

MAINSTREAMING INDIA'S NORTH EAST: CHANGING ATTITUDES

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HOW DO WE GO ABOUT IT?

- **Appoint more people from the North East in national institutions of importance.**
- **Rethink the enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)—a draconian, colonial law—in the Northeast. Is there a justification for so many boots on the ground even today?**
- **People of North East India must be made to feel that they have nothing to fear from a dominant “Indian” culture and that several cultures can co-exist in this huge salad bowl.**

The word 'mainstreaming' has had negative connotations for the people of the seven states located in the North Eastern fringes of the country and commonly lumped as 'North East,' as if all the seven states are a homogenous entity. Each of the seven states has unique features. The tribes inhabiting the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Tripura and the Garos of Meghalaya are of Tibeto-Burman origin while the Khasi and Jaintia tribes are of Mon Khmer descent tracing their migration routes to Cambodia. At last count this region has 238 ethnic groups but this number could change as tribes delve into their histories, reclaim their ethnicities and rename themselves. There are several tribes in the hills of Manipur, for instance, who were hitherto members of small tribes but later affiliated themselves to the larger, more dominant 'Naga' tribe, perhaps more out of a need to identify themselves as being different from the Meiteis living in the plains of Manipur who practise a very conservative form of Hinduism called Vaishnavism. There is of course the larger history of conflict where the Naga-dominated areas of Manipur are sought to be brought under the larger homeland of the Nagas called Nagalim which includes the present day state of Nagaland and the hill districts of Manipur. If Nagalim becomes a reality, Manipur will cease to be a state since its area would have been less than one-tenth of what it is at the moment.

The nation-building project of India is a problematic one because it defies the criteria defined by the west, whereby a nation is a sovereign entity, has definite boundaries, a homogenous racial group, a common language besides other factors. India is known for its diversity and should therefore have

modelled its nation building agenda on other more inclusive factors rather than adopt an alien model which considers the more dominant Hindi-speaking groups of northern and central India as being the real representatives of Indian nationhood. Even the Indian parliament and those who have ruled this country for several decades have been from the so-called Hindi heartland who because of their sheer numbers, dominate the parliament and also the ministries. Even the bureaucracy was for a long time a fiefdom of babus from the Hindi belt. It was only much later that South India began to assert its importance by refusing to agree to accept Hindi as the rashtrabhasha (national language). In fact the era of the 1960's was an era of dissent in India even as it saw the Chinese aggression and in the next decade the war with Pakistan and the liberation of Bangladesh.

While the Chinese aggression and Nehru's famous remarks thereafter, "My heart goes out to the people of the North East," which is interpreted by nit-pickers as the first prime minister's farewell to a territory of his country which he had as good as given up, for the Chinese had come far as Tezpur in Assam. India was unprepared for the Chinese aggression, hence troops and reinforcements from the Indian side took a while to arrive. Communication was poor or non-existent. This young nation never expected that it would have to go to war on the North Eastern frontier, although it was quite prepared for any assault on its western and northern borders considering the bloody nature of the partition that created two nations – India and Pakistan – a parting gift of the British that continues to haunt us even today. The Chinese, as we know from different historical accounts now, were not serious about invading India's North East but were only teaching India a lesson for the country's involvement in Tibetan issues – a grouse it continues to nurture to this day. Besides, the politics of borders has always been contentious and fraught with ambiguities, more so when the mapping itself is done by a third 'interested' party. Hence the Macmohan line continues to be the sword of Damocles between India and China.

One of the negative fall-outs of the Chinese aggression, however, is that the North East became a zone of insecurity for the Government at Delhi. Massive investments in military manpower and installations have been made to guard this vulnerable outpost. Yes, that is how Delhi sees the North East – an important part of its territory, only that the people of the region were not considered worthy to receive special development packages, although the entire region was hugely deficit in every kind of infrastructure. In fact even the two major industries - tea and oil, both in Assam were a British legacy. After 1947, not a single major industry has come up in the region although it is a repository of verdant natural resources such as coal, limestone oil and gas. The region continues to support 63% of India's forest and bamboo is a renewable resource that has not been adequately tapped. Fast flowing rivers of the region are also identified as sources for hydro electric projects, although the impacts of such projects in terms of displacement and poor compensation, continue to be a sore point with the people here.

It was only in 1972 that the North Eastern Council, was set up for better administration of the region but even the NEC was then under the Home Ministry. It was only after the NDA Government came to power that the Department for the Development of the North East (DoNER) was created in 2001 for the purpose of speeding up development. There is a strong perception here that Delhi looks at the region purely from a security-centric prism, rather than an inclusive and participative development paradigm. Hence road connectivity within the region is still very poor, not to speak of rail and air connectivity. Meghalaya whose capital, Shillong was also the erstwhile capital of the undivided state of Assam, is not connected by air. Arunachal Pradesh spread out in an area of 83,000 sq kms is so unconnected that to travel to the western side of the state, one has to come to Assam

first. Poor or decrepit inter-state connectivity has therefore made it difficult for the people of the region to have a regular interface and to resolve common issues. For instance, there are regular skirmishes between Nagaland and Assam, Meghalaya and Assam or Arunachal Pradesh and Assam over boundary disputes. All the three states were carved out of Assam but the boundary issues remains contentious despite different Commissions having been appointed to resolve these.

Let me now come to the conflicts in the region. Since the North Eastern states particularly the hill states were excluded territories and were not part of British India and were allowed a fairly autonomous existence under their village republics, the sudden turn of events after August 1947 and the instruments of accession signed by some tribal chiefs with the Government of India lacked transparency. Most of them were coerced into signing on the dotted lines. Manipur was a kingdom and the manner in which its king finally signed away that kingdom to the Indian Union, thereby making it a state under Schedule 3 of the Constitution remains the point of conflict even today. The Nagas of course have posed the most serious challenge to the Indian state since August 14, 1947 when they declared their Independence. Today the NSCM (IM) which claims to represent the Naga viewpoint has been on talks with Government of India since 1997 and is reaching, what some believe is the final leg of the negotiations.

The region is racially distinct and people are proud of their looks, their cuisine, dress and culture. The tribes are largely Christian and somewhat western in their worldview and that is one of the reasons why they find it hard to accept that they are part of India and its strictly Hinduised mindset, particularly under this new NDA regime of Narendra Modi which has made them feel that the state has intruded into their personal domains what with the beef ban and imposition of Good Governance Day on December 25th (Christmas Day), which for Christians symbolises the birth of their saviour, Jesus Christ. This has alienated a lot of people from the Government of the day.

Attitudes as they say are important elements that shape people's behaviours and their outlooks towards the world, their neighbours and friends or enemies. Attitudes reflect our state or mind or disposition. Psychologists define attitudes as a learned tendency to evaluate things in a certain way. This can include evaluations of people, issues, objects, or events. Such evaluations are often positive or negative, but they can also be uncertain at times. Attitudes are often the result of experience or upbringing and can have a powerful influence over behaviour. For a Naga growing up in the 60s and 70's India and Indians are considered enemies. These emotions are created because of the narratives of those who suffered during the counter-insurgency movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The Indian army fighting the Naga rebels at the time had no idea of what counter-insurgency was all about. It was a civil war which the Indian army converted into a full-fledged war zone. The soldiers fought as if they were fighting an external enemy complete with all the horrendous violations of human rights such as burning entire rice fields, kicking open doors to find "the enemy" hiding there and torturing the rebels they arrested etc., These remembrances will not go away so soon. They have also hardened attitudes of the Naga people towards India and Indians who are still considered, "others," despite several decades of socialising with them.

What has happened with Nagaland is replicated in other states that have been wracked by militancy over the years. There is a feeling that 'India does not accept us as we are and hence wants us to give up our cultural ethos and our cultural pride by agreeing to mainstream ourselves into the great "Indian" culture. For the North East the Brahmaputra defines our idea of a region and a stream that connects thoughts and ideas. Considering that North East India is connected to India only by a 27 kilometre landmass and that 96% of our boundaries are with foreign countries, the idea of an

Indian mainstream thought and philosophy that is distinct from the philosophies of the nations that border the region is difficult to accept. There are ethnic groups in Myanmar that have relatives in Nagaland and Mizoram and the two are constantly in touch. To think of Mizos and Nagas in India accepting the Indian mainstream culture would put discomfit them when they interact with their relatives from the other side of the border. These kinship ties are very important for ethnic communities who have not imbibed the idea of nationhood.

Hence, it would be better for India to understand that its diversities are its strengths and to learn to accept these differences. The people of North East India must be made to feel that they have nothing to fear from a dominant "Indian" culture and that several cultures can co-exist in this huge salad bowl. 🍲