K. Oommen, in his usually incisive style, before looking at the situation in the North-East, examines the conceptual confusion that results from conflation of nation and state. This also leads to conflation between nationality and citizenship undermining the empirical reality in South Asia in general and India in particular where one does not fail to notice a disjuncture between the two, a product of a long historical process brought about by conquest, colonialism and immigration. Even in the context of Europe, where this conflation first began to be articulated, it was not conceptually meaningful to conflate the two. The cultural diversities there were too significant to permit such a luxury. The situation becomes more complicated in the context of India where the range of diversities becomes enormously huge making it almost impossible to conflate nation with state. Any such conflation becomes highly problematical

in nature. The wide gap between the empirical reality of India and the concept of nation-state needs to be recognized. The systematic denigration of the idea of multi-national state needs to be resisted. The idea of nation-state sits uncomfortably with the reality of cultural diversities. The federal political structure that has been institutionalized is a device to articulate and protect the federal quality of our society.

Coming to the North-East, he argues that the state-society dichotomy is substantial. There are only eight states but a greater number of societies in the North-East, and then proceeds to examine the nature of social change in the North-East. Before doing so, he problematizes some of the popular misconceptions about the North-East. One of such misconceptions is that the North-East is predominantly inhabited by the tribes whereas in reality there are only four states (out of eight) which are dominated numerically by the tribal communities. In this context he makes a distinction between a tribal society and peasant society by saying that tribal societies are autonomous in terms of social structure and culture, whereas peasant societies are part-societies. Further tribal societies are stratified whereas peasant societies are both stratified and hierarchical. Then he argues against viewing the entire population of North-East as having been converted into Christianity. Only three out of eight states in the North-East have a Christian majority while four are Hindu majority states. He proceeds to dispel another couple of such misconceptions about the North-East.

Any study of social change should identify the point of departure or the base line from which social changes begin. In the context of North-East he identifies three such base lines – the advent of Ahoms in Assam, the colonial intrusion and the achievement of independence. Changes brought about by these three forces, singly or conjointly, should be part of any study of social changes in the North-East. Finally, in his keynote address, he identifies certain actual processes of social changes in the North-East. For example, the complete displacement of cultural patterns is usually not noticed in the tribal societies of the North-East. What one finds is accretion. Similarly changes in material conditions, as popularly assumed, are not always faster as compared to cultural changes. The spread of education is greater in tribal North-East as compared peasant societies in the North-East. He also notes the declining influence of

secessionist forces in the North-East possibly because of deepening of the process of democratization and its institutionalization in suitable political structures (village councils, for example) and introduction of developmental policies and programmes in the North-East.

Prasenjit Biswas, in his philosophically-informed article, interrogates the very idea of the 'social'. He argues that the nature of social change needs to be understood in conceptual terms. One of the critical aspects concerning social change is an understanding of the interplay between social structure and the social agency. This can be interpreted and theorized following the canons of Marx, Althusser and Weber. It can be argued that these three leading pathfinders of Social Sciences have advanced epistemic and praxiological notions of the 'social', there arises an ontological and ethical view of the 'social' that surpasses any deterministic notion of 'society' as a 'context'. This different and not yet fully received theoretical move within Social Sciences rearticulates an idea of the 'social' as a domain of 'freedom' that is filled in with many possibilities of 'change', both material and immaterial. The paper mobilizes some of the positions that are already contested within Social Sciences in order to arrive at a different ontology of the 'social'. The paper elaborates on this transitional notion of the social in the context of the North-East India to suggest that the 'politics of self-preservation' in the realm of political economy and culture have resulted into a skewed notion of change that needs a correction. In terms of disciplinary bounds of understanding, such transitions require de-disciplining and deterritorializing the idea of the 'social' into 'social change' as an experiential category that discloses more than it declares. Such a shift in our disciplinary orientation could lead us to quite a few home truths that currently unsettle us in the realm of development as well as in our knowledge of the society in the context of the North-East of India.

A.C. Sinha, in his elaboration of factors of social change which he defines as recurrent, repetitive and relatively long-term alterations at different levels, identifies coming of missionaries, introduction of British administration, exposure of the North-East to the world wars, achievement of independence and inauguration of welfare state in India. The missionaries introduced the Roman script so that different dialects spoken in the North-East could be converted into languages. They provided valuable contribution to education and modern health care system. Similarly monetization of land introduced by the British administration had proved to be a highly influential factor of

social change in the North-East changing the nature of ownership pattern. Participation of the people of the North-East in the world wars resulted in their being exposed to the modern ideals of equality, justice and faith. After independence democratization of polity and introduction of welfare state resulted in heightened political consciousness and mobilization among the people of the region.

N. Vijaylakshmi Brara interrogates the very notions of 'development' and 'modernization' and tracing the growth of these terms from their western roots argues that these have been uncritically adopted to understand the process of social change taking place in the Third World countries. What these concepts have done is that they have hierarchized the dualism that exists between the western countries and the Third World countries, with the former being put on a higher pedestal. Coming to the North-East, she contends that for a better understanding of the situation in the North-East, comparative framework would be very meaningful. Development needs to be measured not only on the basis of one component but different components. Human development index should be a vital component of any notion of development. She finally calls for a democratic framework of development instead of alienating the hegemonic frameworks which are currently in place.

Manorama Sharma's paper on *Social Change and Women: Has She Acquired a New Identity in North-East India?* is extremely relevant in a volume of this kind as it fills in the gap by interrogating the issue of gender relations, an issue which has not been given adequate importance in the studies on the North-East. One generally looks at the structural aspects (such as matriliney in Meghalaya, for example) without necessarily looking at the processual aspects in terms of how gender relations are played out on the ground. The experiences of women, which are generally oppressive in nature, go unaddressed. She tries to examine if social changes taking place in the North-East have had an effect on the perception of others on women, their perception of themselves and finally the way their identity is constructed.

C.L. Imchen, in his incisive article, *Construction of Tribal Identity from a Socio-Historical Perspective*, interrogates the nature of discourse that has been the mainstay of constructing the other in European scholarship which has led to the current problematic of understanding the issue of identity concerning the marginalized indigenous groups.

He underlines the colonial roots of such a discourse and looks at how it continues to be employed in contemporary times in the context of the Nagas. He does this by first looking at the relationship of the Nagas with the British which was determined by the principle of 'immemorial possession'. The post-colonial Indian State without considering whether the Nagas consider themselves as part of 'Indian Civilization' incorporated them in its jural-politico administrative structure. The right of self-determination articulated by the Nagas continues to be delegitimized in numerous ways contributing to the continued tensions between the Nagas and the Indian State

D.V. Kumar, in his paper, *Ethnicity and Social Change: The Context of Mizos*, locates the ethnic movement as part of a wider process of social change. He argues that one can make a meaningful appreciation of ethnic movements if they are viewed as a process of social change taking place in the North-East. He makes use of the Lacanian notions of *imago* (the self-image in times of tension) and correlative space (the accompanying perception of social reality) in the understanding the growth of ethnic movements. He takes up the Mizo ethnic movement that took place from the 1960s upto 1980s as case study. The essential argument he offers is that the Mizo ethnic movement was the result of changes which took place in *imago* and correlative space which were in turn caused by the politics of deprivation and neglect which the Mizos were subjected to both by the Centre and the Assam government. While he contextualizes his arguments by referring to the Mizo ethnic movement, he hopes to provide important insights which would be usefully employed in understanding ethnic movements elsewhere too.

N.K. Das looks at the emergence of identity/ethnic politics, separatist movements, sub-regional movements as essentially an expression of perception of deprivation, marginalization and social exclusion. The growing incapacity of the state to address the legitimate needs and aspirations of communities of the North-East in terms of greater political decentralization (in substantive not merely in formal terms), equalitarian distribution of economic resources and measures to protect and promote the cultural identity of communities have been the main factor responsible for the eruption of the numerous socio-political movements in the North-East. They constitute the major component of changes taking place in the North-East. These various movements should not be seen as

something dysfunctional for the society. Rather they need to be viewed as constituting a plea for undertaking necessary and appropriate socio-economic and political measures for the alleviation of deprivation and a feeling of neglect among the communities located in the North-East.

Tejimala Gurung gives a historical account of migration of the Nepalese into India since colonial times. She would argue that migration which can be taken as a manifestation of the process of social change has emerged as an important economic and political issue in South Asian countries. Factors responsible for migration could vary from case to case. But migration of any group from one area to the other has deep sociological implications both for the group which is migrating and also for the host group/s. Migration of a group should not be viewed purely in physical terms. It also needs to be viewed in sociological terms for the implications it will have in terms of diverse cultural patterns coming into contact and affecting each other and different political and economic tensions emerging as a result of this. She contextualizes her discussion by looking at the situation of the Nepalese in the North-East.

I.L. Aier looks at the interaction between the Naga traditional authority structure and the modern state structure. Some important changes have been noticed in this interaction between the two. In order to do this, he makes use of Golman's framework of the study of evolution of Polynesian society in terms of linear passage from traditional (the past) to open (transitional phase) and to stratified (culmination point), though he does notice that there are obvious differences between the Polynesian society and the Naga society

Pariyaram M. Chacko's article looks at the relevance of entrepreneurs for the question of generating employment in the North-East. Given the inability of the government to provide employment to every youth, it is necessary to focus on the development of entrepreneurship which has an immense potential for ensuring economic prospect and generating employment opportunities. Its absence can be a serious handicap for development and growth. Then he dwells upon some of the cultural explanations of entrepreneurship (Weber, for example). He examines the growth of entrepreneurship in the North-East among the indigenous communities who for a long time failed to develop a sense of entrepreneurship (as manifested in the absence of big enterprises) thus leaving the field open for the 'outsiders' to come in and occupy it.

P. Nayak and S.K. Misra in their joint paper on *Structural Change in Meghalaya: Theory and Evidence* refer to structural changes as an essential component of economic changes. Globalization is a recent pronounced instance of structural changes taking place in the economy. Structural changes are essentially long-term in nature and involve some important changes in policies and investment patterns. They seek to construct their case by taking Meghalaya as an illustration. They contend that an examination of various socio-economic components such as economic participation and dependency ratio, sectoral distribution of income, changes in demographic attributes etc. would point to structural changes taking place in the Meghalaya economy.

B.N. Borthakur in his paper *Industrialization and Socio-Cultural Transformation of Rural Community in Assam* adopts a structural-functional framework to examine the changes taking place in a community in terms of occupational structure, education levels, family structure, food habits, attitudes towards religion and greater exposure to means of mass communication, dress patterns and so on as a result of establishment of Oil India Ltd. This is an empirical study which establishes in a typical structural-functional framework a close relation between economy and society.

Debendra Kumar Nayak's article examines a powerful demographic transition that is sweeping across the globe (India is no exception) and its impact on the size and age structure of population of the world. The number of the elderly is rising substantially all over the world. The North-East India, too, is witnessing such a significant demographic shift. In this context he makes a sociologically interesting comparative study between areas of tribal dominance and areas which have a predominance of non-tribal communities on the basis of data collected from successive census enumeration from 1971-2001. He concludes the paper by identifying some of the important issues and challenges that this kind of demographic transition throws up concerning the aged.

K. Debbarma looks at the highly fluid situation in Tripura caused by migration of 'outsiders' into the state. The growing incidence of militancy in the state, may be attributed to a great extent by the increasing incidence of migration. He argues that unless appropriate steps are taken by the state in this regard, the situation will be bound to worsen and become more volatile.

Biswambhar Panda in his article looks at the NGOs as instruments of social change in terms of promoting education, creating awareness and empowering the disadvantaged sections of the society. He makes an empirical examination of the contribution made by the NGOs and the role played by them in ensuring people's participation in developmental process. The analytical framework he uses for this purpose is that of collective action framework. He also takes up issues such as accountability of the NGOs for a critical discussion.

Rekha M. Shangpliang engages herself with an understanding of organic linkages between society and nature in the context of the Khasis of Meghalaya. The linkages between nature and the Khasis are explored in the tribal folklores and legends. The harmonious and peaceful co-existence between society and nature has come under a lot of pressure in the recent past owing to several forces such as British rule, advent of Christianity, heightened process of modernization etc. The natural resources of the region over which communities in the North-East in general and the Khasis in particular depend are being plundered and exploited for commercial purposes. This has serious implications for man-nature relationship and these are dealt with at length in this paper.

A perusal of the articles in this volume would clearly point to the central theme that runs through all of them. Whether one is interrogating aspects of change in the North-East, or engaged in understanding the process of identity construction or looking at the demographic transition experienced in the North-East, or examining the impact of movement of the non-tribals into the tribal areas, the central dialectic that informs all the articles is that of social change. It is the basic analytical variable that is used to deal with wide-ranging issues concerning the societies of the North-East. It is hoped that this volume would prove a useful and meaningful intervention in the current interrogation of social changes that are occurring in the North-East and about which very few sociological accounts are available.

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Social Change in the North-East India

Some Methodological Issues

T.K. OOMMEN

It is a truism that for the analysis of social change 'society' should be the unit. And yet, this self-evident truth poses extremely complex issues because of the efforts to link societies and states. States and societies have always existed; if societies are viewed as products of gradual evolution, states are believed to be consciously constituted structures for regulating the behaviour of the relevant population as and when required. Although some western anthropologists referred to 'tribal' communities as 'stateless societies' it is a conceptual nullity in that all societies have had legitimized authority structures. They manifested in a wide variety of forms – tribal chiefs, council of elders, ecclesiastical heads, emperors, monarchs, dynasties, city-states, party-states and democratic states. If states and societies were co-terminus there would not have been any issue in endorsing them as units of analyses. But this is not true.

It is widely acknowledged that the effort to establish isomorphism between state and society began only 360 years ago when the Treaty of West Phalia gave birth to the institution of nation-state. Ever since that as Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish social scientist, had aptly observed, '... with hardly any exception, all the concepts and analytical tools currently employed by social scientists are geared to a view of the human world in which the most voluminous totality is a 'society', a notion equivalent for all practical purposes, to the concept of 'nation-state' (1973: 78).

I suggest that the conflation of society and nation-state sowed the seeds of initial confusion. Gradually, the institution of nation-state came to be endorsed as an ideal and nation-state and state became equivalents. Thus, the conflation of society and nation-state and hyphenation of nation and state are the twin sources of the prevailing conceptual confusions and the problems in identifying an appropriate unit for the study of social change.

Diametrically opposite articulations are made about linking state and nation/society. Let me illustrate it by recalling the views of two British authors. J.S. Mill held: 'It is in general, a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide with those of nationality ...' (cited in Smith, 1971: 9). But Lord Acton differed violently: 'Nationality does not aim at either liberty or prosperity, both of which it sacrifices to the imperative necessity of making the nation the mould and measure of the state; its course will be marked with material and moral ruin' (cited in Smith, 1971: 9). I can go on with this exercise of recalling both positive and negative pronouncements regarding linking the state and the nation and its consequences. But these excursions will not be helpful in arriving at a consensus. And as Tilly (1994: 137) reports after analysing states and nationalism for five centuries, 'only a tiny proportion of the world's distinctive religious, linguistic and cultural groupings have formed their own states, while precious few of the world's existing states have approximated the homogeneity and commitment conjured up by the label 'nation state'.

Independent India, after some initial hesitation, decided to re-constitute its politico-administrative units on linguistic basis. This was based on the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) which submitted its report in 1956. This was indeed a giant leap forward in improving the governability of India. At the time of the reorganization of the states in the 1950s two broad views were articulated. One view was that the unity of India must not be imposed but must be a fundamental unity recognizing its social pluralities and cultural diversity; the strength of Indian Union must be the strength that it derives from its constituent units, an approximation of J.S. Mill's view and an implicit endorsement of the idea of a multi-national state. The other view was that in the past India had not been an integrated political unit and so the effort should be to create a united India; the new concept of unity cannot be based on the

re-affirmation or re-enunciation of old values such as religion and language which are divisive rather than cohesive. Therefore, the unity of India should transcend community (read religion) and language and recognize the nation as one integrated unit. This view reflects an acknowledgment of Lord Acton's position and endorses the homogenization project of nation-states.

However, Indian political praxis does not neatly fit either of these positions. Both empirical reality and political expediency called for a cautious approach. There are four important bases of socio-cultural identity in India – religion, caste, tribe and language. Of these the first two are not viable for the formation of politico-administrative units (see Oommen, 2005: 142–52) and language and tribe are accepted as the bases for the formation of provincial states.

The purpose of this short exercise in conceptual history is to suggest that there is an enormous gap between the empirical reality of India and the concept of nation-state. Therefore, it is appropriate to designate India as a multi-national state. But even those who used to invoke the notion in the past have abandoned it because it is not viewed as politically correct any more. Perhaps the disintegration of multi-national socialist states and the emergence of mono-national states in their place has accelerated the process of rejecting the notion of multi-national state. As I see it there exists a conceptual vacuum created by (i) the lack of fit between the concept of nation-state and society, and (ii) the delegitimation of the idea of multi-national state. However, there is no serious effort made in political theory to grapple with this issue (see Oommen, 1997, for an exception).

If India's complex empirical reality cannot be denoted by the concept of nation-state and if the notion of multi-national state is no more in vogue, what is an appropriate designation for India? Charles Tilly's coinage, namely, *national state* seems to be helpful. However, his definition of national states as '... relatively centralized, differentiated and autonomous organizations successfully claiming priority in the use of force within large, contiguous and clearly bounded territories' (1990: 43) fits more the bureaucratic structures of states and completely ignores the emotional appeal implied in the idea of nation. Further, national states are viewed as transitory structures; they are nation-states-in-the-making in Tilly's rendition, which does not fit the Indian reality. Therefore, I have suggested that national states should be viewed as entities which not simply accommodate but consciously

celebrate cultural diversities in contrast to nation-states which are perpetually engaged in creating mono-cultural states. This would require the co-existence of federal political structures along with social and cultural diversities (see Oommen, 2008: 21–36). The essence of federalism lies not in the constitutional or institutional structures but in the society itself. Federal government is a device through which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected (Livingston, 1966). Therefore, what Smith (1979) designated as ‘methodological nationalism’ an offshoot of treating nation-states as the ultimate units of analysis is utterly unsuited for comprehending Indian social reality. This also poses methodological issues in treating India’s North-East region as a unit of analysis to understand the ongoing process of social change.

II

The theme of this paper is social change in North-East India. Four issues need to be kept in mind while undertaking this task: one, the nature of the unit being analysed; two, the point/s of departure, three, the process of displacement, and four, the direction of change. I have hinted above that the territory encapsulated within the national state of India consists of numerous societies but all of them may not be appropriate units for analyses. However, the provincial states and union territories established on the bases of language and tribe provide the requisite methodological justification to be treated as appropriate units of analysis. In the case of the North-East the state-society disjunction is substantial; while there are only eight provincial states (including Sikkim) there are numerous societies. Therefore, it is more appropriate to conceptualize the North-East as a ‘region’. But there are several misconceptions about the North-East not only in popular imaginations but also in scholarly imageries which do not lend themselves for rigorous analyses. It is necessary to dispel these naïve notions.

First, the North-East is invariably visualized as a region inhabited predominantly by tribes. But of the 461 Scheduled Tribes (STs) of India only 196 live in the North-East and most of them are tiny. In fact, only 13 per cent of India’s tribal population lives in the North-East. Further, of the eight states of the North-East, only four – Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland – are tribal majority states and the remaining four – Assam, Manipur, Sikkim

and Tripura – are populated mainly by the peasantry. It is very pertinent to remind ourselves here of the great sociological relevance of the distinction between tribes and peasants.

Peasant societies are part-societies and tribal societies are autonomous in terms of social structure and culture. Therefore, they should be recognized as two distinct types of societies (see Oommen, 1967: 85–99). which is to say the North-East consists of two ideal types of societies based on the characteristics of reciprocity (peasant) and autonomy (tribe) vis-à-vis the world outside. It could however be argued that the tribal societies are no more autonomous in terms of social structure and culture. Be that as it may, it is necessary to unfold the factors and forces which contributed to the transformation of tribal societies from autonomous to part-societies. If the starting points of tribal and peasant societies were different the patterns and consequences of social change occurring in them are bound to be different. In an adequate analysis of social change in the North-East this point should be kept in mind.

There is another crucial difference between tribal and peasant societies. As all societies, tribal societies too are stratified based on gender, age, class, power distribution, rural-urban differences. This is true of the tribal North-East too. But the peasant societies of the North-East as elsewhere in India are characterized also by hierarchy. That is, tribal North-East is stratified but peasant North-East is both stratified and hierarchical. This is a crucial difference. True, inequality exists in both these types of societies but in India's peasant society inequality is not only sanctioned but also sanctified through theological doctrines, social values and behavioural norms of Hinduism. The tendency on the part of analysts to overlook this vital fact has obliterated our understanding of the differences in the nature of social change among the tribal and peasant societies in the North-East. It may be that tribal North-East is influenced by the caste system through its interaction with peasant North-East. Conversely, the rigidity of caste system in peasant North-East might have got reduced because of its proximity to and interaction with tribal North-East. But these need to be investigated and established.

The second misleading conception about the North-East India is that the region is largely populated by tribes converted to Christianity at the instance of foreign missionaries. But only three out of the eight states in the North-East have Christian majority while four are Hindu majority states. In Arunachal Pradesh 37 per cent of

population profess Hinduism which is numerically the biggest religious community. Further, the imagined elective affinity between the tribes of the North-East and Christianity is a myth; Arunachal Pradesh with 80 per cent tribal population have only 10 per cent Christians. Does this disjunction between Christianity and tribal identity affect the patterns and processes of social change in Arunachal Pradesh is what needs to be asked and answered. The relative weak presence of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh is also important because the argument that the spread of Christianity among those people who were animists and nature worshippers and whose religion was castigated by Christian missionaries does not hold in the case of Arunachal Pradesh. An explanation of this exceptionalism is significant because analysts of social change should also unfold the why of non-change.

The widespread belief that Christianity in the North-East is a colonial transplant is also contrary to facts. Christianity was first introduced into the North-East India during the Mughal period. In 1901 there were only 33,783 Christians which increased to 560, 987 by 1951. But the number of Christians increased fivefold in the first four decades in North-East after the British left India. That is, the phenomenal increase of Christians in the North-East is a post-colonial phenomenon. While before 1950 the great majority of Christians were found in Meghalaya, Nagaland, and the hill areas of Manipur and Mizoram, during the second half of the twentieth century significant conversion movements spread to Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh (see, Downs, 2003: 381-400). Thus both in terms of numbers and spread to new areas the expansion of Christianity in the North-East is largely a phenomenon of Independent India and not colonial India.

The third misconception about the North-East is that it is a den of tribal secessionist movements inspired and/or led by Christian missionaries. This imagery about the North-East instantly stigmatizes the entire region as 'anti-national' and pro-Christian. But what are the facts? Of the six secessionist movements of independent India the three bigger ones crystallized outside the North-East and they have/had explicit link with religion. The Tamil secessionist movement was based on Tamil language and Dravidian Hinduism, the demand for Sikhistan/Khalistan was/is based on Sikh religious identity and Punjabi written in Gurmukhi script and the Azad/Autonomous Kashmir movement is based on Islamic identity

reinforced by Urdu language. Of the three secessionist movements in the North-East the two – Naga and Mizo – explicitly invoked tribal nationhood, and the third movement under reference is led by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which is non-tribal and non-Christian. In fact the density of social movements in the North-East is disproportionately high as compared with other regions in India (see, Oommen, 2005: 181–95) but only the leaders of the Naga movement highlight their Christian identity. This being so, the stigmatization of secessionist movements of the North-East based on their attributed association with Christianity brings in prejudices in the analysis of social change in the region.

A fourth misconception about India's North-East is that the region is populated by a racially distinct type of people. It is true that some of the communities, notably the Manipuris, the Mizos, the Nagas and the Sikkimese have a different pigmentation but the vast majority of the people in the region are very similar in their physical appearance to the rest of Indians. And curiously, while those with darker pigmentation are discriminated against in the rest of the world, it is the fairer group of the North-East which feels discriminated in India. But the internal phenotypical differences are invariably ignored in media reports. Thus, a recent newspaper report had the caption: 'Our Seven Step Sisters?' (*Hindustan Times*, January 13, 2008).

On the other hand, the discriminations which exist within the North-East is perhaps equally acute. For example, an earlier newspaper report (*Hindustan Times*, January 26, 2004) had the caption: 'We are strangers at home'. However, having remarked that 'we are all racist, but it is more palpable between North-East and the mainland', this report noted that the non-Khasis are branded as 'dkhars' in Meghalaya and non-Mizos are labeled 'Vais' in Mizoram, i.e., outsiders. Similarly, the Assamese propensity to pre-fix 'naga' to anything extreme is well known. Examples are 'naga jolokia' for the hottest chilli or 'naga tenga' for the sourest vegetable. These clearly indicate the prevalence of prejudices among the peoples of the North-East. While the Kuki-Naga clashes are well known, what is not so well known is the stigmatization to which Manipuri Nagas are subjected to by the Nagas of Nagaland by referring to the former as Kachcha Nagas. One can go on pointing out other examples but the point to be noted is that there exists tensions not only between the 'North-East periphery' and the 'Indian mainstream' but also within the North-East – between tribes and peasants and between the tribes. An

informed analysis of social change cannot ignore these matters which vitally affect everyday life. Do the prevailing stereotypes and articulated prejudices which trigger off conflicts, increase or diminish due the ongoing process of social transformation is a question to be addressed now.

India is the proverbial land of immigrants; immigration into India started in the hoary past. But, over a period of time most of the immigrant groups got domesticated. But, the persisting conflicts between insiders (nationals) and those who are perceived as outsiders (ethnies) result in instability and change, and Assam is a prime theatre of this (see, Oommen, 1982: 41-64). Assam has two major blocks of nationals – Assamese Hindus and the plain tribes (the Bodos) who consider the state as their ancestral homeland. There are several blocks of immigrants – the tribal population brought from Bihar and Orissa during the colonial period, Bengali Muslims and Hindus who came from Bangladesh and West Bengal, and the Nepali Hindus – who look upon Assam as their adopted homeland. But those who consider Assam as their ancestral homeland contest the claims of those who consider Assam as their adopted homeland. Needless to say that the immigrants are invested with varying degrees of legitimacy.

The immigrants from the rest of India do not consider Assam as their homeland – ancestral or adopted – and hence remain ethnies, that is outsiders, in the perception of the locals. To complicate matters the North-East has several linguistic/tribal communities which consider themselves as 'nations'. However, only a few are state-seeking nations (as noted above) and aspire to establish sovereign states. While most are state-renouncing nations and demand only politico-administrative units – provincial states, Regional Councils, District Councils – and have reconciled to remain within the Indian Union. But both secessionist and autonomist aspirations have triggered off socio-political movements which have differing implications for the state and society in the North-East (see, Oommen, 2005: 181-95). It could be stated without the fear of being contradicted that social movements have contributed substantially to the process of social change in the North-East. But a full-fledged analysis of this is awaited.

III

The purpose behind calling into question the widespread misconceptions about India's North-East is to alert the analysts of social change

the tortuous task that awaits them. The prevalence of misconceptions often tend to adversely affect 'objective' analysis. Let me now turn to the point of departure or the baseline from which change started in the North-East. The general impression that one gets is that history remained suspended in the North-East till British colonialism. To get out of this impasse one must make a distinction between replicative and retreatist colonialism (Oommen, 1991: 67-84).

Replicative colonialism creates settlement societies as in the New World of Americas and Australia. The colonizers settle down in the new region which was 'discovered' and replicates their social structure and culture through political and economic domination completely marginalizing, through genocide and culturocide (the systematic destruction of the cultures of the local population). A variant of this happens when the immigrant community establishes its hegemony over the geographical space into which it comes without indulging in genocide and culturocide. This is illustrated by the Ahom advent in Assam much before British colonialism and Bengali immigration into Tripura after India became independent. The Ahom advent in Assam has an interesting parallel in Northern India - the Aryan advent. But the domestication and domination of the Aryans and the Ahoms is so complete that analysts refuse to cognize these intrusions as alien to their respective regions. The analytical consequence of not distinguishing between replicative and retreatist colonialism is disastrous because the real baseline from which social change started gets eclipsed. Further, the baselines seem to be different for peasant North-East and tribal North-East - the Ahom advent for the former and British colonialism for the latter with attendant consequences. For example, Ahom kings permitted preaching of Islam in Assam in the seventeenth century which partly explains the strong Muslim presence in the peasant North-East. A long duree analysis of social change in the North-East cannot ignore the differing starting points and the differences in the orientations of the type of colonialisms involved.

British colonialism was retreatist in that after two centuries the colonizers had to withdraw, certainly not willingly but due to the enormous pressure mounted on them through the anti-colonial movement. At any rate, it does not seem to be correct to attribute Christianization of a few major tribal communities to the proselytization policy pursued by the British state. It is pertinent to recall the 1858 proclamation of the British Queen in this context: 'Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity and

acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion, we disclaim alike the Right and Desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects' (quoted in Firth, 1976: 189). I am not arguing that the British adhered to the announced policy, nor am I suggesting that some of the colonial officials have not facilitated conversion to Christianity. But I insist that the analyst should recognize the distinction between official policy and practice because it has serious implications for understanding the texture of social change.

If the British policy were one of systematic proselytization the Christian population in India would not have remained as low as it was on the eve of colonial exit. And, the expansion of Christianity increased several fold in the North-East after the British left as I have already noted. This being so the widespread popular perception that Christianization of the North-East is attributable solely or at least largely to British colonialism needs to be re-examined because the spread of Christianity is widely endorsed as an important factor of social change in the North-East. The role of Christian missionaries also needs to be objectively examined because at least a section of Indian social scientists hold that they were here not simply as propagators of Christianity but were also agents of imperialism (see, for an example, Sinha, 1972: 410–23).

There is a third baseline the analyst of social change in the North-East should keep in mind, that of Indian Republic's massive effort to integrate the region into the 'national' mainstream, the euphemism invoked being nation building. There is a colossal perceptual gap between mainstream India and the North-East periphery, particularly those who challenge the hegemonic orientation of the Union. What is perceived as national integration from the centre is cognized as internal colonialism by the periphery. These variations in cognitions have profound consequences for the analysis of social change.

There is another aspect to 'integration' of the tribes into the mainstream. In the 1931 census of India, there was an entry under religion referred to as animist, primitive or nature worship. But in 1951, the first census of independent India all those who did not convert into one of the world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam – were absorbed into Hinduism. This route to cultural absorption shattered the religious identity of millions of tribal Indians. In the North-East it is not an acute problem given the fact that most of the tribal population has embraced one of the established religions. But yet the problem persists. For example, in 1991, 36 per cent of the

people of Arunachal Pradesh and 17 per cent in Meghalaya did not identify themselves with Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism or Jainism. What are the implications of this?

Since the benefits of reservation are available to all tribal communities irrespective of their religious identity, identifying with one of the less established religions may not adversely affect their economic privileges or political prospects. But is it likely to affect their social standing and cultural identity within their communities? Is it not appropriate to investigate the variations in the nature and quality of social change taking place among those groups which retain their primal vision and those who embraced one of the established religions?

The project of cultural homogenization, the mission of nation-state, is singularly unsuited for India which I designate as national state, an entity which celebrates cultural diversity within the framework of the federal polity (Oommen, 2008: 21–36). That is, 'integration' of the North-East, particularly tribal North-East, can only mean political and economic integration. But the federal structure should concede the requisite political and economic autonomy to all its constituent units. In turn the provincial states should vertically transmit political and economic autonomy to the structures below it. On the other hand, the social structural and cultural specificities of the linguistic and cultural communities cannot be tampered with. Such a dual process, reciprocity in political and economic contexts and retaining autonomy of culture and social structure would throw up a process of social change which is specific to the North-East, particularly the tribal North-East. The examination of this specificity should be an important item on the agenda of the study of social change in the North-East.

The three baselines I have identified – the Ahom advent, the colonial intrusion and the birth of independent India – have differing reverberations and varying impacts on the North-East. Some of these are complimentary but others are contradictory and pull in opposite directions. Their impact, singly and conjointly, needs to be recognized and analysed to understand social change in the North-East.

IV

Let me now refer briefly to what I have called the process of displacement and the point of destination. The tendencies observed in the West in the context of social change are mainly two. One is displacement anchored to western epistemological dualism. And, the

second is the differential rate of change occurring in different dimensions of society which gave birth to the notion of culture lag. Neither of these tendencies seem to be applicable as they are in the Indian case. Thus, as against displacement it is accretion which results in the co-existence of the old and new elements that usually occurs in India. Similarly, it is not that the change in material dimensions is faster as compared with the realm of values; it could be reverse. And, these tendencies have their specificities in the peasant North-East and the tribal North-East given the variations in their points of departure.

For example, the incorporation of Assam into the world tea market had affected the peasantry more. But, the arrival of Christianity made greater inroads into the tribal world. The structure of joint family of the peasantry is gradually giving way to nuclear family but not disappearing. Similarly, monogamous marriages have not completely displaced polygamous unions among tribes. The folk legal system and the state legal system co-exist among tribes in different contexts and with differing legitimacy. In contrast, the religious legal systems and the state legal system co-exist in the case of peasantry. But, both the peasantry and tribes have a common criminal legal system along with their co-citizens in India.

The spread of education differs across the different politico-administrative units. In general, the spread is better in the tribal North-East with Mizoram achieving full literacy. In contrast the peasants lag behind in education; the case of Muslim peasantry being particularly worrisome. As for gender equity the tribes have been better off traditionally as compared with the peasantry. In turn this indicates that patriarchy has been less oppressive among the tribes. But in some tribes (e.g., the Khasis) the women have had an edge over men traditionally because of matriarchy and the inheritance system of property from mother to daughter. This is gradually disappearing with the modernization of economy and men taking employment in the non-agricultural sector. But, the customary advantage of the Khasi women in the economic context did not facilitate their wielding political power. Indeed there has been a gap in the status of Khasi women between the economic and political sectors and that is persisting; they are not much visible in the political space even today.

From the brief narration that I have attempted it is clear that one cannot speak of a uniform set of changes in social structure and

culture. On the other hand, certain broad trends are visible in political and economic contexts. For example, the extremist tendencies in the sphere of political mobilization are gradually disappearing. The Mizos have reconciled to the idea of finding their fortunes within the Indian Republic. The secessionist tendency of the Naga National Movement has blunted and to-day the focus is to consolidate the Naga Nation within the territorial ambit of India. The secessionist streak in ULFA has always been ambiguous and the ultimate objective seems to be to wrest a place of dignity for the Assamese people under the political roof of India.

Even as secessionist tendencies are dwindling the proclivity to pursue political autonomy for the different nations (read linguistic groups and tribes) within the Indian state system is proliferating. This can be contained within the framework of a federal polity which recognizes and respects cultural identities. At the same time, the predatory tendency of the state, particularly the Indian state, comes for intense interrogation because of its perceived proclivity to violate human rights. The civil society becomes an important agent of social change in this context and this manifest in the numerous tribal associations which assert their base anchored to tradition to secure citizenship entitlements.

Social change in the North-East India today, as elsewhere, seems to be primarily technology-driven and market-prompted. Even education is adapting to this emerging ethos. Thus skill-oriented, encashable education which can provide quick huge monetary returns is preferred. The newly enunciated look-east policy is providing intense motivation to become efficient and prompting migration. A small segment of the North-East elite youth is migrating to different parts of India as well as beyond the borders. They are gradually entering the brain pool of the world. However, the economic mobility experienced by the youth of the North-East does not seem to be uprooting them from their traditional attachments. A new hybridity – economic prosperity, political assertion and cultural rootedness – is emerging. Needless to say different permutations and combinations of this hybridity depending upon points of departure and processes through which society passes through would emerge. For the student social change of the North-East the present moment poses a huge challenge and provides an exemplary opportunity.

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