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Winter 2010

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/haokip/2/

Man and Society
Vol. VII, Winter 2010: 86-99.

India's North-East Policy: Continuity and Change

Thongkholal Haokip

Northeast India is the home of numerous ethnic nationalities. B.G. Verghese (2004: 280) describes the region as "another India, the most diverse part of a most diverse country, very different, relatively little known and certainly not too well understood, once a coy but now turbulent and in transition within the Indian transition." Even though the Northeastern region shares certain problems like ethnic unrests, insurgency, immigration, drug trafficking, communication gap, etc., there are severe intra-regional differences in socio-economic issues and ethno-political aspirations. Not only the hills and valleys are at different level of socio-economic development; the urban and rural areas of the valley exhibit social and economic disparities. The region is in fact, one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse region in Asia and each state has its diverse cultures and traditions. J.B. Fuller wrote in 1909 that, "The province of Assam at the far northeastern corner of India is a museum of nationalities."

The diversity of the region has been one of its uniqueness and a paradise for anthropologists and ethnographers. However, this diverseness

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makes it extremely difficult to formulate a policy that can be followed uniformly throughout the region, although the region is often mistaken as a homogenous entity of tribals settling in the hills.

Since independence the Indian government has adopted several policies towards the region. Many of these policies have changed in the past decades. Scholars of the region often question as to how a country have a policy towards its own. In Mrinal Miri's (2001) word, "To whom, or for whom, do you have a policy? What is the object of a policy? ... The Northeast is a part of this country and at the same time we think that the people of the Northeast should be made the object of a policy." He reiterates that human beings do not have a policy towards family members or friends. To be made an object of policy implies that the peoples of the region are not in a relationship of human concerns such as love, friendship, understanding of the other, but in a relationship of the manager and the managed where the idea of management and the idea of a policy are almost the same (Miri 2002: 920). Policies are made to derive some advantage and manipulate for benefit.

However, it is true that the Indian government has adopted several policies towards the region since independence and many of these policies have changed in the past decades. Such policies were measures to solve the complect problems of alienation, insurgency, ethnicity/cultural identity and to bring about economic development in the Northeastern region.

Nehru-Elwin period

With the birth of the Indian union a debate on the future of the hill areas of the Northeastern region and their politico-administrative character began. The relative isolation of the tribals has been considered as one of the problem of nation-building. The attitude of the new Indian political leadership has been same as the early colonial mind, that of an amused bewilderment - that of seeing something so exotic and so far so remote (Dutta: 290).

In response to the worldwide debate as to what should be the approach of the developed complex societies towards the simple tribal structures coexisting within the same political boundary, two different alternatives to the policy of isolation, i.e. either assimilation or integration,

have been discussed. The main question is whether to establish unity by integration or by assimilation. In view of the fact that tribal socio-economic structures, culture and value systems, ways of life are totally different from that of the non-tribal complex societies, any attempt to toward forced assimilation may be counter productive in the long run - the policy of integration instead of assimilation got world-over recognition from both the academic as well as administrative circles (Das: 1995: 76). Independent India also adopted this integrationist approach towards tribal minorities. Assimilation is the loss of ethnic attributes of minorities as a result of interaction and its absorption into the dominant group would lead to "antagonism, tension and increasing alienation of each from the other." (Rao 1976: 546) Integration calls for political, economic and administrative integration within a framework of cultural plurality where minorities can join the majorities without losing their linguistic, religious and cultural identity.

The policies of the Government of India towards the Northeastern region have changed remarkably over the years. The first one and half decade of India's policy towards the Northeastern region can be described as "Nehruvian policy framework" or "Nehru-Elwin policy" where quick administrative expansion associated with the revivalist-protectionist approach towards tribal development in the hill areas was followed. To quote Nari Rustomji (1983: 3): "The Government of India's policy vis-à-vis the tribal people of the frontiers have been humane and sympathetic."

Since the early 1950s Jawaharlal Nehru had realised the necessity of a tribal policy to go beyond the political integration of the Northeastern people with India. Verrier Elwin took an active part in the process of formulation of Indian tribal policy. He can be traced as a social philosopher and policy maker on the tribal affairs of Northeast India. For Elwin "it was not the question of reviving anything. It is more a problem of introducing change without being destructive of the best values of old life" in Northeast India (Elwin 1988: 295). He said that:

> *The old controversy about zoos and museums has long been dead… we do not want to preserve the tribesmen as museum specimen but equally we do not want to turn them to clowns in a circus. We do not want to stop the clock of progress, but we do not want to see*

> *that it keeps the right time. We do not accept the myth of Noble Savage; but we do not want to create a class of Ignoble serfs (Elwin 1989: 246).*

The anthropological approach of the government views Northeast India as a "phenomenally diverse mosaic of cultures which have to be preserved and enriched." (Ramesh, 2005) It has accepted the right of tribals to retain their way of life and identity and has sought to integrate them through democratic means into the federal frame of the Constitution of India (Sachdeva, 2004). Therefore, the post-colonial Indian state followed the British policy of Inner Line Regulation within the Nehruvian policy framework, which ensures non-interference from the people of the plains and also carve out an area of unimpeded self-development for the tribes of the region (Ahmed, Biswas, 2004: 3). Through the various acts and regulations it is viewed that protection of the tribal identity and culture was already assured and the important problem was how to give the tribes the good things without destroying the good things of theirs. However, due to special constitutional arrangements, historical background as well as geographical location, the central government has been trying to integrate the Northeastern region with the national economy through a special policy framework.

Jawaharlal Nehru was not against the modernisation of tribes but wanted that the process should be gradual. In 1960 he wrote that, "Political and economic forces impinged upon them and it was not possible or desirable to isolate them. Equally undesirable, it seems to me, was to allow these forces to function freely and upset their whole life and culture, which had so much good in them." (Quoted in Raha, 1998: 123-124). In foreword to the second edition of Elwin's book, *A Philosophy for NEFA* in 1959, Nehru spelt out his "Panch Sheel" or five cardinal principles concerning the Government's attitude towards the tribals in order to prevent the loss of identity and culture, and also for their development:

- People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in everyway their own traditional arts and culture.
- Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.
- We should try to train and build up a team of their own people

- to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will, no doubt, be needed, especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.
- We should not over administer these areas or overwhelm them with multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through, and not in rivalry to, their social and cultural institutions.
- We should judge results, not by statistics of the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is involved.

Nehru was totally against the assimilation of tribals with the mainstream Indian culture. He felt that this would have disastrous effects on the tribals of Northeast India who would ultimately lose their own culture and tradition and would put an end of their arts and craft, dance and music and their ways of living (Raha, 1998: 125). Elwin also expressed Nehru views: "We may well succeed in uprooting them from their way of life with its standards and disciplines and give them nothing in its place." (Elwin, 1960: 54) Verrier Elwin was against making the tribals of Northeast India "a second rate copy" of the mainland Indians. He felt that two extreme courses should be avoided: one was to treat them as anthropological specimens for study and the other was to allow them to be engulfed by the masses of Indian humanity.

Therefore, it can be seen that there has been recognition of specific tribal and ethnic identities through the policies of the state, but such a policy was not complemented with adequate support of capability building in the region (Ahmed & Biswas, 2004: 3). The Nehruvian policy of leaving them alone did not ensure appropriate self-development.

Aftermath of the Chinese Aggression in 1962

There was drastic change in India's policy towards the Northeastern region in the early 1960s. During the first decade of India's independence Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wanted India to be a leading proponent of decolonisation and act as a neutral mediator on global issues, which gave him recognition from the Afro-Asian countries as the Third World leader. However, the defeat against Chinese aggression in 1962 was the first setback in India's foreign policy. It was an eye opener for the national

government and leaders that such a neglected area could shake the whole of the country and change the course of India's security and even foreign policy. This brought back the colonial approach considering the region as a "frontier" that needs to be protected and defended militarily.

The Nehru-Elwin policy, which was followed during the first one and half decade since independence, came under sharp criticism. There was a wide recognition that administrative penetration into the hill areas of the Northeastern states was minimal or not satisfactory. The revivalist-protectionist approach was dominated by an isolationist insinuation and drives a wedge between the tribals and non-tribals as well as hills and plains. The policy began to change since 1963 and largely abandoned subsequently after the death of both the proponents - Nehru and Elwin, in 1964. All developmental efforts by the government, henceforth, were guided by this security related approach. To tighten its grip of control even the remote corner of the Northeast, the Government of India created more administrative machineries. Hence, there was some short of administrative and political development in the region. However, this political and administrative development was not accompanied by corresponding economic development of the region.

The new policy pursued since the 1960s was centered on the assumption that the tribals face problems that are by no means peculiar to themselves. The corollary to this assumption is that they do not require any special design of development other than the one applicable to other parts of India. Thus, two major shifts in the policy pursued can be seen: First, instead of developing a tribe by keeping its linguistic and cultural identity, the focus was now on developing a territorial unit inhabited mostly though not exclusively by the tribals. Secondly, one also notices a perceptible shift from a culture-sensitive design of development to one that takes massive investment and greater reliance on technology as the universal panacea whether or not they are detrimental to tribal identity. Thus, the Nehru-Elwin policy of gradual integration was replaced by the policy of progressive politico-economic and cultural integration of the tribal people in order to speed up their socio-economic development (Das, 2001: 348). The advocator of the isolationist policy during the British rule viz. Dr. Hutton, Perry, Grigson, Robert Reid and Verrier Elwin were severely criticised.

Politics of Political Representation

In the aftermath of Indian independence many tribes of Northeast India started demanding various levels of autonomy and even independent nationhood. Thus, in the early 1970s there was a conception that the region "required political representation; the diverse tribal cultures and diverse sub-nationalities required participation in 'mainstream' democratic process." (Ramesh, 2005) New states were created in the region during this period to fulfill certain ethnic, cultural and political aspirations for self-government among various tribal groups on the idea that they require representation in the democratic process and that once they have voice and representation in the parliamentary democracy, many of their problems would be minimised. As such, Government of India reorganised the political boundary of undivided Assam through a series of Parliamentary Acts enacted during 1962-72, without considering the financial and economic viability. It started with the creation of Nagaland in 1963 comprising of the Naga Hills District of Assam and Tuensang division of North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA). The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 gave birth to one more full-fledged state, i.e., Meghalaya and two Union Territories i.e., Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh (the then NEFA) and conferring statehood to Manipur and Tripura. Though the people of NEFA hardly voiced for a separate state for themselves, the strategic importance of this territory, the growing unrest among the tribal minorities elsewhere in the region, and the failure of Assamese sub-nationalism in accommodating the tribal aspirations - all these factors seemed to have been instrumental in de-linking Arunachal from Assam (Das, 1995: 87). The reorganisation of Northeast India has undoubtedly given the tribals a sense of pride in their separate political status, and the local elite and dominant sections of the middle class have greatly benefited in economic and political terms. The benefits of reorganisation, however, are yet to penetrate down the masses in a satisfactory manner. The liberal allocation of finance by the Centre and the growing deviousness of political life have led to the flow of black money in the region and political defections (Singh, 1987: 139).

Despite the creation of several new states, the basic problem of integration, insurgency and balanced economic development still

remains. Instead of solving problems, it has a cascading affect leading to new demands from other smaller ethnic groups vying different levels of autonomy. Such carving out of the states was a restatement of self-development for the tribes, but the machinery and the governance could not fully attain such goals (Ahmed & Biswas, 2004: 4). Though quick politico-administrative and cultural integration, and rapid economic development was viewed as the necessary pre-condition for the security of the Northeastern borders, most of the resources for the region during this period were directed to defence needs and little could be achieved in the field of economic development.

India's efforts towards rapid politico-administrative and cultural integration were associated with programmes for rapid modernisation of stagnant traditional tribal economies. For rapid economic integration, the region was brought under the sphere of banking activities during this period. Following the recommendations of the Gadgil Study Group of the National Credit Council, and of the Nariman Committee, the Reserve Bank of India formulated the Lead Bank Scheme in 1969 where the State Bank of India was decided to be the lead bank for the hill states of the region. Thus, the policy of progressive integration adopted during the transitional phase was pursued fervently after 1972 and this policy of progressive integration has been implemented in such a massive scale that the line of demarcation between assimilation and integration got blurred.

The Development Syndrome

In the 1980s the Government of India developed a new policy for the Northeastern region, what can be termed as the "Development Paradigm".[1] This policy assumes that if institutions of development were created and money poured into this region, the problems of politics, of society, of ethnic strife, and of integration will be abated. Thus, the 1980s saw a remarkable increase in public expenditure in the region. Several developmental packages were announced by the Prime Ministers in each of their visit to the region.

In 1996 the then Prime Minister of India H.D. Deve Gowda announced an economic package of Rs. 6,100 crore, following his visit to the region. His successor I.K. Gujral endorsed this package. To boost

economic development of the region the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee also announced another package of Rs.10,217 crore in 1998. In October 1996, under the "New Initiatives for North Eastern Region", it was stipulated that at least 10 percent of the budgets of the Central Ministries/Department should be earmarked for the development of Northeastern states. As the expenditure on the Northeast by some Union Ministries during 1997-98 fell short of the stipulated 10 percent target, the NDA government, created a Non-lapsable Central Pool of Resources to support infrastructure development projects in the region. Between 1990-91 and 2002-03, the region received about Rupees 1,08,504 crores (Sachdeva, 2006).

After large sum of money is being poured in as developmental funds the region still has the problems of underdevelopment. One problem that arises is that the developmental packages being left largely unimplemented neutralise the intended impact. This occurs because of poor monitoring, lack of accountability and non-adherence to the situated time frame for project implementation. What need urgent attention is the proper utilisation of the funds and not just the announcement of developmental packages. Some even believe that pumping in money without proper streamlining and utilisation has opium-like effects. The arm of the government, the bureaucrats, must be reoriented to meet the requirements. Wassabir Hussain listed two main reasons why pumping of funds into the region by the Centre have not had the desired impact:

- Leakage of funds at various levels of the government machinery. Development funds making their way into the coffers of the insurgent groups.
- Lack of capacity by the states in the region to absorb the huge quantity of funds in the absence of training and expertise to successfully come up with implementable location-specific projects and the infrastructure to get some of these projects off the drawing board stage (Hussain, 2004).

The "Look East" policy

Of late there is a wide recognition among policy makers and economists of the region that the main stumbling block for economic

development of the Northeastern region is the disadvantageous geographical location (Sachdeva, 2000: 145). The coming of globalisation propagates deterritorialisation and a borderless world which is often associated with economic integration. With 98 percent of its borders with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal, Northeast India has better scope for development in the era of globalisation. As a result, a new policy developed among intellectuals and politicians that one direction the Northeastern region must be looking to as a new way of development lies with political integration with the rest of India and economic integration with the rest of Asia, with East and Southeast Asia in particular as the policy of economic integration with the rest of India did not yield much dividends. With the development of this new policy the Government of India directed its Look East policy towards developing the Northeastern region. This policy is reflected in the *Year End Review 2004* of the Ministry of External Affairs, which stated that: "India's Look East Policy has now been given a new dimension by the UPA Government. India is now looking towards a partnership with the ASEAN countries, both within BIMSTEC and the India-ASEAN Summit dialogue as integrally linked to economic and security interests, particularly for India's East and North East region." (MEA, 2004)

Recognising the advent of globalisation, regional economic cooperation, new policy approaches for development and the massive changes taking place in the domestic and external fronts, the then Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee expounds that Northeast India has enormous potential to exploit by taking "geography as opportunity" (Mukherjee, 2007). He stated that "with the paradigm shift from state centrism to interdependence and global and regional cooperation, India is aware of the geo-economic potential of the North-Eastern region as a gateway to East and South-East Asia." The border areas of countries neighbouring the Northeast are rich in natural resources. They are at different levels of economic and industrial development and having different levels of natural endowments. Hence, the complementarities between them are substantial. The geographical contiguity could facilitate the exploitation of the potential of efficiency seeking restructuring of industry (RIS, 2004: 2).

If the Look East policy is to be pursued fervently it should involve deepening of India's cooperation in trade and investment, technology, transport and communications, energy and tourism with its eastern neighbours. Sanjib Baruah, a staunch proponent of a continental Look East policy, advocated that "India should take more advantage of Northeast India's history and culture as a soft power resource." (Baruah, 2004: 33) This involves reviving the shared historical and cultural ties between the people of Northeast India and Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Therefore, the Government of India's policy towards its Northeastern region has changed over the years. Both external and internal factors are responsible for the formulation and abandonment such policies. The policy of "leaving them alone" to the development initiatives based on state-centric security approach has kept the region isolated and underdeveloped.

The coming of globalisation, regional integration and India's outward looking economy since the early 1990s brought forth the conception that economic integration with the rest of the world would foster political integration of Northeast with the mainland. The current phase of Look East policy marks the beginning of a vibrant relationship on the economic, political and strategic fronts. The economic potentials of this policy emphasises a link to the economic interests of the Northeastern region as a whole. It correctly identifies Northeast India as the gateway to the East and Southeast Asia and it is one major initiative undertaken by the government of India in the present times. The proposed development of the Northeastern region is to be brought in through increased trade and investment and engaging the people of the region in productive and profitable activities to end their alienation. The Look East policy by addressing the peculiarity of the area and the problems involved with it can bring lasting peace and development in the region.

However, when we consider the existing ground realities the growth of border trade between the Northeastern region and neighbouring countries is slow. Except the opening of border trade between

India and Myanmar at Moreh and Champhai, and between India and China at Nathula, and the much hyped 165-km long Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road connecting Tamu and Kalaymyo-Kalewa, which was inaugurated by the then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh on February 13, 2001, nothing significant has happened on the ground. Thus, the Look East policy needs a re-orientation to suit the development interests of the Northeastern region.

The continuation of certain colonial acts and regulations like the Inner Line Regulation in the post-independence period, especially in the globalised new millennium, must be rethinked. Such acts and regulations were designed to serve administrative, economic, strategic and military interests of the colonial government and not in the interests of the needs and aspirations of the people. Though the colonial rule integrated the Northeast with mainland India territorially; their policies, which were enacted in various acts and regulations acted as a barrier and prevented socio-cultural and political interactions between the hill areas of the Northeast with the plains. While everyone in the region wants to enjoy the benefits of globalisation which is partly intended to be implemented in the form of the Look East policy, the Inner Line Regulation can hinder the implementation of the Look East policy. The concerns of the tribals in the region like protecting identity, culture and land can be done in other ways without restricting the movement of people across state borders.

Note

[1] I borrowed the term "Development Paradigm" from Jairam Ramesh, Union *Minister* of State (Independent Charge) for Environment and Forests.

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