Facets of the North-east

India's North-East: A Historical Perspective

Harekrishna Deka*
Former DGP, Assam

We were very happy to receive a thought-provoking article from Shri Harekrishna Deka on his perspective of India's North East. An ex-policeman who rose to be the Director General of Police in Assam and a highly acclaimed literary figure, Shri Harekrishna Deka occupies a high pedestal in the minds of the people of Assam.

One of the chief merits of his present article is the painstaking research that he has undertaken in mobilizing important details and references related to socio-political developments in the region. In a way his article can also be described as a quick survey of historical developments in the region beginning from the Yandabo Treaty of 1826 till the present times and his interpretation about them. He has not only given the source of quotations and references used in the article, but has also added important notes. In fact what we discover at the end of this article is a good bibliography about the North-east.

I would like to make a special mention of Shri Deka's reference to the British thinking about the region as a whole and about a seriously contemplated plan of creating a Crown colony of the areas inhabited by the tribal societies. Shri Deka mentions that this plan was conceived by Dr J.H. Hutton who had served Naga Hills for many years and had prepared well studied and acclaimed monographs on a few major Naga tribes. Although some serious researchers may be in the know of this move of erstwhile colonial regime, a majority even amongst the intelligentsia appear to be unaware. It is, therefore, good that Shri Deka has referred to this plan. A natural suspicion arises that some information about such a plan might have reached some quarters in the area and that it may have been one of the factors leading some Nagas to agitate for creating a sovereign Nagaland. There can be other factors too; but this thought of creation of crown colony might have been one of the major factors. It is important to take note of this plan because the militancy in the North-east originated in the hills inhabited by the Nagas. It then gradually took the form of a virus and has spread to several other states of the region. One may also recall that it is true and a well known detail that India's hostile neighbours have also played their part in encouraging militancy.

In concluding this introduction to an important article, I must say that this article will prove to be a help in understanding the region. The North-eastern region is a complex region. My favorite description to it is that of a multi-coloured mosaic. Each component of this mosaic has its own peculiarities and characteristics. This article will certainly help in understanding at least some of these peculiarities.
When we name a region by a geographical direction, we refer to its location but at the same time we also assume that it has a relationship with another location perceived as a centre from where such directional viewing takes place. In this relationship, there may be a point of view too. This point of view reflects not only geographical positioning but also cultural and political attitudes. For example, the Middle-east is so named because of its position from the point of view of the European West though it is not in the middle of Asia, which is the East for the West. This viewing does not end there. The nineteenth century West compared its cultural, economic and intellectual accomplishment with the achievement of this East (which is Arab East), and for that matter with all of the Orient, and saw itself superior to it despite the fact that the world's first civilization emerged in this latter region of the earth. Industrial modernization having given it a head-start, the post-renaissance West has always assumed that its superior civilization has some rights to guide the affairs of the East. The directional names such as 'Near east', 'Middle east', 'Far east,' etc., in this respect, are not just some geographical identities but also geo-politically and culturally conceived ideas through which such identities are projected and images are established. In international economic relations, 'North' and 'South' have turned out to be important metaphors distinguishing rich nations from the developing ones.

In modern states, the territorial boundary recognized internationally is a marker of sovereign recognition and modern nation-states have their political maps with clearly defined boundaries usually universally recognized although sometimes disputed by immediate neighbour/s. It may appear that a country no longer requires directional naming but such naming accompanied with psycho-social attitudes still persists and is underpinned by economic interests. The Middle-east is still an area to be disciplined and brought to the ways of the civilized modes of functioning of the West, but lurking below it is the economic interest -- its fossil fuel resources are vital for the growth of the West. This continues to be the global picture in general. But when within a country, a region is marked according to its geographical direction as viewed from a central location, is it just a matter of geographical convenience or is the name intertwined with cultural attitudes and political interests? We may examine this from the name of the North-east applied to a sensitive region of India.

Within a political map of a country, it may be of general convenience to call a region according to its geographical position and it is done so in many countries. It cannot be said that such geographical identification is always loaded with political meaning. The USA has a north-east and it is a geographical marker. The US north-east is one of the most progressive and economically vibrant regions, and a large part of it is known for natural beauty, but the name itself appears to imply a geographical and not a particularly political identification, though, of course, racial and religious attitudes in the North and the South might have acted differentially to affect US politics throughout its history, and therefore its north-east cannot escape its effect as a whole. As far as India’s North-east is concerned, it is also a geographical marker but not simply so. The idea of India’s North-east has not only sprung from its location in the map, but various other considerations have loaded it. Though we are very familiar with the area called India’s North-east from the year 1972 (that is from the time of the reorganization of the region after the division of the erstwhile areas of Assam into several states.)--the name having found political expression as well as being treated as an identified area for economic planning--the idea itself is not new. 1 In the context of the Sino-British relationship, the British colonial Government ruling India before the country's Independence considered a part of it as a buffer region and a frontier brought under colonial control to dominate the eastern branch of that great natural barrier, the Himalayas, against possible Chinese expansion and also in pursuance of its trading interests. 2 Before this, the idea of a north-east frontier was Bengal-specific. The territory north-east of the British province of Bengal was referred to as such by Alexander Mackenzie in his 'Memorandum on the North-east Frontier of Bengal' prepared in 1869 for official use at the request of the Lietuant-Governor, Sir William Grey (Mackenzie was in charge of the Political correspondence of the Bengal Government at that time as mentioned in the preface to his book 'History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill tribes of the North-east Frontier of Bengal.) Mackenzie defined the North-east Frontier of Bengal as 'a term sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally
to describe a tract.’ He also said that ‘in the latter sense it embraces the whole of the hill ranges
north, east, and south of the Assam valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain
system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges.’ Clearly,
the areas comprising the plains of Assam were excluded from this definition. On the other hand,,
following the annexation of the hill tracts that now largely cover Arunachal state, this area was
specifically named North-east Frontier Tract.

Territoriality and geographical direction were not the only ways that the idea of an Indian North-
east took shape in the British colonial thought. The colonial administrators introduced a concept
of difference between the hills and the plains, and it was not just for administrative convenience.
Numerous ‘savages’ (Mackenzie’s term) hill tribes were brought under control apparently to
prevent their depredation in the British Indian territory but the unstated policy of the British
officials was not to expose them to the influence of the plains. In Bengal and other places it had
already encountered political protests and revolts of various kinds from the early days of colonial
expansion. Even the valley adjoining these hills witnessed sporadic unrest, particularly over
introduction of the new land tenure system for collection of revenue. Various peasant revolts of
Phulaguri, Patharughat, Rangiya and Lashima, and the failed liberation attempt of Maniram
Dewan may be cited as examples.3 In hills, it had its tastes of revolt amongst some tribes from
time to time in the early phases of annexation but these were suppressed quickly. The British
administrators were shrewd to notice obvious cultural differences, both in religious practices and
customs, between the hills and the plains. While the plains people overwhelmingly belonged to
the Sanskritized (Hindu) culture (and Islamic culture amongst some), the majority of the hill
tribes except in Karbi-Anglong (then Mikir Hills), North Cachar and parts of Arunachal (then
North-east Frontier Tract) were neither Hinduized nor they adopted any other systematic
religion. They were still strongly influenced by animistic and mythical traditions of their own.
Some of the tribes in Arunachal had already become Buddhists influenced by Tibet. Later, this
pristine ethnicity found a patron in Verrier Elwin, an Englishman and a visionary ethnographer,
whose cultural views far differed from those of the British administrators. He too wanted the
tribes to remain uncontaminated but not for political reasons as it was with the colonialists.
The British conquest of the region that is now called the North-east and also labeled seven sisters
(eight after inclusion of Sikkim) did not take place in one go. The Ahom kingdom, from which the
name of Assam is derived came into the East India Company’s possession in 1826, Cachar in 1830,
Khasi and Jaintia hills between 1833 and 1835, Mikir hills (now Karbi Anglong) in 1838, North
Cachar in 1854. Garo hills and Lushai hills were fully subdued in 1872-73 and 1890 respectively
after the colonial government passed on to the British crown from the East-India Company. The
conquest of Naga hills took a long time. Its various tribes were subdued between 1866 and 1904. 4
This entire region was never in its previous history ruled by a single king or chief and only the
British brought it under one administration as a province of its Indian colony, that too, after many
experiments with the map. This region along with Arunachal, Manipur, Tripura (and later
Sikkim) has come to be popularly called India’s North-east from 1972 and is also recognized so by
the Government.

The British East India Company’s expeditions started taking place in the tribal region now called
Arunachal Pradesh after the Ahom territory came into its possession and continued after the Raj
was established. Subsequently in 1882, a British officer designated as an assistant political officer
was located at Sadiya. The occupation of this region gave British India a frontier with China and
hence it can be said that ‘North-east’ as a geographical directional identification administratively
used for this tract was not just in reference to British Bengal but it became contextually related to
a frontier between British India and a country independent of its hegemonic influence. The North
East Frontier Tract so named necessitated the demarcation of a boundary with China and Tibet
and the famous McMahon line became the boundary between China and India (and Tibet, then
more or less independent, but later annexed by China.). As we all know, this boundary, which was
not physically demarcated, has since been disputed by our northern neighbour. At the time of the
demarcation of the McMahon line, China was not strong enough to resist it but it did not officially
ratify the agreement. Anyway, this was how the geographical term ‘North-east’ and a notion of
frontier came together owing to a British trading company’s commercial interest turning into a
colonial expansionist policy of the British Government. The North-east Frontier Tract was
redesignated as the North East Frontier Agency (or NEFA in short) a few years after India's Independence. Though never a part of Assam in any earlier phase of its history, the area enjoyed a relationship with the Ahom kingdom and a pidgin Assamese became the lingua franca of a section of the people of this region much before it became a British territory. The British added this frontier to Assam because of its geographical contiguity and for administrative convenience but did not allow its psycho-social fusion with the plains region. As already said, they adopted a policy of exclusion to govern this frontier as well as other north-eastern hill areas. The exclusionary policy was carried out by means of different regulations and legislations in phases---by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations, 1873 in which the idea of an inner line was introduced, then by the declaration of the hills as backward areas (which they were) as per the Government of India Act 1919 (its basis was the Montagu-Chelmsford Report 1917), and finally by declaring different hill areas of the province as 'excluded' and 'partially excluded areas' as per the Government of India Act 1935 that was based on the recommendations of the Simon Commission. The stated objective of the Simon Commission was that it was for 'experienced and sympathetic handling' by the Centre rather than by the provincial legislature (legislative rights were partially given to the natives by the 1935 Act) and 'protection from economic subjugation by their neighbours', this provision was necessary. 5 The concerns shown seemed genuine but a careful reading of history would show that there is something more than meets the eye.

It can be admitted here that the native mind of India became enamoured of the western education in its early encounter with the western ways of life and it found invigoration in western modernity, but yet the native culture was strong enough to escape being wholly submerged by the western culture, Gradually and sooner than the colonialists expected, a politics of resistance got built up from India's cultural soil with the construction of a form of Indian nationalism by its newly emerged middle class, which first collaborated with the colonialist and then attempted to capture power. In Assam and its neighbourhood, the colonialists noticed ethno-cultural differences between the largely Aryanized plains and the non-Aryanized hills, and they wanted to keep the latter free from being politically contaminated and culturally influenced by the plains. Besides, the evangelists supported by the colonial administrators found a fertile soil for Christianization (proselytizing was done by the missionaries, the colonial officials shrewdly not participating in such activity). In a letter dated July 10, 1827 addressed to His Lordship-in-Council, David Scott pleaded, 'as soon as convenient such further measures as may be requisite to afford to the Garos instruction in Christian religion as constituting, independently of other instruction, by far the most feasible and efficacious means of humanizing that race of people and effecting the objects which Government has all along had in view in regard to them.' (italics mine). 6 One can note the colonial attitude in the phrase 'humanizing that race' and its proselytizing design from the overall tenor of the letter as underlies the phrase 'effecting the object'. Humanizing a race was not just bringing that race above the level of animals but also westernizing them so as to keep them apart from the rigidified Hinduaized socio-cultural mode, and it was a colonial political move.

Later, from within the colonial administration, there was a clever move to politically de-link the hill areas from the Indian mainland, when a 'North East Frontier Province' comprising the hills of Assam and some contiguous hill areas of Burma as well as Chittagong Hill Tract, then in Bengal, was conceived as a crown colony to be under the direct rule of the British Parliament. This plan was first officially mooted by J. H. Hutton, the deputy commissioner of Naga Hills district and then was strongly supported by Robert Neil Reid, then governor of Assam. It was revived again in 1941 with strong support from Andrew Clow, then Governor of Assam and Sir Reginald Coupland. The same idea was supported and discussed by Dorman Smith, Governor of Burma with Lord Wavell, Viceroy of India, in Simla as stated in a dispatch by Wavell to the Secretary of State for India, Amery, on July 27, 1944. 7 Coupland emphasized similarities in race and culture of the hills and their differences with the Indians. Here again, 'North-east' did not remain a mere geographical identity, rather a colonial politics of differentiation entered into it spoken of in racial and cultural terms. As a crown colony, the region would have remained outside the consideration for transfer of power to a government of sovereign India and the Empire would not only have retained a foothold in the region but would have remained an influential factor in the affairs of the sub-continent. 8 In that event, the epithet 'north-east' for this region would have become
geographically anomalous (North-east from which centre of a political map?) but it would have served the colonial design. The 'humanizing' mission undertaken in the nineteenth century would have borne its fruit. Viceroy Wavell did not support this idea not because he considered it bad, but because he did not think it feasible owing to political developments in India at that time.

Thus 'North-east' was first applied as a geographical directional name to a frontier of British India as perceived from a colonial power base, and then as an area to be differentiated racially and culturally from India or rather from a Sanskritized India. Measures were undertaken to keep the region protected from being contaminated by politics of Indian national resistance that spread out in all directions from the mainland.

It needs to be admitted that despite the exploitative colonial economy, the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys got some economic benefits during the British regime as some developmental works had to be undertaken by the administration to extract natural resources that could be profitably exploited (most spectacular being tea cultivation and its conversion into a profitable industry). There was improvement in surface communication with the laying out of railway lines; markets developed and some urban centres sprang up. But the hills, being devoid of extractable resources at that point of time were mostly left economically unattended by the colonial administration. The British policy was to control the north-eastern border and assure a secure frontier by ensuring the loyalty of the indigenous tribes by way of creating an educated elite amongst them and attracting them to the western mores of life. Proselytizing was a part of this strategy. But at the same time, they did not disturb the cultural practices of the masses and as a result the latter retained their distinct ethnic identities and did not develop psychological affinities with the peoples of the plains. This they achieved by preventing free social intercourse between the hill tribes and the plains people. This policy served them well. Amongst the hill tribes, ethnicity took precedence over nationalism. In one way, the British administrative system facilitated closer contacts among the tribal groups living as clans in villages mostly isolated from each other as well as socio-economically disconnected, though they shared the same ritual customs and spoke the same dialect.. Such closer contact helped develop ethnic alliance. As regards the Nagas, this ethnic alliance amongst various tribes got transformed into ethno-nationalism by the time the British prepared to leave the sub-continent. Naga is a name given to these tribes by others but Naga became a common ethno-national identity of all hill tribes of Naga hills. Many of these tribes are in Myanmar. Naga ethno-nationalism was constructed differently from the Pan-Indian nationalism springing from the depth of the Independence Movement.

Among some other tribes, ethnicity turned into ethno-nationalism later, when the process of pan-Indian national integration received setback from various politico-economic causes. One was sharp divergence between the ethnic interest of the tribes and the cultural-linguistic interest of the Assamese speaking plains people after Independence. Secondly, the Indic (largely Hinduaized) national culture treated various animistic or Christianized tribal cultures of these ethnic communities as exotic and they therefore did not fit into their homogenizing visions. A sense of otherness troubled this relationship. The lack of economic development has been another factor fuelling a desire for separation amongst them.

The hills in the North-east did not trouble the British during the Indian nationalist movement for independence, their shrewd moves paying dividends in this respect. But ethno-nationalist aspirations have come to political surface after the country's independence and it has severely tested pan-Indian national integration. Although the democratic space created by the federal structure of the Republic is supposed to give equal opportunities to all people, in effect, it is in the grip of a centre-periphery complex. As a result, the small ethnic nationalities find themselves marginalized. The sense of their being deprived is actual as well as perceived (the Assamese nationality itself suffers from a similar complex). As a result, the magic of pan-Indian nationalism has failed to work effectively here.

The British province of Assam, formed by adding the neighbouring areas, both hills and plains, to the Ahom kingdom, which the East-India company occupied after the 1826 Yandaboo treaty, was not tampered with (except Sylhet going to Pakistan) on transfer of power by Her Majesty's Government to the Government of Independent India. Even during the reorganization of the states on linguistic basis in 1956, there was no change in the map of Assam. But after decades of
turbulence resulting from conflicting interests of tribal ethno-nationalism and Assamese linguistic nationalism, the map got redrawn in 1972 (Naga hills were separated even earlier and made into a state because of sovereignty demand raised by some Naga tribes.) With the change of the political map of Assam in this manner, the idea of an Indian North-east was revived in a new light to be applied to a larger area, this also a frontier surrounded by foreign powers, of which China's territorial claim was well known. Though in 1972, the newly-born country of Bangladesh was ruled by a friendly government, the Indo-Bangla border had never been easy to police from either side. On the Indo-Myanmar border, insurgent groups treated many areas as liberated. On the whole, this frontier looked quite vulnerable. With the formation of so many small states, the area also presented a fragmented look. The epithet 'seven sisters' used by Jyoti Prasad Saikia (then a journalist in a national daily) in a radio talk as an inspired description for the North-east in 1972 on the occasion of the inauguration of Tripura as a state (till then a Union Territory) was adopted by Sarat Chandra Sinha, the then Chief Minister of Assam, in 1976 to improve inter-state relationship in the context of inter-state border dispute, particularly between Assam and Nagaland. In the Congress session held at Gauhati (now Guwahati) the same year the then Prime Minister blessed this designation in her address to the Youth convention (this writer happened to be present there, being in charge of the personal escort of the P.M.) The national policy-makers found the description an appropriate metaphor for bringing the seven north-eastern states psychologically closer to each other and to promote understanding amongst them. It means that India's national security and its national integration were and still remain major concerns in this region. The North-east, even for Independent India, is not simply a geographical identification. It is a frontier of a country with not so friendly neighbours along its borders and as this frontier looks fragmented from the viewpoint of a political centre, there has arisen a compulsion to find a different identity for the region and hence the frequent evocation of the metaphoric image of seven sisters. But this to become a living metaphor, the socio-political and economic causes afflicting this multi-ethnic and multi-cultural region must be addressed in such a manner that this metaphor does not look artificially imposed but rather becomes naturalized. Failing this, what a western critic Jill Starr said of Indian national project will prove right as far as India's north-east is concerned, '(Therefore) non-western Indian nationalism failed to imagine a manner in which India's numerous, diversified, non-Hindu, culturally conceived imagined communities and social groupings would also be incorporated in its future equitably.' The national Centre's often condescending look has been read as an imperial look by at least one insurgent group of the North-east i.e. ULFA. India adopted a developmental strategy under a model centred on heavy industry but this model ignored the need of a region like the North-east suffering from infra-structural bottleneck. Agriculture remained ignored and industrial development was beyond its reach for lack of industrial capital (We have to wait to see whether the newly conceived Vision 2020 can change the economic outlook). This apart, the Centre's failure to address the immigration problem in the right perspective has also been alienating the indigenous people here. Demographic changes have been affecting political power equations in Assam and the Assamese linguistic nationalists, who still retain their capacity to mould public opinion amongst the Assamese, entertain deep fear that the changing electoral equation is gradually undermining their dominant power position. In fact, the entire community has been going through an identity crisis. Amongst the Assamese speaking people there is a general suspicion that the migrants are being used by some political parties as tools in the political power game of the state. As viewed from this periphery, the Centre's response to the problem of immigration appears inadequate and lukewarm. The spell cast by Indian nationalism in Assam valley during the Independence movement has been wearing off. During the 6-year long anti-foreigner's agitation (1979 to 1985) the frequently uttered rhetorical question was, 'Are you an Assamese or an Indian?' As of now, for different reasons, the image of 'Mother India' is not yet an emotionally moving image for her seven north-eastern daughters.

Notes:
1. For details of the reorganization, see various essays in the book 'Reorganization of Northeast since 1947 edited by B.Datta Ray and S. P. Agrawal (1996), Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi. Also see India's


4. There are several histories of Assam which may be consulted. These include A History of Assam by Sir Edward Gait (1926) Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, A comprehensive History of Assam by Swarnalata Baruah (2007), Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, The Comprehensive History of India, edited by H.Karpujari, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati.. Also see North-east India in Perspective edited by Rajatkanti Das & Debashis Basu (2005) Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi

5. See India's Northeast Resurgent by B. G. Verghese

6. David Scott in North-east India,1802-1831 (1970), Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi. Also quoted by B.G.Verghese


8. I view that the British officials devised the Coupland plan in order to retain a strategic foothold in this region so that the British Government could be a player in the power-politics of the subcontinent even after they relinquish sovereignty in favour of the national governments of India and Pakistan. B.K.Roy Burman in his article 'Sixth Schedule of the Constitution' included in the book 'Autonomous District Council' edited by L.S.Gassah( Omsion Pulsion, Guwahati, 1997) says in another context that commercial interest was also a reason (page 21 of the book) as the area was resource-rich. I have not accepted this point as till the British left India valuable mineral resources were not so much discovered in the hills of the North-east..


10. Also read the chapter The Naga Imbroglio in B.G.Verghese's above-mentioned book

11. See the book 'The Bengal Borderland' bu Willem Van Schnedel (2005), Anthem Press, London

12. This is from my personal talk with Jyoti Prasad Saikia. In 1976, he was the press adviser of the Chief Minister, Assam. He later got absorbed into the I.A.S. and subsequently retired as a commissioner in Assam. He is presently the editor, Dainik Asom, an Assamese daily. In an article 'Assam Nagaland Clash' Satish Chandra Kakati (1996) said that the epithet seven sisters was coined by Sarat Chandra Sinha to promote goodwill between Assam and Nagaland in the context of border disputes between the two states. His version does not appear to be correct.


*Harekrishna Deka is a poet, short story writer and a critic born at Tinsukia in 1945. He joined the Indian Police Service in 1968. He was the Director General of Police, Assam from November 2000 to October 2003. He retired from service in January 2005 as the Chairman cum Managing Director, Assam Police Housing Corporation. He also received the President's Police Medal for Meritorious Service and President's Police Medal for distinguished service. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1987 for his collection of poetry 'aan ejon.' He also received the Katha Award for Short Story in 1996 for his story, 'The Prisoner.' Harekrishna Deka has recently written his first novel which is under publication. Since retirement, he has been writing on socio-political issues pertaining to the North-east, particularly Assam. For sometime he also edited the English daily 'The Sentinel.' At present he is editing the Assamese literary magazine, 'Goriyosi.' He can be contacted at deka78@gmail.com.