Imperilled Frontiers

India's North-Eastern Borderlands

NARI RUSTOMJI

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IMPERILLED FRONTIERS

India's North-Eastern Borderlands

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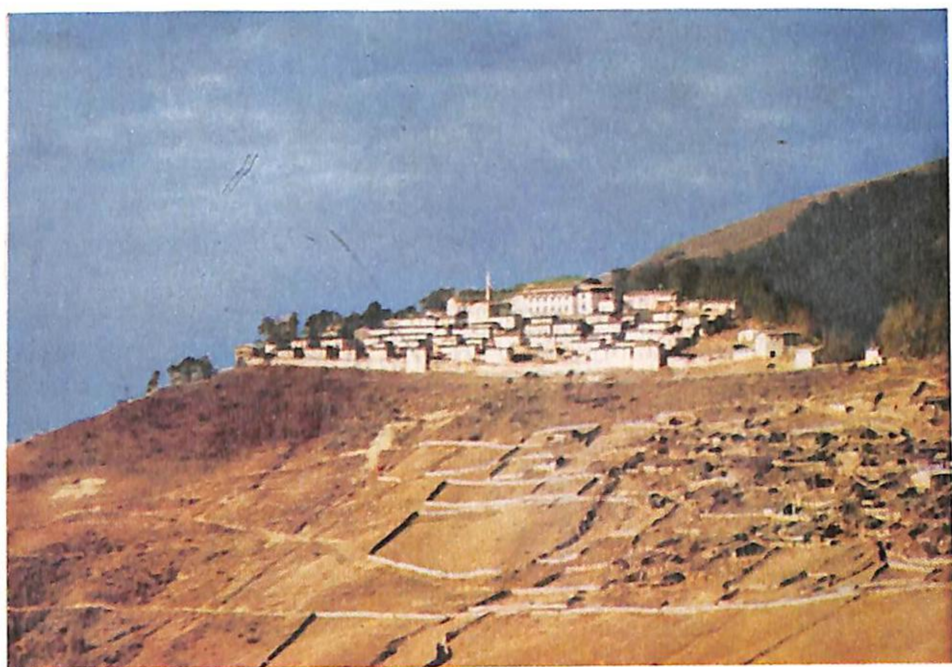

Tawang Monastery

IMPERILLED FRONTIERS

India's North-Eastern Borderlands

NARI RUSTOMJI

DELHI
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
OXFORD NEW YORK
1983

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

LONDON GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO
NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM CAPE TOWN
MELBOURNE AUCKLAND
and associates in
BEIRUT BERLIN IBADAN MEXICO CITY NICOSIA

© Oxford University Press 1983

Printed in India by P. K. Ghosh
at Eastend Printers, 3 Dr Suresh Sarkar Road, Calcutta 700 014
and published by R. Dayal, Oxford University Press
2/11 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002

For my wife Avi
who has shared with me so much of
sunlight and shadow

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Acknowledgements

I should like to express my gratitude and deep appreciation to the Nuffield Foundation through whose assistance I was able to write this book in the most pleasant and inspiring of surroundings. It had been my intention to make a dispassionate study, after retirement and when free from the constraints imposed on a civil servant, of the problems of change affecting not only the hill tribals inhabiting India's frontiers with China and Burma, but also Sikkim and the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. The present book deals with the north-eastern borderlands and will be followed by a companion volume concentrating on Sikkim and Bhutan.

I am especially grateful to Mr B. H. Farmer, Director, Centre of South Asian Studies, through whose good offices the facilities of his Centre were made available to me during my residence in Cambridge. My thanks are also due to the Information Departments of the Nagaland and Meghalaya governments, and more especially to Messrs P. Pal and K. Chakravarty of the erstwhile Nefa administration, for the use of their photographs.

Introduction

Although this book was given birth in the academic environs of Cambridge, it was not conceived as an academic exercise. And although my canvas covers mainly the regions bordering India's north-eastern frontiers, the principles discussed apply with equal validity wherever in the world people at different levels of material, economic and social culture come into contact with each other.

The unrest on India's north-eastern borders has arisen not from want of goodwill on anybody's part but from a failure of understanding. The hopes and aspirations of the Assamese that they could absorb the hill districts of Assam within their own cultural stream were doomed from the very outset. The Assamese did not realize that people, however primitive, resent the imposition of an alien culture. And so, one by one, the hill districts broke away from the parent state. The Assamese have since found themselves in their turn faced with the threat of cultural annihilation. Year after year, immigrants from Bangladesh have been infiltrating into Assam and getting themselves absorbed in the host state. But in getting themselves so absorbed, they have clung tenaciously to their own culture and made no attempt to assimilate with the Assamese. The Assamese have legitimate fears that, if the influx continues, the time will not be far when they will be reduced to a minority in their own state and lose their cultural identity.

In her endeavour to consolidate the unity of the nation by forcing the pace of integration of its several diverse elements, Pakistan succeeded only in losing her eastern wing and, unless she is prepared to learn from the lesson, will find the tribes of her north-western provinces similarly breaking away. This is a forewarning to India lest a similar situation develop on her strategically vital north-eastern borderlands. The movement to secede from India has hitherto been mainly confined to

extremists in the Naga and Mizo hills, but it will quickly spread throughout the frontier states if the apprehension is allowed to fester that their culture is in peril.

Though economic neglect is often cited as one of the causes for the unrest on India's north-eastern frontiers, it is by no means the major factor. Despite a minimum of expenditure on the frontier areas, the British were able to win the goodwill and loyalty of the tribes through engendering a feeling of confidence that they had no interest in interfering with their religion, culture or way of life. Nothing gives rise to so much anger, hostility, even hatred, as the apprehension of cultural aggression. And it is this apprehension that has been at the root of the unrest on India's north-eastern frontiers since the British withdrawal.

Three regions,[1] each with its own distinctive historical background, have been discussed in this book with a view to emphasizing the wisdom of 'hastening slowly' amongst communities that have recently broken out from their shell of isolation. There will be many who will react to this approach as old-fashioned and anachronistic in the world of today, where respect for traditional values is at a discount and held as tantamount to a brake on progress. There are communities, however, that have suffered tragically, and beyond redemption, from well-intentioned attempts to reform them overnight. While, therefore, no community can remain static and while change is an imperative for a community's healthy growth and development, it has to be ensured that the pace of change is adjusted to the community's capacity to absorb such change without detriment to its inherent organism and essential values.

The hill people have been regarded in the past with an attitude of condescension, as simple folk with quaint and curious customs which they will outgrow as they are progressively civilized. Much of the discord on the borders is a reaction to this attitude of patronizing condescension. It has been sought to be shown that heavy economic investment is of little avail in gaining the goodwill of the people of India's north-eastern borderlands and that a strong military presence often creates more problems than it solves. It is only if they can be convinced that their culture and way of life are not in jeopardy and will

[1] Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.

not be undermined by alien pressures that there is hope for a peaceful and secure frontier.

The hills skirting India's north-eastern frontiers are inhabited by a multitude of tribes, the names of which are known to few, save administrators and specialists. Few people outside these fields know of the Pailibos, or of the Akas and Konyaks. Yet each of these tribes has, through the centuries, evolved its own distinct pattern of culture, its own language, its own code of laws, and each has, until recent times, succeeded in maintaining its identity despite the changes taking place in the world around.

At first sight, the tribal people may appear primitive and backward. Many of them are only scantily clad and have no knowledge of reading or writing. Some are to this day nomadic and have no settled home. The first reaction of the inexperienced but zealous young administrator is to set about 'civilizing' the tribal people, and by 'civilizing' he means teaching them to conform to his own pattern of behaviour and thinking. It is only with time and in the light of practical experience that he comes to realize that civilization can be of many sorts.

The road that has led to so much conflict and agony amongst the people of India's north-eastern frontiers has been paved with good intentions all the way. The failure has been, for the most part, not so much in intention as in empathy and sensitivity. And when we speak of failure, it is not in a spirit of criticism or condemnation. Failure and success are relative terms, and if it is deplored that there is so little tranquillity and contentment on India's north-eastern borders, it may equally be argued that the situation might well have been worse! The Government of India's policy *vis-à-vis* the tribal people of the frontiers has been humane and sympathetic. If there has been failure, it has been in an inadequate appreciation of man's instinctive resentment against interference in his inherited and accustomed way of life, however crude and uncivilized it may appear to others.

There has been extensive research on the mysteries and intricacies of tribal lore and custom. It is anomalous however that the stress should generally have been so much more on our responses to the supposed oddities of tribal attitudes and behaviour than the other way round. Much of the misunderstanding

and tension in our relations with the tribals has arisen from the fact that, whereas we are only too ready to react, if not over-react, when confronted with practices and attitudes that do not conform to our standards, we do not sufficiently consider and weigh their reactions to our own more sophisticated perversities. In our righteous indignation at the Naga for taking a few heads in battle, we gloss over the shortcomings of modern culture as manifested in the barbarities of the gas chamber and germ warfare. If more stress were laid on examining in what manner the tribal reacts to the attitudes and beliefs of his self-appointed educators, we might find ourselves more understanding in our approach to his problems and more sympathetic to the realization of his aspirations.

Much is heard of the 'Tribal Problem'. There is, however, no more a 'Tribal Problem' than there is an 'Indian Problem' or 'English Problem'. Each of the multifarious tribes of the Indian subcontinent has had its own history and grown in its own separate way. While, therefore, there may be certain common denominators in their cultural organization, it would be incorrect to generalize too specifically, as though the same considerations applied equally to every tribe. The reasons for variation will be several, partly racial, partly geographical, and partly depending upon the stage and pace at which, as well as the extent to which, they have developed contacts with people and ideas outside their own community and culture. Each one of these factors has to be borne in mind if we are to arrive at balanced conclusions.

My years of frontier service were years of unbounded happiness. And the happiness arose from working amongst people who attracted me, physically as much as emotionally, from the moment of my first meeting with them at the threshold of my career nearly forty years ago. I owe it to them, therefore, to help bring about a wider understanding of their frustration and perplexities in coping with the changes that are so rapidly and haphazardly overtaking their society. I do not propose to justify or find excuses for our many failures. Where there has been failure, I would prefer to accept my share of responsibility and examine what went wrong in the interests of avoiding

similar pitfalls in the future. The problems themselves are as old as the hills and many of the mistakes could have been averted if there had been a keener willingness to learn from the past. All that need be said about the approach to tribal problems has already been said, over and over again, by sociologists and others who have lived and worked amongst primitive peoples in regions as remote and diverse as the South Pacific islands, the Amazon basin and the Himalayan highlands. The misfortune has been that their store of accumulated experience and wisdom has remained the monopoly of anthropologists, administrators and specialists without percolating to the level of the layman. The result is that, where wrongs are committed, the implications remain restricted to a limited milieu and the public conscience is not aroused. The specialists have indeed recorded their findings, but it is most often in a jargon that is not readily comprehensible by the layman. My aim and hope is that, by a discussion in simple terms of complex problems, a wider and deeper understanding may be reached of issues that are vital to the security and happiness of peoples whose whole way of life, traditions and beliefs are so often imperilled by the arbitrary and thoughtless intrusion of alien influences.

I

A Question of Survival

It is given to few to see and feel with the eyes and heart of the tribal, and it was many years before I realized how out of harmony my colleagues and I must have appeared with the landscape and culture of the people amongst whom we were placed. We dressed differently, talked in a different language and were accustomed to different kinds of food and drink. We took it for granted that our own habits of dress, language and diet were more civilized and there were many who poked fun at 'the locals' as having a long way to go before they could aspire to our own elevated level. It was only after I came to know the tribal people more intimately, when they could speak to me as personal friends, that I understood their innermost feelings and attitudes towards the multitude of strangers in their midst. Every tribe has its own word to denote the foreigner or outsider. In Bhutan and Sikkim, where most of the foreign visitors were from India, the term *Gyagar* (Tibetan for 'Indian') came to be adopted to denote the outsider. Though the term was innocent enough in itself, it was clear from the tone of voice and accent with which it was expressed that it conveyed a derogatory, if not contemptuous, sense. One was reminded of the connotations of the word *barbaros* (foreigner) of ancient Greece. Though originally applied by the Athenians to their traditional enemy, the Persian, it was later invoked to brand even the Greek 'foreigner', Philip of Macedon, as a taunt that he was held to be outside the cultural pale of Greece proper.

Tribal populations are thinly spread and, until recent times, their towns had more the appearance of over-sprawling villages. The influx, therefore, of even a handful of families of an alien culture has an immediate impact, psychological as much as physical, on the indigenous population. It is not long before

the outsider sets about 'taking over'. His values are the outgrowth of a different culture, and he proceeds to implant his own peculiar social, religious and recreational institutions, whether they be church, temple, mosque or racecourse. It is only a matter of time before there comes about a complete reversal of positions and the native tribal finds that he is a stranger in his own land.

No community, tribal or otherwise, will readily welcome in its midst the intrusion of a population practising a way of life which is at complete variance with its own. This is well illustrated by the experience of the citizens of Pune, who reacted with dismay and acute apprehension to the establishing in the 1960s of a novel style of ashram in the neighbourhood of their homes. The head of the ashram, a Hindu of wide erudition, who came to be known as Bhagwan, was a person of unusual charisma who succeeded in attracting disciples from all over the world to visit his ashram and sit at his feet. They came to seek the wisdom of the East and found in the ashram a congenial atmosphere, far removed from the tedious asceticism and self-denial commonly associated with India's religious teachers. Bhagwan, their teacher, took a liberal view of sexual freedom and his philosophy of universal love inspired his disciples to behave in a manner that appalled the inhabitants of Pune. They could not view with equanimity the motley groups of Americans, Indians, Britons, Swedes, draped in shawls of silken saffron, all but cohabiting on the roadside sward. Their cultural roots were shaken and they felt abhorrence at the setting in, amidst their homes, of a pattern of life in which there was disregard, if not contempt, for any organized scheme of values.

The citizens of Pune objected to the continuance of the ashram in their city and agitated for its removal out into the country where it would not impinge so much on their day-to-day lives. But the country-folk were no less apprehensive of the ashram than those in the city. Both were unanimous that the devotees, with their negative, if not positively disruptive, attitude to traditional values, were not a wholesome influence and should go back to where they belonged.

What, it may be asked, is the relevance of all this to the tribal context? It is to help uncover the root cause underlying

the tribal agitations against outsiders that are seen to be breaking out throughout the country with increasing frequency. The public reaction to such agitations is that they manifest an unfriendliness and ingratitude on the part of the tribal people and that, in any case, it is anti-national to press for restrictions being placed upon any citizen of India moving about in whatever part of the country he may choose. It is not realized that the question of anybody being anti-national does not arise in such cases at all. The tribal people are not unpatriotic in feeling concern for the survival of their culture and their institutions. The citizens of Pune had no animus against foreigners *qua* foreigners when they agitated for the removal of the ashram. All they sought was that the society within which they had been reared, and more especially their children, should not have to be subjected to what, in their view, were corrupt and alien influences that would undermine their long inherited and deeply cherished value-system. Tribal movements demanding the eviction of outsiders are no more anti-national than the agitations of the gentlemen of Pune. They are the expression of long pent-up feelings that have been building up in the community's subconscious, a desperate *cri de coeur* in defence of a way of life and pattern of values that is being threatened by an aggressive, alien influx. If viewed dispassionately, such agitations will be seen in their true perspective. It will be possible then to identify the seeds of apprehension and suspicion and to take remedial steps to allay hurt and anxiety. As matters stand, the resentment of the tribal people is unhappily exacerbated by insinuations concerning their loyalties. Tribal sentiment is grievously wounded by the misconstruction put on their motivations and by the refusal to recognize that the tribals' behaviour pattern is common to all communities who have a pride and respect for their culture and traditional institutions.

While the Assamese cannot be categorized as tribal, they share none the less the tribals' feeling of insecurity that they are being overwhelmed by outsiders and may ultimately be reduced to a minority in their own habitat. It was this feeling that was responsible for their launching in 1979 a movement that completely paralysed the life and functioning of the entire north-eastern region. The object of the movement was to put pressure on the central government to stop any further influx

of outsiders into Assam, as also to deport such entrants as had already surreptitiously infiltrated into the state and contrived to have their names included in the electoral rolls. What angered the public of the country as being an anti-national stance was the decision of the agitation leaders to restrict all movement of products from the refineries of Assam at a time when oil was in short supply throughout the country and imports from abroad could only be procured at prohibitive rates.

These developments were the more surprising in that the Assamese are, by temperament, an easy-going people not normally given to reacting sharply to provocations. The first words of the Assamese language that a newcomer to Assam learns are *lahe, lahe* ('slowly, slowly'), an expression that has come to be accepted as summarizing the Assamese disposition of patient tolerance, if not indifference. Until the last century, the Assamese led a comparatively easy life. Land was plentiful and the soil rich. It required little toil to reap an abundant harvest and habits of indolence and lethargy inevitably set in. There was no need for hustle and bustle, food was plentiful, and if things occasionally went wrong, they righted themselves in their own good time. The smoking of opium contributed to the general euphoria of the people and the philosophy of '*lahe, lahe*' gave complete satisfaction.

What has happened, then, to distort this idyllic scene? It is one of the ironies of the human comedy that peace and contentment are so often the seeds of their own destruction. As the population in the adjoining districts of Bengal increased, they cast their eyes upon the vast and alluring expanses of the Brahmaputra valley. Muslims from the heavily overpopulated Mymensing district of Bengal (now in Bangladesh) gradually began to overflow into Assam. They found the Assamese people hospitable and accommodating, and it was not long before Assam was pock-marked with clusters of Muslim settlements. With Partition in the offing, there were indeed serious apprehensions regarding Assam's future in the new dispensation: but in the outcome, it was only the Muslim-majority district of Sylhet that fell to Pakistan's share.

Assam had been traditionally a province of communal harmony and, as long as there was no pressure on their land, the Assamese did not resent the Muslim presence. Their philosophy

of tolerance was also one of the factors making for harmonious relations. Assam was thus spared the atrocities and excesses of the partition of Punjab and, even after the excision of Sylhet from the parent body, the peace and harmony of pre-Partition days was not substantially disturbed. At the level of the two governments, there were certainly tensions and friction. The contiguous districts of Bengal had been the main market for the agricultural produce of the Assam border districts, consisting largely of tribal populations. The Pakistan authorities placed obstacles in the way of the smooth continuance of trans-border trade, with the result that, in the absence of any readily accessible alternative market, the border villagers were left with their produce rotting on their hands and faced with economic strangulation. But governmental provocation apart, the people themselves were not embittered by Partition. The social and economic relations of the inhabitants on either side of the border had been so close and intimate that it took time for people in Assam to look upon East Pakistan as a foreign country.

It was this very spirit of friendliness that stood in the way of vigorous and systematic steps being taken to curb the entry of immigrants from East Bengal into Assam during the years following Partition. The Assamese had indeed been feeling for some time a sense of uneasiness at the growing Bengali presence in their province. The early immigrants, mostly poor cultivators, had mixed freely with the local population and even spoke the local language. The more sophisticated Bengalis, on the other hand, who entered government service or the professions, tended to remain aloof from the Assamese and regard themselves as a superior caste, not deigning to speak the local language or interest themselves in Assamese culture. And apart from this attitude of cultural arrogance, they were seriously encroaching upon the employment opportunities that were developing all over the state with the setting up of new industries under successive Five-Year Plans.

There was, of course, nothing new in all this. It was the British who had originally packed the services with Bengalis, not because they entertained any animus against the Assamese but because qualified Assamese were not then available. With the opening of schools and colleges in the province, however,

there was soon a surplus of Assamese with the minimum qualification for entry into government and other services, and it irked them to find avenues for employment blocked, with so many posts already filled, or being progressively filled, by Bengalis.

The Assamese exercised restraint in giving vent to their resentment in the years immediately following Independence. It was a period of high hopes and aspirations, during which there were many who dreamt that, with the departure of the British, the splendours of the old Ahom empire might once more be revived. It had been a long-standing grievance that the British had clipped their wings and excluded them from the administration of the extensive hill areas comprising the multifarious tribal populations. The hour had struck for the Assamese Renaissance. Assamese culture and the Assamese language would find at last their rightful place in the life of the land and Assam's political boundaries would be restored, as of old, to the remotest extremities of the international frontier with China and Burma.

Within less than thirty years, Assam saw all her grand hopes shattered. Far from her regaining administrative control of the hills, she lost even the symbolic suzerainty that she had exercised during the British era. One by one, the hill districts were excised from the parent body of Assam and constituted as separate states or Union territories. Assam was left a shadow of her former self.

The Bangladesh war of 1971 was a major turning point in the political history of the north-eastern borderlands. Assam and her people had been accustomed enough in their history to the infiltration of foreign and outside elements. But such infiltration had taken place in driblets and, as it had been spaced over a considerable period of time, it had been within the absorptive capacity of the province. The refugees that crossed over to Assam and Meghalaya during the Bangladesh operation entered not in driblets but as a mighty, sweeping flood. If Assam felt overwhelmed, the hill people comprising the newly-formed state of Meghalaya felt even more so. Meghalaya's total population was not much above a million, and if the influx of refugees was not contained, they would lose their identity as a tribal state despite all the safeguards of the

Constitution. Tripura was a glaring warning. The indigenous tribes of Tripura had been reduced by the Bengali influx to a negligible minority in their own state. If this could happen in Tripura, there was nothing to prevent it happening in Assam and Meghalaya.

The dismemberment of Assam,[1] however inevitable under the circumstances, came as a shock and trauma from which she could not quickly recover. And coming as it did at a time when she was being flooded by refugees from Bangladesh, it is not surprising that she lost her balance. For Assam suffers from a sense of deep hurt that the Centre has been primarily responsible for her humiliating reduction to the status of a mini-state, one amongst many under shared governors, and that, too, not *primus inter pares*, but a mere equal.

Assamese discontent has been attributed to the Centre's neglect in assisting her adequately to fulfil her industrial potential. However, it has to be borne in mind that the hasty and premature setting up of large-scale industrial units in comparatively undeveloped regions can often be the source of more harm than good. The implementation of such projects necessitates the enlistment of technical personnel, as well as of skilled and unskilled labour, that are not locally available and have to be inducted from outside. Outsiders, understandably enough, expect enhanced salaries and allowances to induce them to leave their homes for employment in the remotenesses of the frontier, and the granting to them of special benefits at once raises local jealousies. The animus against the outsider has arisen largely from a feeling that the funds sanctioned by the central government for the development of the state are in fact no more than an avenue for outsiders to fill their pockets at the expense of the Assamese people.

The Assamese have repeatedly declared that their movement—and resentment—is not against outsiders *per se* (i.e., non-Assamese), but against 'foreigners' (i.e., persons who are not statutory Indian citizens). While this may theoretically be so, there is no doubt that even Indian citizens who are not Assamese live under a sense of insecurity that they are not welcome in the state. For this, too, the Assamese cannot be held entirely

[1] The Khasi, Garo and Mizo hills were excised from Assam under the Reorganization Act of 1971.

at fault. Until recent years, there has been the most abysmal ignorance in the country regarding the people of India's north-eastern borderlands, and tribals from the Naga and Mizo hills have complained often of the harassment to which they have been subjected through being mistaken by Indian officialdom—as also by the Indian public—as foreigners from China or Vietnam.

The Ahoms originally entered Assam from Upper Burma and, although they have since intermarried with the local population, their features still show traces of their Mongoloid origin. Until the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, Assam was outside the British orbit of influence, and the Assamese have ever held it a matter of pride that, save for a brief period of less than thirty years in the seventeenth century, the Ahoms could successfully resist all attempts by the Moghul emperors to subdue their land and bring it within their dominion. With this background of Assam's comparatively recent absorption in the Indian mainstream, her stance *vis-à-vis* foreigners and outsiders becomes understandable; for if even educated Indians have, until recent times, been so ill-informed as to think of the Assamese as a people beyond the periphery of India, the Assamese can scarcely be blamed for regarding Indians as equally 'foreign' to themselves.

The root of discontent on the frontiers is clearly the apprehension of cultural annihilation, whether the people concerned be Assamese, Nagas, Mizos or Meghalayans. The Assamese are not an unreasonable people, and the first necessity is to recognize that their apprehension is justified. They have seen that, for all the administrative measures devised by the government—the sealing off of the borders, the establishing of frontier check-posts, the constitution of tribunals to weed out and deport foreigners—the influx of outsiders into the state continued unabated. This has led them to conclude that the Centre is not sympathetic to Assam's aspirations nor serious in its assurances about checking the inflow of outsiders.

It is late, but not too late, to restore the situation. But if the situation is to be restored, it will not be by doubling or tripling the Centre's grants for Assam's economic development. The Centre has to create a feeling of confidence amongst the Assamese—as indeed amongst all the people of these sensitive

frontier regions—that their land, culture and way of life will be secure from any future inroads of population from outside, whether from Bangladesh, Nepal, or elsewhere. The Assamese and the tribals are humane and practical people who will not insist on the summary eviction of bona fide settlers. The rehabilitation of refugees is, however, a national responsibility and they are entitled to expect that, if commitments have been made regarding their acceptance, the burden of their settlement should fall equally on the country as a whole and not only on those states that happen to be contiguous to Bangladesh. It is, moreover, unjust that those very regions that have been defined in the Constitution as requiring special safeguards for their economic and social survival should be subjected to population pressures which, if not restrained, can only result in their cultural annihilation.

Also by Nari Rustomji

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Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs