

S. K. Ghosh's book: *India's North-East Frontier: Fifty turbulent years*¹ sums up how the region appears to academicians and government officials, and indeed, to the majority of people in mainland India. A "Boiling Cauldron of Insurgency and Terrorism"² is also another way in which the author describes the region. The same sentiments are expressed when a Northeasterner meets others of the mainland in his or her travels. Why are your people so violent? Why do they continue killing each other?

The Tribal People of the Northeast

A Liberating Quest for Identity, Equality and Respect

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S. K. Ghosh's book: *India's North-East Frontier: Fifty turbulent years*¹ sums up how the region appears to academicians and government officials, and indeed, to the majority of people in mainland India. A "Boiling Cauldron of Insurgency and Terrorism"² is also another way in which the author describes the region. The same sentiments are expressed when a Northeasterner meets others of the mainland in his or her travels. Why are your people so violent? Why do they continue killing each other? Hence, in the minds of many the Northeast is a bundle of problems like insurgency, militancy, ethnic conflicts and unreasonable demands like secession, etc. According to B. K. Roy Burman, a noted anthropologist, "in their heydays the insurgents are not anti-social. In their subjective-objective concourse they are pilgrims in the turbulent journey towards, what they think to be just society, good society, liberated humanity."³ This article is an attempt to look at the turbulent Northeast from the perspective of a pilgrimage of peoples in search of a better future. Legitimate and genuine aspirations and hopes may lie below the turbulent surface.

Quest for Preservation of Identity: A Question of Survival

A look at the names of the various militant organizations of the region could

be the key to deciphering their aspirations and hopes. The leading militant organizations of the tribals of the North-East are the following: *NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland)*, *HNLC (Hyniewtrep National Liberation Council)* of the Khasis and *ANVC (Achik National Volunteers Council)* of the Garos of Meghalaya, *NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura)*, *NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland)* of Assam and *KNF (Kuki National Front)* of Manipur⁴

Significantly, the common denominator in all these movements is the term 'national'. Hence, it seems to be clear that these tribals, whether big or small in number, consider themselves to be separate 'nationalities' with their own unique culture and customs. What is needed here is not to enter into a discussion about what a nation means or whether these tribes can claim themselves to be separate nationalities. What is important is to find the meaning of this claim? This, it seems to me, is a quest for recognition, acceptance and the preservation of identity. If xenophobic voices are heard among the tribals of the region, it is a corollary to the above quest. It is because of the "fear of being swamped by 'outsiders', of lifestyles and histories being destroyed..."⁵ The example of Tripura where the "indig-

enous people became a minority in their home-land and the real threat and possibility of this being repeated in other parts of the region is what makes the locals jittery and often resort to violent ways to drive away the outsiders.”⁶ There are xenophobic elements in many parts of the country, even where there is no danger of the outsiders becoming the majority. If that is the case, how much more will it be in parts of the Northeast where the locals can easily become a minority. The introduction of *Innerline Permit*⁷ to enter Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal are means of protecting the locals from being swamped by the outsiders. Hence, it is done for the preservation of the distinctive identity of the people and the protection of their land. Thus, B. G. Verghese is right when he states: “The various movements in the Notheast have all to do with identity.”⁸ It is for the preservation and in fact for the *survival* of the various ethnic groups. The survival instinct being the strongest and most basic, any perception of its being threatened can result in violent responses. This is not an attempt to explain away the violence but to attempt to have a better understanding of the violent nature of these movements. Often the authorities demand the shunning of violence as a pre-condition for talks with these movements or they are just banned as enemies of the society. However, more often than not, the authorities in the Government are responsible for making these movements take to violence and terrorism in the first place. These movements are “essentially manifestations of extreme frustration...”⁹ The origin of Naga secessionist movement can be traced to the experience of extreme frustration felt by

Phizo and his colleagues. The Naga leaders met Nehru three times between 1952 and 1953,¹⁰ but Nehru refused to listen to them and is reported to have said that “even if the heavens fell or India went to pieces, Nagaland will not become independent.”¹¹ In the last public meeting of the Nagas with Nehru on 30 March, 1953, at Kohima, the Nagas made their demand for Independence again. When he did not listen to them, many left half way through the meeting. Nehru got offended and never came back to Nagaland again.¹² Even if he was not willing to accede to the full demand of the Nagas, “a sincere show of willingness to dialogue with them might have changed the course of history in Nagaland. A man who had fought so long for independence from a foreign rule was expected to have a more sympathetic ear for the Naga cause.”¹³ But for him, the tribals seemed not worth listening to seriously. On the other hand Mahatma Gandhi was ready to listen to the Nagas. In fact the Nagas had high hopes of him. Phizo, the late Naga leader, is quoted to have said that Gandhiji “assured him that the Naga demand would be considered sympathetically and also advised the Nagas to shun the path of violence. This chapter, however, ended with the death of Gandhi.”¹⁴ Had he lived longer, probably there might not have been 50 years Naga insurgency. The violent rise of Mizo nationalism, spearheaded by the late Laldenga too was an expression of extreme frustration at the failure of the Government to help the people in their dire need during a devastating famine.¹⁵ In fact, Laldenga was completely opposed to violence initially. He even sacked the secretary of his organization

for advocating violence. Sanjoy Hazarika, the author of *Strangers of the Mist*, a connoisseur of the North-eastern realities and a Northeasterner himself sums up the reasons for the situation in the region when he says: "But Delhi's 'we know best' attitude, the superciliousness of its bureaucracy and the overwhelming ignorance of its politicians from the cow-chapati-dust belt to understand the compulsions and beliefs of proud but small nationalities, sees it blundering into one insurgency after another."¹⁶

One thing the tribals of the North-east want to assert is: though historical events of the more recent past (British India) have brought them together with the rest of India, they are of a different race or nation with their own history, culture and customs. This is admitted by authors and observers of the North-eastern tribal scenario like B. G. Verghese when he says "differences there are in the history, ethnic make up and linguistic roots of the region. Being of Mongoloid stock (as others along the Himalayan rim) makes the Northeasterner ethnically distinctive, but not for that reason necessarily politically separate."¹⁷ What the tribals resent is the conclusion of the statement. The logic is typical of 'we know best policy' mentioned above. The argument of the tribals is: if you recognize our distinctive identity, you must allow us to have a say in our own affairs, shape our own destiny. The tribals perceive that this can happen only when they are treated as a separate and distinct nation. If the authorities in New Delhi have the wisdom and the courage to proclaim and manifest in action that the tribals can be fully

themselves and totally Indian as well, the tribals will be more than ready to be integrated into India. To claim a separate identity as a nation does not necessarily mean to seek secession from India. In fact, of the organizations mentioned above, only the Nagas have consistently demanded secession from India. If others also demand secession, often it is the expression of extreme frustration as mentioned earlier as well as a yearning for autonomy and a greater say in their own affairs.

The tribals on the whole are pragmatic people. For whatever historical reasons, they have been brought within India. According to B. G. Verghese, "the Northeastern tribal leadership almost to a man repudiated the idea of a markedly Christian tribal Crown colony covering the Northeast, Burma (Myanmar) and the Chittagong Hills Tracts with Chittagong as an outlet to the sea, that was advocated by an influential lobby of British bureaucrats. The variants proposed by Reginald Coupland, adviser to the Cabinet Mission, and the notion of a Northeast Frontier Province taking in Sikkim, Bhutan and the Northeast (leading to a possibly different future dispensation) were also rejected outright."¹⁸ The tribals threw their lot with the emerging young India full of expectations. The past fifty years have been by and large disappointing to them. They have not been treated equally with the rest of India.

Quest for Equality

Closely connected with the quest for identity is the quest for being treated equally. In fact, this accrues from the quest for identity. If the tribals claim to

be a separate race/nation with their unique history, culture and customs, it is for the sake of claiming equal status and treatment like any other race in the country. How has the Northeast been treated by the rest?

First of all, to the majority of people in India what B. G. Verghese says is perfectly true. "Read Indian history as it is taught and you will scarcely know the Northeast exists," or it "remains in the periphery of the periphery," "it remains somewhere there."¹⁹ In a similar vein Vir Sanghvi points out: "the sad truth is that the Northeast is at the periphery of our consciousness."²⁰ He goes on to say, "compare the time and effort devoted to the Kashmir problem with the total lack of attention paid to the Northeastern insurgencies."²¹ Further more, "even well-meaning human rights organizations get more agitated about Kashmir than they do about Manipur though both are integral parts of India."²² The typical example of this unequal treatment is how the Kuki-Naga conflict has been allowed to drag on for the past eight or so years without any serious concern on the part of the Central Government towards solving it. In fact, "allegations are made that the ethnic strife between the Nagas and the Kuki tribe has been purposely fanned by the authorities. The clash, which has been going on since mid 1992, has caused both sides dearly. Many have been killed and thousands of Nagas and Kukis have lost their houses, villages and vocations. The Government has used the opportunity to induct more forces and sustain such Draconian laws as the *Armed Forces Special Powers and the Disturbed Areas Acts*. But there is

hardly any conciliation move."²³ This is what Kuldip Nayar said in 1995 but the situation has not changed for the better. The attitude seems to be: what does it matter if two insignificant groups of tribals in some remote corner of the country are at each other's throat? Or this is the classical example of 'divide and rule' policy. If this is the indifferent attitude of those who govern, they should not be agitated when these neglected people attempt to secede from a country whose authorities show no concern for them. Such a government is one "that bothers little about small communities but pays more attention to strategic considerations such as the natural resources of the area, their exploitation for the national good and the region's proximity to a friendly or inimical neighbour. Decisions for the little peoples of such regions – the historian Amalendu Guha describes as 'sub-nationalities' – are made by bureaucratic and political *mandarins* in national and state capitals, far removed from the realities of the customs and beliefs that govern the thoughts and lives of the indigenous peoples."²⁴ This is very true of how the Central Government looks at the Northeast in general and Manipur and Nagaland in particular. The BRTF (Border Road Task Force) has constructed a road starting from the Northeastern corner of Nagaland stretching all along the Myanmar border till the south west corner of Manipur bordering Myanmar. This, coupled with the prompt dispatch of the security forces for the slightest possible reason, seems to indicate that these border states and its peoples are only strategically important. One feels sad to

say that on many an occasion the security forces were passive spectators the ethnic conflicts that were raging. This was true in the Naga-Kuki conflict and also in the Kuki-Paite conflict in Churachandpur (Manipur). At times they were also accused of siding with one conflicting party or another. It is alleged that many militant outfits get their supply of ammunition from the security forces. Often it appears that the Central Government wants the insurgencies and ethnic conflicts in the Northeast to go on as a training field for its army. There may not be documented reports or findings but these are the feelings of many thinking people of the region in the light of the happenings during the past years in Manipur and Nagaland. A study prepared by the 1993 batch of Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officials titled *Understanding Ethnic Unrest in Indian Periphery-1994*, which was released on 2 May of the same year, also asserts that political parties are responsible for fuelling ethnic unrest in the Northeast.²⁵ A people treated this way finds it difficult to have a sense of belonging to the country. Hence, it is no wonder they want to secede from India. If these Northeastern states are considered to be strategically important for the security and integrity of the country, the people of the region should be taken into confidence. They will be the best defenders of the country.

Quest for Respect and Dignity

A corollary to the quest for identity and equality is the quest for respect and dignity. Fundamental to the tribal ethos is the sense of self-respect and

dignity. However, today, even after fifty years of Independence, the tribals are like second class citizens of the country. In our caste-ridden society, the term tribal is used in a very pre-judicial sense of being inferior, primitive, etc. The system of reservation for tribals has become a tool for looking down on the tribals. As K. Kumar points out: "Weaker sections of Indian society were given a special place in the Constitution, but the apparatus of the state continues to treat them as faceless millions."²⁶ Are the tribals forever condemned to be tribals, that is, backward, primitive and the like? "How can the educated tribals, so constantly described in these unpleasant terms, be free from an acute inferiority complex with all its unhappy consequences? In any case, words like 'backward' and 'uplift' imply subjective judgments which are often based on a wrong sense of values. Who is backward - the creative artist at her tribal loom, the gentle mother with her child among the hills, or the inventor of the atom-bomb which may destroy her and all her world? Are these self-reliant, cooperative tribes the really backward as against the self-seeking, individualistic, crafty products of our industrial civilization?"²⁷ But these words are too good to be true for the tribals. In the real world of their contacts with the rest of India, they are still considered second class citizens. The quest of the tribals is, then, to be rid of these alienations.

The current debate on the suitability of Sonia Gandhi to be a prime ministerial candidate because of her Italian origin has significance for the tribals of Northeast India. The argument is that in a nation of over 950 million people,

can we not find a Prime Minister who is an Indian by birth and origin (racial). By implication, there seems to be a feeling that there is a citizenship within citizenship. It is a non-legal definition of who is an Indian. And as Vir Sanghvi rightly points out, "each time we try and move away from a legal definition of Indian nationality, we run into problems. Many in the *Sangh Parivar* argue that Muslims are not truly Indian; they have extra-national loyalties. Sections of the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* argued last year that Christians were certainly not Indian, they owed allegiance to the Vatican."²⁸ To carry the argument further, if a tribal from the Northeast were to aspire to become the prime minister or president of India, it would be said: Is there nobody else than this tribal, who any way looks like a Chinese? In fact, Sonia Gandhi may appear more Indian than the people of the Northeast. As Vir Sanghvi says: "If you were to show a villager in Bihar a photograph of Sonia Gandhi wearing a *sari* and one of Sangma wearing a suit, the chances are that he would pick Sonia as the Indian and Sangma as the Chinaman."²⁹ The feeling of estrangement and unequal treatment felt by the Northeasterners is summed up in what one of them has to say in his recent travel to mainland India when he said: "History and geography of the Northeast appears to have been blanked out like the computer's virus wiping out all info-data stored in the computer."³⁰ However, he goes on to say: "Yet when we make a noise, military, para military forces are brought at once to silence the cries for equal treatment and justice. We wonder, are we a part of India or only a colonial out-

post?"³¹ It is quite natural for a people so insignificant in the eyes of the rest of India to want to be independent from that country. It is nothing but a quest for dignity and self-respect.

The future is not very bright for the tribals of the Northeast, even on the eve of the new millennium and after the celebrations of 50 years of India's Independence. The recent statements and plans of the BJP and its allied organizations like the VHP and Sangh Parivar are ominous for the tribals of the Northeast. The unfounded and ridiculous accusations against the missionaries by the VHP leader Ashok Singhal for "instigating the common people, seeking to create a sovereign state," his assertion that by propagating Christianity "the missionaries' sole ambition and objective was to back the insurgents to make unrest in the country," and his announcement that "about 10,000 Hindu missionaries were being trained by the VHP to work in all parts of the country," do not augur well for the tribals of the region. The BJP and the VHP and others who advocate *Hindutva* claim that the tribals who are following their traditional religion were once Hindus. However inclusive a religion Hinduism might be, to say that the tribals were Hindus before they became Christians is only with the sinister aim of discrediting Christians and the missionaries. If they were Hindus, let the tribals be the ones to say so, not the VHP or anybody else. Some pseudo-scholars who think they are experts on the tribes of the Northeast too think that the tribals were originally Hindus. For instance, K. Singh, asserts that "the scheduled tribes are mainly followers of Hinduism, 87.05 per

cent of their population..."³² He also maintains that the non-Christian tribals are Hindus. For example, according to him 79.94 per cent of 'any Kuki Tribes' are followers of Hinduism and 20.06 percent are Christians, according to the records of 1971 census.³³ This is far from the truth. By 1971, the vast majority of the Kuki tribes had embraced Christianity. There were hardly any left who were following the traditional religion, not to speak of Hinduism. S. K. Tiwari is another author who claims that "all the Indian tribals followed the primitive form of Hinduism."³⁴ If the VHP and others think that the tribals were Hindus originally, why have they kept themselves away from the tribals so long? Hence, it is relevant to ask: "where was the VHP one hundred years ago when the region was a jungle? Why did it not provide educational and health care facilities for the people here? Why the sudden interest in the region?"³⁵ The fact of the matter is that the Hindus who came in contact with the tribals did not consider the tribals worthy of being converted to Hinduism.

The hill tribes of Manipur (till recently or still today in some places and by some) were called *hao* (a derogatory designation) and were not allowed to enter the houses of Manipuri Hindus. It was considered to be a defilement. If a tribal wanted to meet a Manipuri Hindu, he could only shout from a distance in front of the court yard of the house. The tribals were thus treated like dirt by the Hindus. How can the VHP and similar organizations claim that the tribals were Hindus before and make attempts to re-convert them. Even if the tribals were Hindus and were converted to Chris-

tianity, for whatever reason, it was their own decision, in their best interest. Hence, they should be respected for having made that decision. The frequent accusation that the tribals were converted to Christianity by force or inducements is an insult to the tribals as if they are incapable making decisions on their own. The tribals have made many decisions on their own in the past and the decision to become Christians also was entirely their own. Others should respect that. No missionary ever forced a tribal to become a Christian. On the contrary many tribals embraced Christianity inspite of initial opposition from their families, clans and village and many suffered persecution for it. The tribals embraced Christianity because it gave them a sense of identity, equality and respect. The Christian missionaries gave them these feelings and made them feel that they are inferior to none given the chance to prove themselves. Thus, a whole range of new possibilities were open to the tribals with the introduction and encouragement of education. The reason why tribals did not embrace Hinduism was the fact that there never was a serious attempt to convert them to Hinduism. It might have been due to the fact, as mentioned earlier, that the tribals were not considered worth converting. It is providential that they did not because, if they had, they (tribals) would have been "placed at the bottom of a caste hierarchy..."³⁶

The people who practised coercion in Manipur were the Hindu missionaries. Vaishnavism became the official religion in Manipur with accession to the throne of Garib Niwaz (1709- 1748 A.D.) and "a serious attempt was made

to impose it upon the people as a whole and punishments were prescribed for those indulging in blatant non-Hindu activities.”³⁷ In 1717, the king with some of his followers received the sacred thread from Guru Govind Das and “this marked the beginning of the period of forcible Hinduization in which not only were the Hindu gods afforded royal support but those who offended against Hindu ritual were also punished.”³⁸ About “123 Meitei manuscripts, or *Puyas*” were also burnt which is commemorated in the practice of *Puya Meithaba* (setting the manuscripts on fire) and an “unaccounted number of temples of the nine *Umangglais* (sylvan gods presiding over villages and lineages) were also destructed.”³⁹ The name Manipur itself was given by them and they were responsible for destroying *Sanamahim*, the original/traditional religion of Manipur and imposing Vaishnavite Hinduism.⁴⁰

Conclusion

We have taken the militant movements or the insurgencies in the North-east as the point of departure because they are the ones which make newspaper headlines and the region is known through them. Like many other organizations and movements, the militant organizations of the region too have lost quite a bit of their original ideology and goals. However, these movements in so far as they represent a cry for identity, acceptance, equality, etc., still have mass support because they express the deep yearning of peoples. While persevering in their demand for the fulfilment of their rights and legitimate aspirations, the tribals need to realize that they must first

and foremost inculcate these values among themselves. The claim for a distinct identity will be meaningless, if the tribals themselves lose their cultural roots.

The contribution of Christianity and Christian missionaries to the well-being of the tribals so far is beyond dispute. They have “opened the floodgates of education for the tribals of the North-east. Consequently they are open to see the injustices done to them, the neglect and domination they have suffered for centuries.... The task of the Christian missions will remain incomplete if it remains at the level of opening the eyes of the tribals without actively promoting and enabling them towards the achievement of their longings and desires.”⁴¹ Education in culture should also be part and parcel of the educational system. The tribal youth must be taught how to sing their cultural songs; how to dance their cultural dances and preserve other cultural values. In olden days, there were certain in-built structures like celebrations of certain festivals, morungs (bachelor’s dormitory), whereby the youth could get instruction in their cultural heritage. Those structures have been replaced by the school, the parish, etc. Hence, these must take on the task of educating the youth in their culture. Even if a political identity and autonomy is obtained, without a cultural identity, it will be hollow and meaningless.

According to Kuldeep Nayar, “while New Delhi’s earlier policy was purely oppression, imposition of laws violating human rights, now it is sheer money, which is spreading like water.”⁴² The solution lies in giving more autonomy to

the tribals, to have a say in the ordinary affairs of their life. "While complete political independence may realistically not be expedient, the Government in the

centre must give a special status, more autonomy to this region instead of making them beg for every thing and dictating every move of the region from Delhi."⁴³

Notes

1. S. K. Ghosh, *India's North-East: Fifty Turbulent Years*, Titagarh, Linkman Publication, 1997.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
3. B. K. Rpy Burman, "Insurgency: Its Dynamics and Vision for the Northeast India," in B. Pakem, *Insurgency in North-East India*, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1997, p. 21.
4. Other organizations like ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) and PLA (People's Liberation Army) of the Meiteis of Manipur Valley are not considered because they are non-tribal and hence beyond the scope of this article.
5. S. Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1994, p.xviii.
6. P. Haokip, "The Challenges to the Church in Northeast India", *The Diocesan Priest*, 8 (1996) 2, p. 6.
7. The Innerline Permit is a regulation that requires even citizens of India, who are not of the region, to acquire permission from the state authority to enter that state.
8. B. G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996, p. 285
9. *Ibid.*
10. K. Maitra, *The Nagas Rebel and Insurgency in the Northeast*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1998, p. 21.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
13. A. Mao, *The Nagas: A Missionary Challenge* (Doct.dissertation), Bangalore, St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, 1998, p.192.
14. K. Maitra, p. 19.
15. R. N. Prasad, *Government and Politics in Mizoram 1947-1986*, New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1987, pp. 161-242.
16. Hazarika, p.249.
17. Verghese, p. 285.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
20. V. Sanghvi, "Can the Twain Meet?", *Sunday*, (7-13) April, 1996, p. 8.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
22. *Ibid.*
23. K. Nayar, "Between the Lines: Defiance by the Nagas", *The Sentinel*, 8 March, 1995, p. 4.
24. Hazarika, p. xviii.

25. Quoted by Hazarika, "Insurgency in Northeast India," in B. Pakem, ed., *Insurgency in the Northeast*, p. 120.
26. K. Kumar, "Civic Fatalism: Citizens' Loss of Sensitivity and Grace", *The Times of India*, 13 March, 1999, p. 10.
27. Editorial, "Who is Backward", *Wisdom*, 25(1997)11, p. 42.
28. V. Sanghvi, "Indian, by Choice", *The Telegraph*, 23 May, 1999, p. 10.
29. *Ibid.*
30. P. B. M. Basaiawmoit, "A Pre-New Millennium Travelogue," *The Meghalaya Guardian*, 3 June (1999), p. 4.
31. *Ibid.*
32. K. S. Singh, *People of India: The Scheduled Tribes, National Series Volume III*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 12.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 648.
34. S. K. Tiwari, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Tribals*, vol. I, Delhi: Rahul Publishing House, 1994, p. 19.
35. P. Mukhim, "What is the VHP Agenda for the North-East: Growing Threat to Secularism", *The Shillong Times*, 21, November, 1997, p. 4.
36. Verghese, p. 283.
37. P. Saroj Nalini, *The Religion of Manipur*, Calcutta, Firma Klm, 1980, p. 135.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
39. O. Sunil, "Burning of Meitei Scripts Commemorated," *The Northeast Telegraph*, 23 January, 1998, p. 6.
40. *Ibid.*
41. P. Haokip, "A response to Dr. Thomas C. Joshua: Christian Impact and Conflict Resolution in Manipur", in J. Puthenpurakal, ed. *Impact of Christianity on Northeast India*, Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publication, 1996, p.506.
42. Nayar, p. 4.
43. Haokip, p. 506.