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SITUATING TRIBES IN NORTH-EAST INDIA : A DISCURSIVE NOTE*

SATYA BRATA CHAKRABARTI

A serious student of North-East India Studies is automatically committed to an understanding of the region based on an intellectual exercise of multi-disciplinary discourses. In order to grasp the broad subject being proposed for the present discussion one reasonably prefers to refer to a longer time frame. The complex historico–political and socio-economic contexts of the social formations in this region evolved during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods before taking the present shape. A quick overview could also appear to be inadequate in fulfilling the task in hand. In this wide spectrum one is naturally expected to delimit his domains of discussion under a time constrained compulsion. Therefore, in view of all limitations imposed, I will very briefly try to draw a rough contour of the whole range of diverse factors entailing history , economy, polity and society including culture of the region and its people.

To start with, we may refer to some meaningful observations made by a geographer Joseph Swartzberg in a discussion on Regions and Regionalism in South Asian Studies. He observed, " The word 'region' has significantly different meaning in various contexts. It is most important that scholars understand these meanings when dealing with regions in an area like South-Asia, where such a remarkable degree of regional diversity exists, where so many old instituted boundaries have been swept away in the wake of independence, where people's perceptions of what constitute the new regional order are so often at variance and still in a state of flux, and where regional sentiment often runs dangerously, if not suicidally.'' We may now juxtapose another set of equally meaningful observation made by Nirmal Kumar Bose, an acclaimed anthropologist cum social historian, while guiding an All India Survey on Culture Traits. He found that "the spread of material cultures of the people of rural India cut across the linguistic divides of the existing geographical regions and there is more unity in India's variety than one is likely to admit in moment of forgetfulness''.

The historical, political, geographical, economic and socio- cultural realities of the region that we know of as North-East India today perhaps can be fruitfully captured between the two sets of germane observations of two very renowned scholars cited above. People in general and scholars on North-East India in particular, by and large, know how the present eight administrative state units have evolved by stages since the rule of the Ahom Kings for about 600 years beginning in the early thirteenth century. The annexation of Assam was

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done by the British colonizers in 1826. Assam initially became a non-regulated province of the Indian empire in 1874 with the Chief Commissioner as the Head. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal was thus relieved of his duties. Lord Curzon decided to combine eastern district of Bengal with Assam by renaming it Eastern Bengal and Assam which was reversed in 1912. Following the Govt. of India Act, 1919 Assam was granted the status of a Governor's province. The colonial rulers experimented in many ways through a policy of 'Non-interference' and proceeded through a 'Forward Policy' till the taking over of full economic and political control over the region between 1865-1914. After the enactment of the Govt. of India Act 1935, there remained virtually three spatial enclaves in the whole region, namely Brahmaputra-Surma Valley, excluded and partially excluded areas, such as some outlying hilly terrain of Assam and North-East Frontier region, and the two princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Later, the Constituent Assembly following the recommendation of the Cabinet Mission set up an Advisory Committee in 1946 under the Chairmanship of Sri Gopinath Bardoloi, the premier of Assam to look into the question of the tribals and the excluded areas. This subcommittee's recommendations formed the basis of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, 1950, which provided the safeguards of economic and cultural autonomy to the hill tribes of the region. This phase was not always very smooth, and had witnessed turmoil and violence of different magnitude. The Naga movement initially preferred to remain independent of India and rejected the adoption of the Sixth Schedule. Subsequently, the agreement between the Naga Peoples' Convention and the Govt. of India virtually laid down the formation of full-fledged statehood to Nagaland in 1963. The beginning of separating hill states from Assam followed through the decades via Autonomous District Councils, Union Territories and finally reached a stage of granting separate statehood. Thus came Meghalaya in1972, Mizoram in 1986 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. The princely states of Manipur and Tripura were acceded to Indian Union in 1949 and upgraded to statehood in 1972. In the meanwhile the official identity of North-East Region came into being in 1971 with the establishment of North Eastern Council under the Home Ministry, Govt. of India. Sikkim, which attained the status of a state in 1975, was added in the conglomeration of the earlier seven sisters, namely Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh in 2002. This is in brief the history of emergence of hill states in North-East India.

To a general observer remaining out of North –East India, the region primarily presents two archetypal dichotomies. One, the beautiful landscape with diverse flora and fauna, a place of colourful people with cultural excellence and community bond, unique and favourable land-man ratio, distinctly identifiable indigenous family based art and craft and so on and so forth. And second, a politically disturbed region with lot of insurgent activities and drug trafficking, low level of technology, poor communication network and the resultant isolation and so on.

In the earlier administrative reports of the colonial rulers (for example, Alexander Mackenzie's History of the Relations of the Govt. with the Hill Tribes of North-East Frontier of Bengal, 1884) Assam and its entire strength of hill areas in the east were known as the land of jungles in blanket term and its people as savage, primitive and uncivilized and virtually isolated and backward till 1930s. This ethnocentric value loaded assessment of the people by their colonial masters interestingly got reflected even in the debates argued out by the non-tribal members of the Constituent Assembly during 1947-49 while discussing about granting of autonomy to the hill people. What remained apparently unemphasised are: a section of the same so called savage and uncivilized people met the Simon Commission in Assam in 1929 and placed their grievances before a Royal Commission. The level of their consciousness and intellectual preparedness would be revealed from the memoranda submitted by them to the Commission; this region on account of its having 4500 miles of international boundary with Tibet, Burma (now Myanmar), East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) already created a vulnerable trade zone ; the existence of silk road would bear testimony to this fact which provided a channel of commodity transfer from one area to the other from East to West Asia starting from China to Mediterranean Sea involving areas like Tibet, Bhutan, Burma and Indo-China and their people; further, this region accommodated a number of migrant transborder communities linking a social network based on kin and clan affiliation extended to South- East Asia apart from the large scale exodus from the neighbouring countries due to the enlargement of huge cultivable land and plantation areas in Assam. The other formidable reason of later migration of people was the partition of the country in 1947.

Various dimensions of the great diversities and divides of the present day North-East India such as, historical, economic, ecological, social, political, cultural and religious, inter-stitch a unique human mosaic in space and time. It is here that we get about 200 of India's 635 tribal communities and about 175 spoken languages out of 325 Indian languages with a dominant trend of Mongolian strain and variants of Tibeto-Burman speech. We get even now patri-matri structural pattern in social relations; clan /community ownership over basic resources like land and forest, traditional political governance and ideally opposed parallel authority structure in the traditional political institutions vis-à-vis the modern political institutions and so on. A geographical space of 2,55, 037 sq. km. occupying a total of 8% of the country and having 4% of the country's total population bearing a vibrant history and rich cultural heritage, certainly warrant our attention not only for an academic research but also for its important bearing on the country's all round development. This is a region which has produced extra ordinary excellence in almost all aspects of life – art and architecture, culture, performing arts, academics, politics, literature, human liberty and so on.

Considering the importance of the region, the Govt. of India instituted a separate Ministry in 2001 for the Development of North–East India (DONER) with liberal financial allocations

from time to time . The initiation of the Look East Policy since the early 1990s was another massive venture in these directions. In its dynamics , the present North-East India has been exposed to all the emergent global forces of the 21st century in the midst of a segregation-integration syndrome, a popular debate on the status of the tribes between Verrier Elwin on the one side and G.S Ghurye on the other. The region has been undergoing a phenomenal transformation – both slowly in certain socio-cultural aspects and rather rapidly in secondary and tertiary aspects of the economy in the face of a politically charged insurgency infested occasional outbursts. This is not only limited to the so-called terrorist outfits among the hill tribes alone, but gradually strategized by the plains tribes of the region as well with the trend of internalization of the external issues and externalization of the internal issues.

The eastern region of the country being the gateway and contagious to the North-Eastern region should play its part in analyzing these changes with a comprehensive understanding based on a multi-disciplinary exchange of notes. Some efforts were already initiated at the Asiatic Society long back. A few more academic bodies are gradually coming up with this objective in view. Late Pannalal Dasgupta and a few others took initiative in 1966 for a dialogue with some hill leaders, spokesmen of some underground groups, scholars, administrators across the table in a seminar organized in Calcutta University. It is time that we pick up the thread in a real follow up orientation. Therefore, the present venture of the three collaborating institutes is the most welcome step for which they deserve our deep appreciation. Personally, I remain beholden to the organizers of this seminar for very kindly providing me this rare opportunity to share my concern this morning with all of you.

Bio-Profile of the Author
General Secretary, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata
Former Deputy Director
Anthropological Survey of India
Email: sbchakraborti@gmail.com