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BEING FACE TO FACE WITH REALITY : EVOLVING RESEARCH STRATEGIES FOR INDIA'S NORTHEAST*

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The Concept Note of a recently held seminar on India's Northeast asks for revisiting our research strategies for the region, makes a clarion call for walking away from the traditionally followed practice of viewing the reality through our narrow disciplinary window and highlights the importance of multidisciplinary research.[1] For reasons to be explained below, I think window serves as an apt metaphor to describe how a discipline views the reality and with what effects. I will argue that the traditional practice of viewing the reality through one's own disciplinary window has its devastating consequences for research in general and Northeast Studies in particular.[2] Borrowing from Mao Zedong who used the phrase albeit in a completely different context, this paper makes a call for 'bombarding the headquarters' hitherto being preserved by the disciplines and disciplinary practices. Due to obvious limitations of space, I propose to confine myself to three sets of criticisms. The concluding part underlines the need for transcending the disciplinary boundaries and asks for being face to face with the reality instead of viewing it through the window.

The Framed Vision

A window gives us only a framed vision – a vision that is governed by its own rules and protocols. A window offers us a frame through which the object of research is viewed. As such it allows us to view certain things as much as it does not allow us to view certain other things. Thus to cite an instance, the incident of a stranger driving his vehicle though a kindergarten school compound and in the process moving down four little children playing there may be described in all different ways by researchers owing their allegiance to as many disciplines. An anthropologist might be interested in highlighting that the driver of the vehicle was black while the children were whites and the incident took place in a city, a student of Law and Public Administration might be eager to inform us that traffic law is lax here and that there is not enough policemen or electronic surveillance in the city. A social historian will not miss the point that the city had a long history of racial riots. A political scientist on the other hand might find the fact that the driver and the parents of the children are hardcore cadres of two rivalling political parties. It is possible to say that (a) all of them are true or (b) even wrong or (c) one is or some are true while others are wrong. Views acquired through diverse

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disciplinary windows thus become exercises in fiction without any corresponding attempt at exchanging our notes and arriving at some meaningful conclusions.

Let us take 'tribe' as an example. 'Tribe' is a crucial concept informing most of our researches on the Northeast. Public administration and Law seek to understand 'tribe' as a community that figures in the schedule officially maintained for the purpose. For example, Rajbanshis in Assam were regarded as an OBC (Other Backward Class) until very recently. Now they have been reclassified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) although the Koch-Rajbanshis continue to be classified as an OBC. The categories of ST and OBC are mutually exclusive, for, the Rajbanshis cannot be both OBC and ST at the same time. In West Bengal the Rajbanshis – mostly living in the six districts of North Bengal - continue to be scheduled as a caste (SC), not a tribe. In the neighbouring state of Bihar, they are classified as an OBC. In Bangladesh, Rajbanshis are recognized as a linguistic minority while in Nepal they are regarded as a *janjati* or ethnic community. The window of Public Administration and Law categorizes the object in no uncertain terms.

A sociologist will find such definitive categorizations flippant - if not naïve. Rajbanshi identity has historically remained fluid and it becomes difficult for us to put them into any of the categories suggested by the students of Law and Public Administration. Sociological research on the Rajbanshis of North Bengal may be instructive for us. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Rajbanshis hitherto classified as a tribe with a genealogy tracing them to the Koches and Koch dynasty ruling the kingdom of Cooch Behar asked for their Kshatriya status. There was the mass ceremony of Kshatriyazation at Debiganj by the river Karatoya about that time when over 10000 Rajbanshis participated in the ceremony under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Barma – the pioneer of modern Rajbanshi resurgence - and started wearing sacred thread.

On 27 Magh 1311 BS, the Rajbanshis first organized the ceremony of adopting sacred thread by the river Karatoya at Debiganj in the district of Jalpaiguri under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Barma. The claim to Kshatriyahood continues to be as strong especially amongst a section of Rajbanshi intellectuals. Sukhobilas Barma refers to a postcard (dated 4 August 2001) which he received from one of those who had heard two or three of his addresses to the community. The writer sharply reacted against the current attempts at conferring Dalit identity on the Rajbanshis and reaffirmed their Kshatriya identity:

> I have heard your lectures in two or three meetings. Do not bring in the Dalit context – whatever opinion you express about the Kamatapuris, Rajbanshis can never be that of the Dalits. We are the ruling race of this region. We have our political history which the Bengali Bhatiyas (people from the downstream or the Southerners) had never had. If we cry out identifying ourselves as Dalits, the Bhatiyas will hate us more. Do not go to any assembly of the Dalits, do not bring in the Rajbanshis to any context that will add to our indignity. The poor amongst us have been taking the advantage of reservation – let them; but do not enhance our ignominy by claiming us as Dalits.

By all accounts Rajbanshis' search for Kshatriyahood met with little success inasmuch as the upper castes hardly had ever accorded recognition to their claim while many from their own community were insistent on re-invoking and retaining their tribal identity. The immigration of 'the upper caste gentry' guided as they were by the Brahmanical values - from outside North Bengal – brought about some sort of a tectonic shift in the society in a way that the Rajbanshis 'failed to get a respectable position in the status estimation of these immigrant caste groups'. On the other hand, Debendra Nath Barma - an intellectual from the community - observes that Rajbanshis are 'in reality' – not Kshatriyas – but belong to the Indo-Mongoloid family of races. The followers of Manu (*Manuwadis*) have 'imposed Brahmanical culture on them' (D. N. Barma 2009:21) and the Rajbanshis were 'inspired to intensively incorporate Brahmanical values and practices for a purified social image'. By 1947 the search for Kshatriya-hood, according to Basu, 'lost its vigour and dynamism'.

The Window Hopping

Disciplinary windows open to those objects that are taken as fixed and frozen. For, in order that they figure within the frame of the window, they cannot or are not allowed to move. What about the moving objects that are too mobile to be captured within the frame of the window? Social objects constantly travel across windows: they more often than not come into the frame and go out of frame. Until very recently, insurgency was regarded as a subject of Political Economy and Political Science. The causes and conditions explaining the emergence of insurgencies and their perpetuation attracted a good deal of research. Besides, sociologists also focused on the social processes underlying the insurgents' construction of ethnic identity, their appeal or lack of it to the larger community they claim to represent and so forth. Now, hardly ever insurgency is considered as their subject. It has become a subject of Administration and Security and Strategic Studies. The emphasis is now on how we tackle (the menace of) insurgency and with what legal repertoire and coercive apparatus. In fact, the argument that is now gaining ground is that development can trump up insurgency and violence.

Much in the same manner one can raise the uncomfortable question: Do we see the same object as we see it from different disciplinary windows? Does not how we see determines what we see? We may remind ourselves of Sartre's famous example. A researcher interested in watching how a couple conducts and behaves may decide to interview couple inside an open parlour. But the same will behave differently when closeted in a bedroom observed secretly through an eye hole. As one changes from one window to another, one's research findings also keep changing in a way that one finds difficult to match one with the other.

The Concept of Raij

Let us take the Assamese concept of *Raij* or public as an example. The *Chandrakanta Abhidhan* (Goswami 2012:752) defines it as a body that is held together through some clan or kinship ties and unlike any ordinary collectivity of individuals, Raij is considered to be politically active – always in the forefront of a struggle or a movement.

Historical-Anthropological or Social-Anthropological writings on r*aij* by Manorama Sharma or Maheswar Neog, for instance, point out how the *raij* was held together through strong clan and kinship ties towards the end of the nineteenth century when Assam – particularly the Upper Assam was witnessing a series of peasant rebellions. The basis of the solidarity was traditional clans and kinship system. Maheswar Neog has done extensive research on the role of the Vaishnavite Satras in Moamaria rebellion. Histroical writings are very important at this point. The sudden change in the land tenure system led to the large scale peasant rebellion not only in Assam but also in North Bengal. Ranajit Das Gupta's study (1992) of Jalpaiguri in the nineteenth century and changing land relations underlines two significant changes: (i) Land was increasingly getting fragmented and farm size registered a sharp decline. Even the town of Siliguri witnessed fragmentation of the jots. (ii) As the market forces started penetrating into the hitherto placid agrarian economy, classes were about to replace the old clan and kinship ties. The older clan and kinship ties served as a glue in the mobilization of the peasantry. Although anthropologically rich and historically fertile field of research exist with enormous political significance, political scientists hardly found any interest in conducting research on the subject. They continue to be overwhelmed by the western categories and concepts and try albeit without much success to mechanically apply them to the Northeast. I have not come across any Political Science writing on the concept of *Raij*.

Raij seems to have acquired a new lease of life in a context when the neo-liberal course of development now being underway has taken a toll on the people threatening their life and livelihood across the board. *Raij* is now constituted as a body that cuts across ethnicities, clan and kinship ties and transcends ethnic boundaries.

We conducted a series of case studies and interviews in Gerukamukh area in Upper Assam – the hub of anti-dam protest in the Northeast - organized by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and a few other organizations. While recent violence in Lower Assam is predicated primarily on the demand for homeland - whether for driving out the 'outsiders' or against being driven out by them - the movement in Gerukamukh marks the arrival of a new subject in the wake of a series of developmental policies initiated since the early 1990s. The interviews were conducted across various age groups and communities like the Mishings, Deuris, Ahoms, Assamese, Nepalis, Hajongs, Bodos and other Tea tribes like the Kurmis etc.

Most of our respondents extend unflinching support to the anti-dam protests – although not all of them actively take part in them. When asked why they support it, all of them have been unequivocal in pointing out that the issue is integral to 'security of their life' (*jiwanar suraksha*). They argue that unless their life is not secure, development becomes 'unthinkable'. What will they do with development if they are not alive? Economic development or for that matter any other kind of development has no meaning unless there is security of life, which according to one respondent, cuts across the ethnic boundaries and is 'greater' (*brihattar swartha*) than economic development for any 'particular' community. When collective survival is under threat, it is imperative that all people irrespective of their ethnicity, creed and community identity come

together and put up a joint (*ekeloge*) resistance and collective (*umaihotiya*) struggle. It is important that 'the public' (*raij*) across ethnicities and nationalities work together as a collective (*ekgot*). Ensuring the security of life is therefore the topmost priority for them.

While a whole diversity of groups and communities constitutes 'the people of Assam', the coming into being of 'the people of Assam' as a collective entity is a complex task as envisaged by our respondents. *Thai* in Assamese is a word used popularly to refer to one's immediate dwelling place and neighbourhood as distinguishable from homeland. It is interesting to note that a distinction is made between one's identity as a dweller in a particular *thai* (like Gogamukh) on one hand and one's identity as a member of a particular ethnic community on the other. An ethnic community within an area is spread across many such *thai*s – each *thai* in effect has its own importance for those who inhabit it. While autonomy disunites people and privileges one community over another, the anti-dam protest unites all of them.

Insofar as threat is perceived as 'real' by all of them, dam and development strike at the physical body that exists as 'the tabernacle of dynamism, its potential' and is 'not yet objectified'. The body refuses to make itself available for the forms and technologies of developmental governance as it fears death and develops a stake in the practice of life. The potential of body as a living organism never completely exhausts itself by surrendering to the call of death, but constantly interrupts the forms and technologies of developmental governance. Never before in the history of the Northeast has physical body become so much of a security concern for the people as it is now. This is not to say that physical body has never been under threat in the region's history. The recent violence in Lower Assam (July-November 2012) points to how physical existence particularly of the common people was under threat. But the important point is that for every life lost, an epitaph is written by the particular community that loses its member and therefore there is mourning and pledge to revenge for her death. Processions were taken out with the dead bodies of those who lost their lives as a result of the ethnic violence. The dead is remembered as a martyr. But when a dam bursts and washes out communities and groups, there is life that is lost 'without being sacrificed' and it spares none to mourn the dead. As dams are perceived to threaten the physical survival, developmental governance does not 'realize the potential, but contradicts it'.

The Concept of Neighbourhood

Sociological research on the concept of *ghar* or home in Assam points out that neighbours are an extension of the family with family being the nucleus that spreads out to engulf the neighbours. The neighbours are also an integral part of the family with of course varying degree of intensity. Sanjib Baruah recalls that in the case of the bereavement of one of his family members the entire locality descended on their home. This might appear to be offending to a westerner and might be read as an intrusion into their private space. But for an Assamese living in Assam this was considered as perfectly normal insofar as the Assamese hardly make the distinction between the private and public wherever neigbours are concerned. *Amar*

gharkhan is the Assamese phrase used to describe both the family and neighbourhood thereby completely disregarding their otherwise western connotation.

Literary and anthropological writings dwell on how the neighbours survive even when they are divided into two or more nation-states. They concentrate on the strategies the divided people deploy while coping with the new reality of neighbous being separated by two or more nation-states. A good deal of literature in this direction points to the strategies of negotiation – if not subversion with the borders that suddenly keep the neighbours apart. This often leads one to plead for reviving the old, pre-Partition kinship and social ties that were torn asunder – thanks to Partition (1947) and consequent reorganization of international borders. In a paper based on dense ethnographic documentation, Sanjeeb Kakoty (2008) points to the ethnic ties and cultural continuities that seem to have survived the demarcation of India-Bangladesh border in East Khasi Hills in the wake of Partition. He also records in detail the continuing social and economic practices that appear to militate against the nationalist project of bringing the territory under State control and nationalization of space. Robbins Burling argues that the Garos of Madhupur, now in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, despite many of the visible differences with their brethren living in the Garo Hills of Maghalaya in India feel that the place across the international borders is the land of their ultimate refuge. Thus, when they were attacked by the Pakistan army during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971, the 15,000 Garos crossed over to India (Burling in Raha & Ghosh eds.1998:360). While social ties and practices of this nature do not show signs of disappearance at least in the short run, the argument that we need to revive them on the ground that they predate Partition often sounds impractical and ahistorical. The reality of the post-Partition State cannot easily be wished away.

Post-Westphalian writings on International Relations on the other hand tend to point out how nation-states and international borders separating one from another are a new reality that cannot be undone. Although hitherto conducted studies in International Relations in the region cannot claim any specificity of its own, they follow the western paradigm and are busy underlining how nation-states establish their hegemony in the bordering people and how older clan and ethnic ties cutting across the borders pose a threat to national security and sovereignty of our nation. Illegal migration in the Northeast is perceived by the scholars of International Relations as a threat characteristic of the fledgling state of our nation.

Now that there is the realization that borders will remain porous, there is also the sense that nation-states will have to adjust to the new realities, by way of devising means of allowing exit and entry without any threat being posed to national security. One notices a whole range of intermediate institutions between a fully enclosed nation-state and a nation state that is fully integrated into the global economy - the latest in the series is the West Bengal Government's recent declaration that four border *haats* (periodic markets) will be opened along the Indo-Bangladesh border. International Relations in the Northeast as a discipline is likely to gain immensely by drawing on both Anthropology and History, by appreciating how the whole idea of neighbourhood has undergone a change in the discourse of the nation-state

in India, particularly since Independence. In the absence of any conversation between disciplines, International relations in the Northeast has remained perpetually underdeveloped and turned into a mere rehash of western theories and concepts. I propose to draw an outline of what a concept of neighbourhood might look like by being synergized with cognate disciplines as it passed through at least three distinct stages.

a. Nations-in-Civilization

The enterprise of building civilizational nation was not free from its paradox: Incessant migration, thanks to her open-arm policy during the initial years, destabilizes the demographic balance, poses a threat to the language and culture of the natives (as the large bulk of the Assamese Population felt and accordingly organized the longest ever anti-foreigners' agitation during 1979-1985) and adversely affects the democratic structure while enfranchising the immigrants who eventually turn into a majority in many of the electoral constituencies and threaten to run the Government.

Accordingly, India's commitment to civilizational nation is seen to be conveniently translated into the modest project of extending through diplomatic means safety and security to the minorities in their respective countries so that they do not have to migrate to the neighbouring country. Thus begins the era of territorializing the nation by way of scaffolding it within the given state-territorial space with the overarching assumption that the nations of Asia inhabit a common civilizational space. The newly born Indian state is thus called upon to invent its territorial particularity hitherto alien to it (like passport system was introduced vis-à-vis East Pakistan well after India became independent) and also to ensure that it is not overrun by whosoever is forced to migrate from other countries.

As Nehru observed back in 1948: "Our duty to those, who will be in peril in East Bengal, will be to protect them in their own country and to give them sheer shelter in our own country if there is no other way and the situation so demands." Nehru-Liaquat Pact (1950) is a classic example of this. The Pact signed in 1950 and named after the premiers of these two countries imposed on them the mutual obligation of providing safety and security to the minorities of their respective countries so that they did not feel threatened in their own country and have to migrate to another.

If diplomatic means fail, India may even have to fight a war in order to ensure safety and security of not only the minorities but also the majorities living within the neighbouring countries. The distinction between the majority and minority loses its meaning insofar as both are perceived as potential building blocs of Asian civilization. War is of course an extreme option but certainly not uncommon as was aptly exemplified by the Bangladesh war (1971). The Indian state was keen on protecting the people including both the minorities and the majority against the genocide unleashed on them by the Pakistani forces by fighting a full-scale war. The prolonged eight month-long genocide resulted in the flight of approximately 10 million refugees to India. In the words of Myron Weiner, 'the refugee flow was one of the causes of war, not its consequence'.

b. Civilizational Neighbourhood

While Prime Minister Vajpayee was right in pointing out that one cannot choose one's neighbours, it does not mean that neighbourhood policy of a nation is necessarily guided by what Derrida calls 'hospitality beyond any horizon'. Nor is it informed by any kind of radical otherness. Contemporary writings on the theory of neighbourhood gesture towards the situated nature of the relation between neighbours and the limited possibilities that such situatedness offers for framing and reframing of a country's neighbourhood policy in line with one's national interest. Civlizational framework thus gets reduced to national interest. Neighbourhood policy in recent years slowly transforms both civilizational nation and nations-in-civilization into 'civilizational neighbours'.

India's invocation of the phrase 'Civilizational Asian neighbours' (as Shri Pranab Mukherjee, the then Minister of External Affairs put it) - while making a plea for India looking east towards Southeast Asia - is by now widely known to us. The series of policies that has been under way since the early 1990s and is now generically called 'India's Look East policy' is couched in the imperative of opening up to the 'powerhouse' economies of South East Asia on the ground that we had had long and enduring ties with them throughout history and they happen to be our 'Civilizational Asian Neighbours'.

While at one level, the policy privileged the movement of goods and services over that of the neighbours meeting each other, it carefully eschews any reference to India's most powerful Western neighbour and clearly makes a preference for trumping it by the eastern ones. Very recently, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Hon'ble President of India, in his address to the legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh on 29 November 2013 reiterates the same point:

Arunachal Pradesh is an integral and important part of the Northeast region of India and a core stakeholder in India's Look East foreign policy. India has long standing civilizational bonds with its neighbours in South and South East Asia as well as in East Asia. The Northeast of India provides a natural bridge between us and South East Asia. The essential philosophy of our Look East Policy, is that India must find its destiny by linking itself more and more with its Asian partners and the rest of the world. We seek to make our neighbours partners in our development. We believe that India's future and our own best economic interests are served by closer integration with Asia.

The newly introduced concept of civilizational neighbourhood marks a realist turn in India's civilizational policy. Huntington sounds realist when he argues that civilizations – unlike the Indian perception - do not differ softly, but clash violently in our era of reckoning with disastrous consequences for mankind in order to decide who would rise over whom or maybe perish mutually. Ultimately, as he envisages, it is a zero-sum clash that decides the destiny of civilizations.

The Researcher as a Stranger

Looking through the window implies that the researcher/observer situates herself inside a a closed space and she looks through the window from inside. The researcher is advised not

to associate herself with the observed and keep safe distance from the object being observed by her. The distance is the mark of the objectivity of her research. The positioning of the researcher is important.

Objectivity understood as a function of keeping safe distance from the object of observation poses two sets of problems: (a) observance of objectivity is likely to amount to 'objectification' of the researcher and (b) the principle has a tendency of turning live social actors into mere 'objects' of research. My experience as a researcher in the otherwise highly conflict-prone area of India's Northeast testifies that all others and not just my respondents have always been very nice and decent to me across the board as much as I have been nice and decent to all of them. Being an outsider my respondents and interlocutors often became overtly concerned about my safety and security. At a time when I was yet to pick up Assamese, many of them advised me not to take public bus where I would be required to communicate in the same and it would be possible for others to make out my identity as I would fumble over my Assamese. Now I must make the anecdotal confession that the imperative of being nice and decent to others holds me from expressing my ethical position on any of the ongoing conflicts. As I strove hard for becoming 'objective' I could realize that I was as it were exercising control over my own self in my attempt at becoming what I am not – at turning against my very being. At the end of the day I note that I become in the process a product of my doctoral work and the doctoral work is not a product of mine.

What social scientists delineate, as social reality is the product of the tools, instruments and categories that they employ in order to make sense of and/or change it. They define social reality as a 'field' that they consider worthy of their investigation and research. Thus, social reality is made synonymous with the field. There is no social reality outside the field. Social science tools, instruments and categories in other words, contribute to the construction of the field. The gaze of social science could be excruciatingly painful as it might take a toll on human life. Chuni Kotal – the first lady graduate amongst the Lodhas of West Midnapore (West Bengal) – classified by the colonial authority as a 'criminal tribe' – who took admission into the postgraduate Department of Anthropology in a state-run University in West Bengal committed suicide reportedly because of the dense research gaze that was cast on her. Chuni's brother observed in disgust: "why do they (the researchers) visit us? To see how we walk, eat, drink, dress, get pregnant or defecate?" Unable to take it any longer, as his brother writes, she perhaps took her life.

Social Science disciplines offer only a narrow window to view reality that is only a slice of the whole – not the whole - at the cost of many other realities. We as social scientists are cocooned inside our safe fortresses – never allowing us to come face to face with the reality, confront and negotiate it and most importantly foreground it in our research. While it is important to 'bombard the headquarters' that has hitherto kept us imprisoned to it, we can make a beginning not by hopping across windows, looking through all of them and blending the images thus obtained, but by simply shattering the fortress and cutting across their boundaries.

Notes

[1] The seminar was organized by the Kolkata Society for Asian Studies on 8 March 2014 at Maulana Abul Kalam Azad College, Kolkata. I thank the members of the Society for having invited me to deliver the Inaugural Address. However, I am alone responsible for the lapses, if there are any. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from original non-English sources are mine.

[2] Northeast Studies as a separate branch of Social Science has emerged particularly since the late 1980s in such institutions as Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University. I had the opportunity of writing on the history of its emergence elsewhere (Das 1997:13-33).

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