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INDIA’S FRAGMENTED DEMOCRACY

by B. P. Singh

Events of recent years have focused considerable attention on northeast India, particularly on tribal uprisings, insurgency, the problem of aliens, the involvement of foreign agencies, political horse trading, and natural disasters. At the same time, ethnic and religious factors have been almost wholly ignored—this despite the fact that they have a decisive influence on the institutions of democracy and, since India’s independence, have acquired quite new and different nuances.

In 1950 northeast India consisted of the State of Assam and the Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura. With the passage of the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act of 1971, the northeast emerged as a significant administrative concept. The more familiar unit of Assam was replaced by a North-Eastern Council (NEC) to deal with planning and security. The area presently consists of five states—Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Tripura—and two union territories—Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The northeastern region accounts for 8 per cent of the total land surface of India and has a population of 26 million, 20 million of whom are in Assam. Each political unit of the region has a directly elected unicameral legislature.

Geography has had its influence on the economic, social, and cultural life of the region. The Brahmaputra Valley, for instance, was a colorful corridor between the two great civilizations of India and China, while the Himalayas reach to the frontiers of Iran and Central Asia. But the foremost feature of the social order of northeast India is its heterogeneity. The region is inhabited by three major groups: the hill tribes, the plains tribes, and the nontribal population of the plains. Within each group there is tremendous variety: in terms of race (probably greater variety than in any other part of the globe); language (as many as 420 languages and dialects); and religion (animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity).

Traditionally, ethnic ties and religious affiliations have been a source of personal identity as well as a basis for organizing kingdoms and clans for conquest or revenge. The introduction after independence of the concept of one-man/one-vote has brought profound changes, among them the politicization of primordial loyalties. The ceding of Sylhet to East Pakistan at the time of the partition was primarily caused by the religious division between the Hindus and Muslims and by linguistic conflicts between the Assamese and the Bengalis. The reorganization of Assam in 1962 and the later carving out of Nagaland were also due to ethnic and linguistic feelings. And though politics is today the driving force behind political administration, it still does not function independently of ethnic and religious bonds.

The people of northeast India are composed primarily of five races that entered the area at different periods of history: the Austrics, the Negroids, the Kiratas, the Dravidians, and the Aryans.

The Austrics came from Indochina. They include the Khias and the Jaintias of Meghalaya and the Morans of Assam. These people prefer women as managers of property and also accept the leadership of women in the family.

The Negroids, who came from south and southwest China, are the present Naga of Nagaland. They have shown a tremendous love for freedom and have developed strong village institutions. Men and women are accorded equal rights, but the latter are discouraged from participating in politics, fighting, and hunting.

The Kiratas, people of Mongolian origin, are known today as the Bodos, and their language is Bodo. They are found in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, North Bengal, and Bangladesh and are an important political force in the region.

The Dravidians entered northeast India in the recent past and have yet to become a cohesive group in politics. The Aryans, on the other hand, have been coming in, mostly from North Bihar, from the fourth century B.C. They are divided into castes.

Over the centuries the ethnic cauldron of northeast India has been kept boiling by the contradictory processes of assimilation and preservation of ethnic identity. Today a number of tribes and castes dominate education and administration, among them the Khias in Meghalaya, the Hindus in Assam, and the Bengalis in Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura. In 1935 the colonial government saw an advantage in giving political recognition to each tribe by distributing certain administrative and electoral privileges. This was strengthened under the 1950 Constitution of independent

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India. With the inauguration in 1952 of community development schemes throughout the country, particular ethnic communities began to express their economic aspirations as well, demanding their own development programs. Consequent electoral calculations have been based on the recognition of these ethnic nests. Thus the traditional bonds of ethnic kinship that provide security and identity also create a bewildering set of problems for civil servants engaged in administrative and developmental tasks.

Despite the secularization of political affairs, the various religions continue to play an important role in social affairs. Some members of various racial groups have been converted to a new belief, while others have not, and this variety within the group has added to the variety of intraracial relationships and to political problems. Up to the twelfth century, animism and the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition, based upon India’s ancient Hindu epics, dominated most of the region’s consciousness. Buddhism was introduced in the seventh century; Islam in the thirteenth; and Christianity in the nineteenth. From the middle of the nineteenth century, believers in the various animistic faiths who had been only marginally touched by Buddhism and Hinduism began to convert to Christianity. The number of believers in animism continues to decline.

Buddhism did not come to northeast India from Bihar, as did Brahmanism, but from Tibet into Arunachal Pradesh, and from Burma into Mizoram, from which it spread to other parts of northeast India. Buddhists in India generally follow the tenets of Theravada Buddhism, but the Buddhists of northeast India are mostly Mahayanists, who believe that Buddhahood is open to all.

By the time of the British entry into the region in 1826, Hinduism was the accepted religion of an overwhelming number of the plains people, while the people of the hill areas still practised animistic beliefs—although Buddhism and the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition were appreciated. During the period of British rule there was a Hindu renaissance in West Bengal that only later took hold in northeast India, but it helped to consolidate Hinduism in the plains and to propagate modernization and national ideals. Today Hindus constitute over 65 per cent of the total population, but in northeast India they are in the majority only in Assam, Manipur, and Tripura.

The impact of Islam on northeast India began with the unsuccessful efforts of the Turko-Afghan ruler of Bengal, Bukhtiar Khelji, to capture Assam in 1205–6. By 1682 Islam had become the religion of a significant group of people in Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Bangladesh. A process of assimilation began between Hindus and Muslims, and in the Brahmaputra Valley of the seventeenth century the Muslims had become an indivisible part of the local population. The British policy of divide and rule, by encouraging divisions particularly between the Hindus and Muslims, had an adverse impact on northeast India. Today, due to bloc voting patterns among immigrant Muslims, Islam is a political factor in Assam, where Muslims constitute 25 per cent of the population.

The work of Christian missionaries began in the 1840s with the publication of Arunodaya, a Baptist monthly in Assamese, the translation of the Bible into Assamese, the transcription of tribal languages into Roman script, the establishment of hospitals and the spread of the idea of health care, and the founding of schools and colleges for both boys and girls, culminating in the founding of Cotton College at Gauhati in 1901. All these interactions of Christianity with the indigenous culture and its traditional faiths created a new form of socialization. The conversion of animists to Christianity occurred on a phenomenal scale. Today, Christians comprise 80 per cent of Meghalaya’s tribal population, 85 per cent of Nagaland’s, 96 per cent of Mizoram’s, and 26 per cent of Manipur’s. In four of the seven northeast political units the chief-ministers are Christians. In Nagaland all but one member of the sixty-member legislature are Christian. The Nagas, Mizos, and Khasis in particular have undergone profound changes as a result of the spread of Christian ideals among them, and this has brought them into the mainstream of modern civilization, with all its strength and its perils.

"ALL THE LIGHT AND TRUTH"
There is no denying that the internal visions, values, and beliefs of those who hold political power influence the choices that are made in establishing and implementing public policy. When the Brahmins entered the Brahmaputra Valley, they brought their own ideas of political administration along with their ideals of the path of salvation. They succeeded in converting a substantial number of the population, and their kingdoms were set up and administered in accordance with the Ramayana-Mahabharata tradition. The Ahoms, who invaded Assam in the beginning of the thirteenth century, brought a new set of values and beliefs. Like their kinsmen of Burma and their ancestors of South China, the Ahoms believed in the religious and cultural values of Tai, influenced by Buddhism. However, in the long six hundred years of their rule in Assam they made no attempt to impose their religion but concentrated instead on shaping the administrative system according to the experience of their ancestors. This led to oligarchical
rule and a system of compulsory service instead of taxation.

The annexation of northeast India by the British in 1826 heralded a new and somewhat contradictory set of values in both politics and administration. The management of public affairs gradually took on the character of a representative government based on the primacy of law. On the other hand, the British, actuated by a strong desire to rule by any means, brought about a deepening of the sense of communal tradition and stifled the growth of a tradition of democratic social organization. The presence of the British, of course, reinforced the urge to idealize the Indian past and to reinterpret some of its values, and this in turn gave birth to a national consciousness that was both political and cultural.

When we come to look at the freedom struggle, we find that the Indian National Congress was more concerned with reforms of the social order than with advancing or disavowing any particular religious or ethnic group. The emphasis of both Gandhi and Nehru was, rather, on how to accord equal respect to all religions and to all groups of people. Gandhi wrote that India’s prayer should not be “God, give him the light that thou hast given me” but, rather, “Give him all the light and truth he needs for his highest development.” This readiness to concede to a fellow citizen the right to follow his own light became the foundation of both secularism and national unity. Under Nehru’s leadership the principal values came to be conceptualized as an ethos of national unity amidst regional diversity. Democracy, secularism, egalitarianism, modernization, and the promotion of policies of nonalignment and peaceful coexistence in international affairs were the components of this ethos. Students of political science in India refer to it as the Gandhi-Nehru framework of values.

During the thirty-seven years of independence, the values of secularism and national unity have come up against a countervailing force in the age-old suspicions that almost every tribe has toward other tribes, and in conflicts between indigenous and migrant populations. Every tribe, every group in the region has developed its own word to denote “outsiders”: “Bengals” and “Bahiragats” are terms for outsiders in Assam; “Mayangns” in Manipur; “Vais” in Mizoram; and so on. These terms are often derogatory and contemptuous and have found their way into folklore and popular songs. The attitude of suspicion toward outsiders has its obvious roots in history and certain unhappy experiences of the more recent past.

In northeast India, as in other parts of the country, the political system was long dominated by the Indian National Congress party, which acted as arbiter among conflicting claims of the various ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups since the 1920s. Although the breakup of the party was averted in 1969, its second split in 1978 led to an ascendency of ethnic and religious loyalties in the electoral process and to the complete overthrow of the electoral covenant that had been in force under the umbrella of the Congress party. The resurrected Congress party of the ’80s controls the government in six of the seven political units of northeast India; Tripura has a Marxist government.

The electoral process, which should have been the chief instrument of conflict resolution, has not been accepted by certain ethnic groups. A section of the Nagas has declared its independence of the Indian Union. In a similar vein, the Mizos asserted a separate nationality for themselves in 1966. A decade later, in 1976, the Meiteis of Manipur revolted against the constitutions of India because, in their eyes, the political process neglected their genuine aspirations. Various other ethnic groups, while accepting the broad framework of the political system, have asserted a greater role for themselves in political and economic administration. The Assamese of the Brahmaputra Valley have been agitating for the protection of their cultural, political, and economic preeminence and for the removal of “foreigners” from Assam. The point is that, in India today, the primordial loyalties of clan, tribe, and religion demand and still receive far greater loyalty than the idea of the state.

A NEW OPPORTUNITY

Given the history of suspicion among ethnic groups, the massive inflow of people from outside the region, and the scarcity of jobs, membership in an ethnic group continues to provide a fundamental base of comfort and identity in northeast India. Rapid industrialization may ultimately be an answer, but the fear of being swamped by members of other communities sustains a culture of isolation, and appeals to ethnic pride continue to be an important factor in the political equation.

Although religion does not play as important a role in political affairs as ethnicity, the religious scene is sufficiently complicated in itself. There are a number of situations that could flare up. For one, the efforts of Christian missionaries to make conversions are disliked by a number of Hindu organizations. For another, the tribal people of the plains and some of the Hindus have lost their lands to immigrant Muslims—the traditional voting bloc of the ruling party in Assam. In election-related violence in Assam in February of 1983, the tribal peoples of a sleepy rural area of Nellie indulged in ghastly massacres of immigrant Muslims, and the two communities have since exhibited a frenzied hatred of the worst type. On the whole it is a matter of concern that, while the commonly held notion that religion should be relegated to private life is accepted in public pronouncements, at the same time various groups use religious issues without restraint and on a scale never before witnessed in the region. All these factors need to be noted, since, with the decline of popular faith in political leaders, religious fanatics are drawing bigger and bigger crowds, and those whose commitment is to ethnicity are in the ascendant.

In recent years there has been a genuine concern in India to give the people of the northeast a new economic and political opportunity in order to strengthen the nation-building process. Both ethnicity and religion would play a major role in both personal and socio-cultural spheres. However, political administration cannot be guided solely by ethnic and religious considerations, and the politicization of primordial loyalties will continue. The democratic process itself will reinforce these primordial ties, since even in the most remote areas elections are becoming increasingly competitive. The forces of change are actually deepening inequalities in northeast India, and a socio-cultural revolution toward equality is not in sight. It will be interesting in coming months and years to watch the interaction among economic and social developments, secularization, and the capacity of the state to distance itself from ethnic, religious, and caste biases.