



OXFORD INDIA PAPERBACKS

# THE PROBLEM OF CHANGE

A STUDY OF  
NORTH-EAST  
INDIA



B. P. Singh

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# Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Prologue	ix
Introduction	1
I. Setting and Argument	8
II. Inheritance: Ethnicity, Religions and Polity Management	27
III. The Middle Class, the Elite and Regional Consciousness	61
IV. The Political System	76
V. Attractions of Political Reorganization in Assam	94
VI. Administrative Philosophy and Institutional Framework	106
VII. Policy Perspectives: Points of View	129
VIII. Demography, Culture, Identity Crisis and Economic Development: An Overview	140
IX. Future Perspectives	171
Epilogue	185
Notes	200
Appendices	211
Select Bibliography	219
Subject Index	225
Name Index	229



# Introduction

North-East India, which comprises the States of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram\*, is a region that has witnessed particularly major changes in the years after the Second World War. During this period, north-east India watchers have always viewed the region as 'troubled' and afflicted with one 'crisis' or the other. This crisis syndrome has in fact, been caused by, or is central to, a number of rapid and inter-related changes in demography, production technology, political institutions, religious practices, attitudes towards language, changes in the environment of national security as well as in consumption patterns and the responses of people to these new realities.

The occupation of parts of Manipur by the Japanese and the battle between the Allied and Axis powers at Kohima during the Second World War stirred the people of north-east India and gave them both a new spatial consciousness and an awareness of modern technology. Hitherto, only a small section of the literati and business elite of the region had travelled outside India, acquired the habit of reading newspapers and hearing the radio as part of a daily routine. Most people in the region had no perception of the world beyond the Brahmaputra Valley, or any familiarity with modern technology and weapons of war. Within north-east there existed several societies at different levels of economic and political consciousness. There were glaring dissimilarities in the hills between an Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh bordering Tibet and a Khasi of Shillong, the seat of State administration, in terms of educational attainments, language and consumption patterns. None the less, a broad synthesis between the people of the hills and those of the plains was widely assumed by scholars, politicians and administrators at the time of Independence.

In the hills, the tribal political consciousness was confined to the village, within the clan and contacts with other clans, or with the markets in the plains. The technology used in the production of food, weaving, dyeing and the construction of houses was

\*On 20 February 1987 Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh became the 23rd and 24th States of the Indian Union.

primitive. The village iron-smith made tools like the *dao*, axe, hammer, chisel, tongs and arrows from iron procured from the plains. These instruments were used for myriad purposes in agricultural operations, hunting, and in the preparation of food. The cloth used was mostly made from hand-spun cotton yarn on simple looms, and indigenous vegetable dyes were used for colouring. Locally available forest materials were used in the construction of houses. The *jhumming*, or slash and burn method, was used in the preparation of fields, as well as to keep the land fertile. The land was essentially communally owned.

The situation was different in the plains. Here the economy was predominantly based around settled rice-cultivation, particularly in the Assam plains, Manipur Valley and Tripura. There was widespread permanent cultivation of *sali*, wet rice, the land was individually owned, and there were also arrangements for minor irrigation. Weaving and spinning were widely practiced and the plains' people produced exquisite silk and other handicrafts. Although in most crafts and agricultural operations simple bamboo and wooden implements were used alongside iron implements, the tea industry and limited oil exploration had made the plains' people familiar with industrial technology. Automobiles, railways and aircraft were also known. Brick houses were unique to urban centres. While barter was an important form of exchange in the hills as well as in the plains, in the latter, currency was in circulation and the villagers had acquired the habit of paying land revenue in currency notes and coins. The process of monetization of the economy had received a fillip with the introduction of railways, particularly those connecting tea-producing centres with the markets of Calcutta, the exploitation of jute crops for factories located in East Bengal and Calcutta and oil exploration works.

It also needs to be highlighted that the phenomenon of temporal change in north-east India is different from that in other parts of the country. The advent of the industrial revolution, the development of communications and the remarkable cultural renaissance that characterized the rest of India from the second half of the eighteenth century—all these did not make any significant impact on north-east India till the twentieth century. Although the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys were the first to receive modernization ideals, this new breeze did not reach the masses in the region. Nevertheless, a small but significant begin-



ning was made with the establishment of Cotton College at Gauhati in 1901. It was only from the 1920s onwards, with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the scene, that a perceptible change occurred: the freedom movement led to a cultural resurgence. In this new task, the princely orders and the Christian missionaries played conflicting roles. Manipur and Tripura, which the British left to be administered by the princely orders, and large tracts of the hill areas, which were more under the care of Christian missionaries than of the British administrative system, could not become active participants in the new cultural, nationalistic and scientific movements even as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. The princely states of Manipur and Tripura helped in the propagation of new ideals of reform, like the abolition of Sati, the removal of untouchability, etc., and in the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition. Similarly, Christian missionaries in the hill areas of the region and elsewhere popularized modern education and health care. However, in so far as dissemination of the ideals of freedom and equality and a sense of belonging to the 'great' Indian nation were concerned, the Christian missionaries played a negative role. Similarly, the princely orders did not believe in the democratic rights of the peasantry and worked for continuation of age-old systems of inequality and the divine right of kings. British administrative policy segregated the hills from the plains and one result of this policy was that the hill areas remained virtually uninvolved in the national freedom struggle and its liberating social impact.

At the time of Independence, with the exception of the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys, north-east India was far behind the rest of the country in education, political awareness and administration and the entire region was economically backward. Yet all the political and administrative changes in the country which were introduced in the 1950s found their application in north-east India too.

The one-person-one-vote system for election to the Assembly and the Lok Sabha, the setting up of district councils in tribal areas and election of its members on similar principles had an unprecedented impact. The introduction of community development schemes in the 1950s not only took the State apparatus to every village, but the insistence on participation of the villagers in

development schemes brought in an unprecedented change in the political and economic consciousness of the people. This was in sharp contrast to the colonial master-servant relationship between the State and the people. In the hills, in particular, the concept of equality among the members of the clan was now extended to the entire gamut of economic and political activities, increasing manifold the capability of the population to interact with the economic, political and administrative organization of society. Hitherto dormant aspirations surfaced with great force, almost like the release of water from a dam, and flooded the State system with various demands. In the public eye, the State assumed the responsibility of being the chief agent of fulfilment of individual and group aspirations. In this new phenomenon the State appeared not only larger than the family or the clan, which in fact it was, but also demanded greater loyalty and the subordination of tribe and caste interests. It was difficult for people in certain areas to give their loyalties to a new State that was secular and primarily intangible, except that it found physical expression in the villages through a small presence of transferable civil servants and elected representatives with fixed tenures. The strengthening of police structure and the sizeable presence of security personnel, although justified on rational considerations, did not help improve matters.

Certain groups and, in fact, several tribes treated the new State as an intruder and the instrument of subjugation. The Nagas and, later, the Mizos revolted against the new order and claimed independence. It had long been realized that the only way India could be administered from New Delhi would be with the consent of the centres of power of small nationalities; but what was not realized was that the State apparatus of Assam, the centrally administered territories of Manipur and Tripura, and the district councils under these administrations were inadequate to cater to the aspirations of the people. These were a product of the new forces of modernization interacting with the old loyalties to language, tribe, clan, tradition and cultural diversity.

On the political side, the independence of India in 1947 was accompanied by vivisection both of its eastern and western territories. These developments were followed by the establishment of an independent State of Burma, with Tibet becoming part of a powerful State of China, and East Bengal of the new State of



Pakistan. Borders were marked by the presence of security forces of the respective States and the Sino-Indian hostilities of 1962 turned the area into a sensitive security zone.

In the east, the ceding of East Bengal to Pakistan disrupted traditional economic institutions in north-east India. It deprived the hill areas of the market for their agricultural products and handicrafts. It also meant an abnormal increase in the price of fish, a staple food, and a decline in the price of jute. River communications as well as road links were disrupted between one political unit and another in Tripura, Manipur, Cachar and Mizoram. Henceforth, the people of East Bengal needed passports to lawfully enter the Brahmaputra Valley and the tribals of the Chittagong hill tracts to enter the Mizo hills; the people of Arunachal Pradesh were confronted by security forces near the borders of Tibet; the Nagas found themselves living in India as well as in Burma; and the Mizos in India were separated from their kinsmen in Burma. All these groups had hitherto moved freely and resented international frontiers that restricted their 'natural' movements.

Both the Indian National Congress and the leftist parties of India popularized modernization ideals and the need for change in socio-economic structure. Thus, in the late 1940s there was more concern in India with education, health care, freedom, equality, land reforms, community development than ever before. After Independence, these ideals were officially recognized in the Preamble and Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution.

Several positive and negative factors operated in north-east India that were almost unique to the region. On the positive side, the region was not afflicted with the scourges of untouchability or the dowry system; the caste system was less rigid than elsewhere; Hindu-Muslim relations were closer; and socially and economically it was not marked by the widespread and deadening inequality of say, Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. On the negative side, Manipur and Tripura had princely orders which firmly believed in economic parasitism and gave respectability and sanction to Hindu obscurantist practices. The Congress and leftist parties, all of which had affiliations down to the village level in other parts of India, were absent or ineffectual in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and the other hills of the region (with the

exception of the Shillong area). The activities of Christian missionaries in these areas for nearly a century had successfully prevented the people from viewing themselves as part of the sufferings and aspirations of the Indian people. Even some years after Independence, the government's presence in parts of these areas remained symbolic—Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram had no police system till the mid-1960s.

Against this backdrop, several tribes of north-east India were simply not equipped, by inclination or experience, to deal with the new phenomenon of democratic institutions. The impact of change was, at places, bewildering because of the sudden graduation of some groups of people from a near-primitive situation to modernity. While in the rest of India the slogans of land reform, socialism, etc. were accepted on the surface, people knew, on account of their being meaningful participants in politics, that earlier traditions would continue to prevail. In most areas of north-east India this duality was never understood.

The social landscape of north-east India has always presented great ethnic variety. People have their origins in Aryan and Dravidian stock as well as to the Indo-Burmese, Indo-Tibetan, Kuki-Lushais, Meiteis, Chin-Kukis and Shan-Tais. Though these people came to the region at different periods of history, there was no major flow of population from the thirteenth to the first half of nineteenth century. The population assessment that followed Assam's annexation by the British in 1826 revealed fewer than a million people in the region. The British encouraged the migration of people from East Bengal, Orissa and Bihar into the region to encourage the expansion of the newly established tea industry and for the reclamation of land and agricultural operations. This process of migration from East Bengal, now Bangladesh, in particular, has continued despite the Partition of India in 1947. During the last century and a half (1826–1981), the population of north-east India increased from less than one million to a sizeable 26 million people. Unfortunately, while in terms of geography it was possible to accommodate this massive increase in population in terms of social engineering it posed serious problems and continues to do so.

The management of change is as complex a phenomenon as the process itself. On the one hand, it is widely advocated that social change must be radical and encompass the entire gamut of a



social order; and on the other, and equally important, is the need to appreciate that in order to keep the social fabric intact, the forces of change must be properly articulated and prevented from disrupting the social setting to the extent that anarchy prevails. The powers of the State, although considerable, are limited in its ability to control or direct the development of a rapidly changing society. Institutions like political parties, religious organizations, social and ethnic groups, trade organizations, middle class and even government servants in their personal capacities have a greater role to play in giving direction to processes of change towards orderly progress. Changes brought about through discussion and consent are more enduring. There is no denying that the State-system has the duty to protect and also a responsibility to advise, but it must not arrogate to itself powers of omnipotence, however pious its objective may be. When innovations are called for, as at present in north-east India, to strengthen economic institutions, to make democratic organizations fully participatory, to secularize the polity, to regulate migration of population, and to resolve cultural and linguistic conflicts, the State-system must be sensitive enough to respond to the opinions of various groups of people. Otherwise, the State-system will alienate large sections of the people it was planning to serve.

## CHAPTER I

# Setting and Argument

On 26 January, 1950, north-east India consisted of the State of Assam and the Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura. With the passage of the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971, the region emerged as a significant administrative concept with a North-Eastern Council (N.E.C.) as its regional planning and security organization, replacing the hitherto more familiar unit of public imagination: Assam. Administratively, the area consists of seven States: the States of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The region accounts for 8 per cent of the total land surface of India and has a population of over 26 million. Some basic statistics are shown in Table I below:

TABLE I

State/U.T.	Area (sq. kms.)	Popula- tion (million)	Growth rate of population (per cent)	Density of popula- tion (per sq. km)	% of region	Literacy rate (per cent)
Assam	87,523	19.90	36.09	254	74.48	36
Nagaland	16,527	07.73	49.73	47	2.94	41.99
Meghalaya	22,487	1.32	31.25	59	5.36	33.22
Manipur	22,356	1.43	33.65	64	5.39	41.99
Tripura	19,447	2.00	32.37	196	7.64	41.58
Mizoram	21,087	04.87	46.75	23	1.83	59.50
Arunachal Pradesh	83,578	06.28	46.75	7	2.36	20.09
India	32,87,782	683.8	34.75	221	Not appli- cable	36.17

(Source: Census of India: 1981)

### *Social Order*

The foremost feature of the social order of north-east India is its plural character. It consists of the hills as well as the plains and is



inhabited by three distinct groups of people—the hill tribes, the plains' tribes, and the non-tribal population of the plains. All three groups are very heterogenous. The hill areas alone have more than a hundred tribes of Mongoloid origin. There are ethnic groups with their origins in the Indo-Burmese, Indo-Tibetan, Kuki-Lushais, Meiteis, Chin-Kukis, Shan-Tais and Indo-Aryan peoples. Each group of tribes has its own language and culture, and more than four hundred languages and dialects are spoken. All the tribes and sub-tribes have a profound distrust of and antipathy towards outsiders. The plains' tribals have ethnic links with the hill tribes, but these links have either been snapped or weakened over time; the plains' tribals have forged links with neighbours in the plains in terms of religion, language and economic activities. While a majority of those living in the plains are Hindus or Muslims, a very large percentage of the tribals in Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya are Christians. In addition, there are Buddhists as well as Animists. In education, the Bengalis, the Assamese caste-Hindus, the Khasis and the Mizos are predominant, thanks to a variety of historical factors.

### *Geography*

Geography has always played a specially important role in the economy, politics and administration of north-east India. The chief geographical features are: (1) the Hills; (2) the Brahmaputra Valley; and (3) the Barak or the Surma Valley. The hills and basins of the region are a mixture of high mountain ranges, plateaus and low hills covering an area of 90,160 sq. kms (roughly 60 per cent of the whole region) and the people living in these hills provide a variety which is a perennial source of interest and delight to sociologists, anthropologists and social or religious workers. The next geographic unit in size, but the most populous and developed, is the Brahmaputra Valley, which is spread over 65,339 sq. kms and constitutes a little over 25 per cent of the region. The Valley is 720 km long from Sadiya in upper Assam to Dhubri bordering Bangladesh and West Bengal, and its width, as if earmarked for nucleated human dwellings, varies between 50 to 120 kms. The Valley's only outlet is to the west and then on to the rest of India.

## Economy

The economy of the States and Union Territories comprising north-east India is more underdeveloped than in other parts of India. There is little industry and agriculture is largely backward, despite the great variety of resources and potential of the region. In the field of hydro-potential, the north-east could provide 20 million KW of power from the Brahmaputra and Barak river systems. Its principal mineral resources are petroleum, natural gas, coal, limestone-dolomite, and ceramic and refractory raw materials. Recent surveys have also located some deposits of metallic minerals. Its forest resources are impressive and the region also has the potential to develop new forests. All these natural resources are yet to be fully harnessed, except perhaps in the field of petroleum and tea cultivation, where sizeable achievements have been made. While a large proportion of the region's educated manpower is unemployed, its agricultural scene is marked by chronic underutilization of manpower and excessive dependence on it. The general economic scene is indicated by the following table.

TABLE 2

State	Per Capita (7th Finance Commission)	Road length per 100 sq. kms.	Per capita consumption of electricity (in kWT)	Agricultural workers to total workers	Per capita bank deposits	Per capita bank advances	Irrigated area to net cultivated area	Railways* (per 100)
Assam	791	72.59	31.59	76.68	150	62	21.4	16.40
Nagaland	820	35.06	39.61	79.43	196	50	33.3	13.82
Meghalaya	820	16.40	24.65	71.69	339	52	24.7	—
Manipur	870	39.47	4.88	72.28	81	29	46.4	—
Tripura	830	74.63	10.70	76.58	117	44	12.5	13.82
Mizoram	Not available	13.82	5.23	84.16	108	6	10.4	—
Arunachal	—do—	13.82	9.50	80.44	107	6	20.0	—
All India	1379	49.90	111.68	72.05	353	241	24.6	48.90

(Source : North-Eastern Council, Shillong, 1983)

\* North-East India constitutes 8 per cent of the area of the country, but has only 3.2 per cent of its railway track kilometrage.



The industrial sector is undeveloped. While the natural resource endowments of the region are capable of supporting a large number of industries, the rate of industrialization is yet to be accelerated. Upto 1986, there were only 62 medium and large industrial units in the entire region, of which 48 were in Assam. As per the Guidelines, PT-1, 1982, 7 districts of Assam, 2 of Meghalaya, 3 of Nagaland, the entire area of Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and of Mizoram are backward. The limited expansion in the industrial sector and a near stagnant primary sector is having its consequential impact on the economy. The expansion in educational opportunities and modernization has led to phenomenal growth in the tertiary sector and north-east India has several times more of government servants, contractors and middlemen than industrialists, entrepreneurs and modern farmers. This level of under-development has in turn its own impact on operation and utilization of economic forces and opportunities in the region.

The reasons for the shortcomings in agriculture have been identified—mainly the prevalence of shifting cultivation, the lack of irrigation facilities, low consumption of fertilizer, the single-crop system, inadequate credit and marketing, land alienation and tardy land reforms. In industry, the lack of infrastructure, of local entrepreneurs, inadequate skilled manpower and, above all, the lack of capital, contribute to backwardness.

### *Ramayana-Mahabharata Tradition*

The diverse ethnic origins of the people inhabiting north-east India in a territory of difficult and tortuous terrain naturally led to the growth of centrifugal forces directly stemming out of various ways of living, different forms of worship and separate dialects. None the less, over the years, there emerged a cultural communality which greatly contributed to social cohesion. The legends, myths, folklore and customs of the area were woven with those of the rest of India and originated from the same source: the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition.

Both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata make distinct references to Pragjyotisha and Kamrup—the ancient and medieval names of Assam.<sup>2</sup> The *Kalika Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana* are replete with references to places in north-east India. The legendary king Bhagdatta, the founder of Pragjyotishpur (present Gauhati), figures in the Mahabharata war as heading a 'vast army of Kiratas and Chinas' on the side of the Kauravas. Sonitpur (present day Tezpur, where I served as Deputy Commissioner in the early 1970s) is still full of stories frequently related in schools and homes as being the land of Usha, who was enamoured of Anirudha the prince of Dwarka. Arunachal—the land of the rising sun—was the homeland of Rukmini, whose beauty enchanted Krishna. Manipur is associated with the abode of the Pandavas in distress. Nagaland is the place where Arjuna's Ulipi was born. The ancient ruler of Tripura had attended Yudhishthira's *Rajasuya Yagna* in Mahabharata days. The Ramayana tradition is reflected in Vasistha Ashram near Gauhati and Parsuramkunda in Arunachal Pradesh, bordering Dibrugarh district in Assam. The Shiva tradition has the shrine of Kamakhya, the centre of Tantrik worship in the Nilachal hills of Gauhati, and the remnants of near ten million idols of Shiva were supposedly deposited on the banks of the Brahmaputra at Bishwanathghat in the Sonitpur district of Assam by Ravana, the demon king of the Ramayana epic.

It is interesting to delve into the factors that led to the build-up of this tradition in north-east India. Recorded history is not much of a guide in such an exploration, but recorded legends are. Interpreting the latter, it appears that the link was established by the legendary king of Mongoloid origin, Bhagdatta, in about 1000 B.C. Bhagdatta accepted the composite religion and culture of Gangeitic India and thus initiated the process of Aryanization or Sanskritization in Assam and the other territories of north-east India.

The earliest recorded history of the region is by the Chinese traveller and scholar, Hiuen Tsang, who visited India in the first half of the seventh century. Hiuen Tsang visited Kamrup. Bhaskaravarman, as Hiuen Tsang recorded, popularized the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition in his kingdom with the help of Brahmins and forged close links with Harshavardhana, whose seat of power was at Kanauj. The early migration of Brahmin



scholars from Kanauj to Assam began at about this time and was a crucial factor in the cultural and political relationship between Kamrup and Kanauj. The Kamrup empire at the time encompassed the whole of north-east India (except the Naga and Mizo hills and Manipur) and extended over the greater part of Bengal.<sup>3</sup> Despite the gradual decline of the Kamrup Kingdom, the process of building up the Ramayana–Mahabharata tradition was continued in the subsequent centuries.

This tradition received a set back in the first half of the thirteenth century, with the advent of Ahom rule<sup>4</sup> over upper Assam in 1228. But it was gradually overcome as interaction between the Ahoms and the indigenized Hindu population increased. Assam again started looking towards Mithila, Magadh and Kanauj and drew inspiration from these kingdoms in shaping its institutions. This was enhanced by the policy of the Ahom rulers of bringing Brahmin scholars to their courts to promote learning and culture, a process that continued over a long span of time. These Brahmin families settled permanently and integrated with local society. The respect accorded to the Brahmins and their close interaction with the rulers and other tribal autochthones helped accelerate the process of Sanskritization. Ramayana and Mahabharata tales—the latter in particular—spread to large segments of society and became essential ingredients of local culture, to find expression in such forms as folk-song and dance, and they were transmitted from generation to generation in the highest traditions of *sruti* and *smriti*.

The spread of education among the upper castes helped consolidate the Ramayana–Mahabharata tradition further. Schools were founded in Assam, and the abler students encouraged to visit the seats of learning elsewhere—Varanasi in northern India, and, later, Nawadweep in West Bengal attracted a large number of students seeking to develop their knowledge of Sanskrit, Indian philosophy and mathematics. On returning to the north-east they spread the ideas imbibed in these places among their people and, in particular, other students.

The Ramayana–Mahabharata tradition reached its zenith and received mass support in the Brahmaputra Valley and, to a lesser extent, in the neighbouring hills, with the neo-Vaishnav movement led by Sankardev (1449–1569) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The movement was part of the Bhakti cult and built

around the heroes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Until then, both the Ahom Koch kings who, between them, ruled over most of the Brahmaputra Valley and beyond, were under the baneful influence of self-seeking priests, astrologers and curious beliefs. The Ahoms believed in Tai and Hindu rituals, while the Koch kings were devotees of the Shakti cult, and human sacrifices were common. Sankardev succeeded in ridding the local religions of their magical rituals and beliefs and, instead, emphasized religion's role in individual salvation, political and social development. *Satras* (monasteries) were established and they became centres of equality among castes and tribes. *Namghars* and *Kirtan-ghars* were set up in most villages and the *satradhikars* and senior priests visited them regularly, even in the far-flung areas of the Jaintia, Cachar and Arunachal hills. Krishna thus became the key figure in the religious life of the region as well as in the entire gamut of this thought processes of the people. The reformation movement helped integrate the Brahmins, Kalitas and Keots into a group of caste Hindus; it also created concord not only between caste Hindus and Muslims but also between Hindus and the various tribes.

#### *British Annexation and Policies*

However, the fact remains that at the time of the British annexation of Assam (1826) and other areas of north-east India slightly later, the spread and depth of the Ramayana–Mahabharata tradition as an integrating cultural force was far from complete. The later half of the eighteenth century witnessed the first ever military clash between the *Satras* and the State in upper Assam; in this the Moamarias of Mayamara *Satra* forcibly captured the seat of Ahom power on 21 November 1769 and remained in authority till their violent overthrow five months later. The challenge thrown up by the consequent civil wars had a feeble political response and the decline of the polity thereafter was sharp. A successful agricultural economy, which had helped in the development of a culture, was shattered after these civil wars.<sup>5</sup> Sovereignty passed from Ahom to Burmese hands in 1819, and the rule of the Burmese over the Brahmaputra Valley, though brief, was a severe blow to earlier traditions of cultural unity. It led to an unprecedented flight of population from the Brahmaputra Valley to Bengal, Arakan



and Tibet in the face of atrocities and the destruction of religious institutions. The British annexation of Assam and other hill areas thereafter led to a restoration of peace and order, but the new cultural policy did not encourage the Ramayana–Mahabharata tradition.

The policies pursued by the British had both positive and negative effects on the process of integration in north-east India. The restoration of peace and order, the stopping of head-hunting and raids by the tribals, and the abolition of slavery, bailed the flight of population, restored agricultural operations and resurrected some of the earlier religious life. *Namghars*, *Kirtanghars*, *Satras* and schools in the Brahmaputra Valley were repaired. The political integration of the hills with Assam, as also the establishment of administrative headquarters at Shillong in 1874 helped in the socialization process between the plains and hill peoples, particularly of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the modernization that commenced with the construction of railway lines and roads, the setting-up of schools, colleges, printing presses, hospitals and dispensaries, and the beginnings of political institutions, with the advent of legislative councils, political parties and associations, encouraged the people of north-east India to view themselves as part of India and to know more about the country's cultural heritage, traditions and values. All these developments led to the growth of nationalism. It is another matter that, in many cases, certain ideals flourished in spite of them.

At the same time, British attitudes and institutions naturally did not result in a wholesale restoration of the past. British administration in 'greater' Assam, based on principles of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence, the insistence upon recording evidence and the elaborate maintenance of land records, was far removed from the local traditional systems of oral evidence and community ownership of property. This led to the induction of a new class of administrators and clerks into Assam from Bengal. The Bengali *Bhadralok* knew English and established themselves as 'second class rulers' between the alien rulers and the local population. In their bid to establish supremacy, they prevailed upon the British to declare Bengali and English as the languages of administration. This policy had far-reaching, adverse consequences. It posed a serious strain on the Ramayana–Mahabharata tradition

in north-east India, as the Assamese language had emerged as the chief agent of propagation of this tradition among large segments of the population, and was also slowly emerging as the lingua-franca of the region. The replacement of Bengali by Assamese in 1873 as the official language of administration and the medium of instruction in schools did not, unfortunately, lead to a restoration of the earlier patterns of relationship between the Assamese and Bengalis. It left a near permanent distrust between them and gave birth to linguistic chauvinism in the Brahmaputra Valley, which worsened with the increasing migration of people to Assam from various parts of Bengal, a process which persists even today.

The policy of encouraging Christian missionaries to play an active role in north-east India had a very significant impact on the culture and traditions of the indigenous as well as migrant peoples. Among the missionaries, the American Baptists were the first to come to Assam: they set up missions at Nowgong and Gauhati from 1837 onwards. In 1867, they started a mission in Goalpara for work among the Garos, a tribe of head-hunters. Missions were established in 1867 to work among the Ao Nagas, in 1879 to work among the Lhota Nagas and in 1880, among the Angami Nagas. The success of missionary activities led to the setting up of establishments among the Mikirs in 1895 and the Assamese Hindus at Dibrugarh in 1900. Besides American Baptist missions, various European missionary societies were also working in Assam. The Welsh Calvinistic missions became active in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills as well as the Lushai Hills during the second half of the nineteenth century. Among the Catholic missionaries, the Salvatorians or the 'German fathers' started their work in 1890, which continued up to 1915, when they were expelled in the wake of the First World War. During this period, they established a large number of missions at various places in the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys and among the hill tribes.

During 1840-65 Christian missionaries demanded and received financial support in their philanthropic and educational work, and official protection and explicit recognition of their role were given by officials 'speaking in a personal and not official capacity', etc. In Assam, the tea planters prepared the way for the touring missionary. As the German missionary, C. Becker, records: 'Without their help it would have been unthinkable to



undertake long and extensive tours, to cross the Assam Valley in all directions and to visit the Christian communities dispersed over such a vast area.<sup>7</sup> The Government of Assam afforded Catholic missionaries the privilege of staying free of charge in dak bungalows when on tour, a facility that is usually accorded only to state functionaries. Similarly, generous grants were made to Christian missionaries towards the construction and maintenance of schools and hospitals and, in times of natural calamities, they worked with the administration to provide relief and succour to the needy. As a result, the spread of Christianity, specially among the tribal and tea-garden populations, became very rapid.

The induction of Christianity was a new process and greatly contributed to the growth in literacy and better health care. For the tribals, it meant a stoppage of head-hunting. The Roman script was introduced in tribal languages. At the same time, these developments led to a loosening of intra-tribal bonds of unity and a decline in the authority of tribal chiefs. The tribals also discarded their traditional dress and forms of music in favour of Western dress and music. The process goes on. Christian missionaries did not, however, succeed in propagating their religion among the Muslims or high caste Hindus.

The economic policies of the British rulers also had serious social and cultural repercussions. The modernization of traditional agriculture demanded raising crops on all cultivable but fallow land, reclamation of marshy or swamp lands, and the introduction of new crops of vegetables, mustard and jute. These innovations required investment in irrigation, flood control measures, etc. But the government did not want to pay for such measures. They preferred to search for cheap and dependable human labour, which was not available locally. This led the British to induct into the region Bengali Muslim cultivators from East Bengal who were willing to move out of their homelands thanks to pressures in their area. The majority of Bengali Muslims migrated from Mymensingh district (all migrants from East Bengal are popularly described as Mymensinghias) occupied land in the vicinity of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and settled there.

The discovery of tea in Assam led to a further induction of tribal labour into Assam in large numbers, this time from Chotanagpur and Orissa. The British also adopted the policy of leasing land to

their compatriots in Assam. By 1928, 1,629,529 acres of waste land were allocated to planters and nearly 1.2 million migrant labourers were working on their plantations. The 1921 census estimated that migrants to tea gardens and their descendants numbered 1.3 million, one-sixth of the total population of Assam.

The increased production of grains and newly found tea attracted the Marwaris—the celebrated business community of Rajasthan—to migrate to Assam, but the construction work on railway-tracks and roads induced Bihari labourers to frequently visit Assam as seasonal labourers. A large number of Nepalis who came to serve the British army did not return to their homeland and settled on forest and river islands as cattle-farmers, domestic servants, etc.

The question naturally arises as to what the British response was to this unprecedented stress on the social and cultural fabric of the Brahmaputra Valley and other regions of the area. Notwithstanding the notes recorded by some perceptive British administrators and demographers, the British attitude was largely one of benign neglect towards social and cultural issues. The British response concentrated on administrative reorganization and furthered the segregation of ethnic groups.

At higher policy-formulation levels in the British administration, the territorial and administrative reorganization of north-east India was considered the answer to its myriad problems. For a variety of reasons, the fundamental, economic and social issues were relegated to the background. Assam was reorganized in 1874, 1905, 1912, 1919 and 1947 in decisive ways. The territory of Assam after annexation in 1826 was included in Bengal Presidency, but became a separate Chief Commissioner's Province in 1874. It was next attached to East Bengal when Bengal was partitioned in 1905. After the annulment of this partition, Assam was reconstituted as a separate Chief Commissioner's Province in 1912. It became a Governor's Province under the Government of India Act 1919 and continued to be so under the Act of 1935. By the Radcliffe Award, the greater part of the district of Sylhet—under a referendum—was transferred from Assam to Pakistan in 1947. With Independence, too, this process was continued, but the objectives were different and the reorganization of Assam was done through years of dialogue and consultation, keeping in view both the facts of history and the wishes of its tribal population to



manage their own affairs through democratic politics.

The pre-Independence reorganization demonstrated a lack of understanding of the social and cultural distinctiveness of the region. The compulsions of political expediency on the part of the British made them tag the north-east on to Bengal which added a new element of Bengali linguistic and cultural domination to the polyglot region. The comparative lack of education, non-involvement of the masses in public affairs and underdevelopment of a cadre of senior civil servants in the north-east prompted Lord Curzon in 1905 to reorganize the State. Curzon had strong imperial reasons to split up Bengal, but to link Assam and East Bengal was perhaps window-dressing, notwithstanding Curzon's argument that the reconstituted province of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' would help Assam develop into a 'self-contained administration' capable of playing the same role in the north-east frontier of India that the Central Province fulfilled in the centre. The partition was annulled in 1912 and Assam returned to its previous position as a Chief Commissioner's Province.

British policy was, however, clear on two counts: first, the administration of the north-east was essential for the maintenance of the Empire of India, as it could be threatened from the north by Czarist Russia in collusion with Burma, China and Tibet; and secondly, the economic exploitation of Assam oil, tea and forest resources would augment the financial resources of the Empire and, towards that end, administrative efforts were to be reviewed at periodic intervals. Nevertheless, Assam's political linkage with Bengal did expose the people of the north-east to new situations, and many of its current problems are traceable to this association. Regardless of the advantages and disadvantages of Assam's linkage with Bengal, the fact remains that administrators and politicians during the nineteenth century thought that the reorganization of the north-east was comparatively simple and that it would solve problems of administrative management, apart from providing economic development and social harmony.

A policy of segregation emerged out of the British perception of the tribal situation.

The British did, in fact, once apply themselves to the question of opening up the frontier tribal population, but decided against doing so. This decision led to the adoption of an 'inner line' policy

in areas like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. The policy laid down a line beyond which no person could move without the explicit permission of the district authorities and the possession of land in these areas was forbidden to non-residents. The British also maintained a minimal administration in the region and encouraged Christian missionaries in their religious and philanthropic work. The 'inner line' policy discouraged Brahmins and Gosains from travelling to these areas, and thus contained the spread of the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition and Hinduism. The policy was pursued with such rigidity that even the national independence movement could not penetrate into these regions. Jawaharlal Nehru summed up this position when he observed:

For half a century or more, we have had a struggle for freedom in this country culminating in the achievement of independence. That struggle itself, apart from the result, had a liberating tendency. It raised us and improved us and hid for the moment some of our weaknesses and other qualities. We must remember that this experience of hundreds of millions of Indian people did not extend to the tribal area... we were not allowed to go by the old British authorities, so that our freedom movement did not reach these people. Rumours of it reached them. Sometimes they reacted rightly and sometimes wrongly, but whether they functioned rightly or wrongly is not the point. The essence of the struggle for freedom, which meant raising some kind of a liberating force in India, did not reach these areas, chiefly the frontier areas which are the most important tribal areas. The result is that we have been psychologically prepared for the last thirty, forty or fifty years for various changes in India, while those frontier areas were not so psychologically prepared. In fact, they were prepared the other way by British officers or sometimes the missionaries who were there. The missionaries did very good work there and I am full of praise for them, but politically speaking they did not particularly like changes in India. In fact, just when changes were coming in India, there was a movement in north-eastern India, supported by many foreigners there, to encourage those people of the north-east to form separate and independent States.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, when tensions grew between the indigenous people and immigrant Muslims over land rights, the British administrative response was one of segregation rather than a solution through socialization or a process of adjustment. A 'line' was drawn in various territorial units to settle immigrants in segre-



gated areas specified for their exclusive settlement. No thought was given to the long tradition of socialization between the Muslims and Hindus of the Brahmaputra Valley, and division was encouraged.

### *Post-Independence Policies*

A debate on the policy framework for the administration of north-east India commenced as soon as the Constituent Assembly started its deliberations in 1946. The political ethos was then dominated by: (1) the compulsions of universal adult franchise; (2) the genuine desire for economic development; (3) the secularization of the Indian political system through a policy of non-interference in religious faith on the part of the State and all its institutions; and (4) the need for integration of the hill areas as well as the princely States within the Indian Union.

The political system which was made applicable throughout the country with the inauguration of the Republic on 26 January 1950 had, for our purposes, four distinct features: (1) every adult citizen became a participant in the electoral process to elect a representative to the Assembly of a State and another to the House of the People of Parliament; (2) the Planning Commission, formulated, in conjunction with the States, five-year plans for economic development of the country; (3) Zonal Councils, consisting of States of a geographical area, were to act as a forum for deliberations in respect of inter-State projects of economic importance and problems of administration; and (4) the all-India Services—I.A.S. and the I.P.S.—were common to the Union and States and aimed at securing minimum standards of administration everywhere and to be agents of national integration. These all-India provisions, however, were not considered adequate either for the aspirations of the tribal people or in tune with their long traditions of autonomy and isolation. An additional political and administrative framework was considered necessary and provided for. These included: (1) the creation of autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to look after social, economic and even minor criminal and civil matters of the tribal people; (2) the imposition of restrictions on the right of Indian nationals to acquire landed property within District Council areas; and (3) the constitution of Tribal Belts and Blocks

in the plains' areas to prevent alienation of land from plains' tribals to others.

There were, however, ominous signs from the day the District Councils were inaugurated in 1952. The District Council could not be constituted for the Naga Hills as the Nagas boycotted the election to the Council, while some Nagas demanded full statehood and several others clamoured for independence. There were other complicating factors, like the language policy of the Government of Assam, which created suspicion in tribal minds about Assamese intentions regarding their identity. The most important destabilization factor came from the tribal elite, who were highly proficient in English, accepted western dress and modes of living and were keen to become chief ministers and ministers of their own lands. The reorganization of Assam in 1971-2 enabled the principal tribes to have their own councils of ministers. The basic aims of democracy and secularism continued to guide all state policies.

#### *Insurgency and Political Unrest*

The political scene in north-east India from the Second World War period—when Kohima and Imphal became prominent battle scenes—has never been placid. Immediately after Independence, insurgency commenced in Nagaland and gradually spread to other areas. Even now the youth of the region are playing a major role in keeping mass movements outside the forum of electoral politics. The problems in each political unit are seemingly different, but are products of the rapid changes that the region has undergone on account of democratization and modernization processes.

On 22 March 1956, the Naga National Council (NNC) proclaimed the independent 'Naga Federal Government' under the leadership of Phizo—and insurgency commenced in an organized manner. Two decades later, with the signing of the Shillong Accord in November 1975, Nagland is a comparatively quiet state<sup>9</sup> and in elections held in November 1982, the Indian National Congress (I) has been returned to power. But the trouble is far from over as a group of Naga rebels is still in neighbouring Burma and has plans to start fresh incursions at an opportune time.



On 1 March 1966, it was the turn of the Mizo National Front (MNF), led by Laldengā, to raise the banner of revolt against the government and start a revolt almost on the Nagaland pattern. But peace has returned to Mizoram, elections have been held and a People's Conference government is in power. However, with the talks with Laldenga having failed and threats of 'Quit-Mizoram' notices hanging over outsiders, deft handling will be continuously needed to stem any fresh wave of insurgency in the area.

The trouble in Manipur was signalled by Meitei insurgents in June 1978, under the leadership of Biseswar and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and, a little later, by the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)—a Marxist-Leninist organization under the leadership of Tulachandra. The Meiteis have been smarting from a sense of neglect and deprivation in the matter of employment vis-a-vis tribals. The frustration is so deep for the proud Meiteis that they want to renounce their Vaishnav heritage and revive old tribal loyalties.

The Tripura tribals revolted in June 1980 against the loss of political power caused by an influx of Bengalis from Bangladesh, which reduced them to a minority as well as subjecting them to Bengali economic domination which led to the alienation of their land, their being deprived of jobs and exploited in trade. The Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (T.U.J.S.), formed in 1967, has been agitating for restoration of tribal land, the deportation of foreigners and the creation of an autonomous district council for tribals. The State is under Communist Party of India (Marxist) leadership, a party which is identified in the north-east with Bengali nationalism. The elections of January 1982 returned the Left Front under CPM leadership to power, although with slightly reduced strength. Tripura poses the most serious problem of ethnic harmony in the region.

Assam—the senior partner and a bastion of the Indian National Congress up to 1977—came under the grip of an agitation led by All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) over the 'foreign nationals' issue in 1979; an agitation which has caused serious damage to the national economy as well as national unity. The democratic process, which was virtually suspended, was restored with elections to the State Assembly in February 1983, but it has generated divisive forces in the State on a scale that surpasses even those at the

time of partition of Assam in 1947. In terms of election-time violence, Assam in 1983 saw the bloodiest election in India's electoral history.

The disenchantment of the plains' people with the political system in the Brahmaputra Valley can be seen in the break-up of the Indian National Congress and the cessation of its historic role as the umbrella for all ethnic conflicts and their solution, as an effective channel between the State and the Centre and between districts and the State. The process of the Congress break-up began after the 1967 elections, culminating in a formal division in 1969. B. P. Chaliha—the then Chief Minister and leader of Assam—played an important but unsuccessful role in patching up differences between the 'Syndicate' leaders in control of party organization and Indira Gandhi, the head of the national government. In a very rare conversation with the then Chief Secretary\* and the author, on the politics of those days, Chaliha mentioned that, on principle, he was with the organization leaders, but the interests of Assam demanded that there should be no division of the Congress in Assam—a strategic frontier state. He also underlined that it was essential to have the same party ruling over Assam and the Centre. While Chaliha's efforts failed at the national level and the Congress split into the Congress (Organization) and Congress (Ruling), he succeeded in keeping the party united in Assam, despite press reports that his colleague Mahendra Mohan Choudhury—who later succeeded Chaliha for a brief while—would go over to the Congress (Organization). The 1977 elections to Parliament brought the Janata Party to the seat of government at the Centre and Janata captured power in Assam as well in the 1978 Lok Sabha elections. A new process of understanding and adjustment had barely commenced at the political level, not to mention the social and economic levels, when two fundamental changes occurred. First, the Congress broke up in Assam for the first time in 1978 as a result of a second division at the national level, the dominant Congress group in Assam opting against that led by Indira Gandhi. Secondly, the break-up of Janata in 1979 led to the downfall of the Janata government at the centre as well as in Assam. For a short while political power in Assam was held by a local variant of the Janata Party

During 1977–9, Assam's socio-political order was deprived of the centre of adjustment—a role so effectively performed by the

\*A.N. Kidwai, I.C.S.



Congress for over fifty years. During the years, electoral politics had struck an equilibrium between caste Hindus, immigrant Muslims, Bengali Hindus, the plains' tribals and others. Caste-Hindus always win a majority of seats as members of the Congress, with the solid backing of Muslim 'vote-banks' or 'tea-garden labour vote blocks'. In 1971 an attempt was made to develop the OBC (Other Backward Classes) vote banks, but this did not succeed. By 1979, however, there was a free for all, which led to a consolidation on ethnic lines amongst Muslims. In the Mukhama Parishad (a sub-divisional panchayat organization) elections held in Assam in 1979, out of nineteen posts of Chief Executive Councillors, Bengali Muslims captured six posts, three went to tribals, one to Bengali Hindus and nine to all the groups of Assamese Hindus, including Ahoms and the Other Backward Classes. This was a signal to the Assamese elite; the bye-elections to the Lok Sabha of Mangaldoi Constituency in 1979 ignited the agitation over the foreign nationals' issue and generated unprecedented fears amongst Hindu Assamese of cultural and political domination by outsiders. The basic apprehension was that once political power went to the Muslims and their supporters—which seemed very likely in the face of numbers and the ethnic consolidation among Muslims and others—everything that the caste Hindu have, including language and culture, would be gone.

The tribal state of Meghalaya also caught up with the agitation over 'foreign nationals' almost as a spread effect of developments in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh was soon stormed by fears of the mass conversion of tribals to Christianity.

The national response has been to give the people of north-east India a degree of autonomy within the Constitution, to develop according to their own genius, to highlight the factors of economic interdependence among the 'seven sisters' of the north-east and grant them generous financial assistance. During the 1970s, the policy of uniting the 'seven sisters' under the regional forum of the North-Eastern Council was laid down and has been pursued since then. Almost as an antithesis to this philosophy has been the approach of the 'disgruntled' elements to unite the 'insurgents' under the banner of the U.S.A. (the United States of Assam) or the NAMMAT (denoting Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura). There are also revivalist movements aimed at uniting people with a common

Mongoloid heritage and para-military organizations, like the North-Eastern Region Defence Army (NERDA), apart from various 'liberation' armies in Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

While inability to meet basic needs in a changed economic environment is the principal cause of discontent, the problems of north-east India need to be viewed in the context of history, demographic change, the existing political system, security requirements and the aspirations of the people of the region. One also has to appreciate the role of modernization, which has sharpened encounters between the imperatives of the past—ethnicity, religions and geography—with the imperatives of the present and future—political, scientific and economic. The process of shaping a collective consciousness in north-east India, which was slow and obscure in the past has become rapid and strident in present circumstances.