

8 Troubled Periphery

a population of nearly 5 million and a territory close to 60,000 square miles, Assam emerged as one of the largest provinces in British India.

Greater Assam, first under the British and then in the first 25 years after Indian independence, remained a heterogeneous entity—and a troubled one. The Assamese and the Bengalis were involved in a fierce competition to control the province, both sidestepping the aspirations of the numerous tribespeople whose homelands were incorporated into Assam (and thus into the British Indian empire) for the first time in their history. The British found it administratively useful to group together the totally diverse areas on Bengal's North Eastern frontier into Assam. Later, this exercise was followed by an attempt to integrate the frontier marches on the North East of Bengal with the hill regions of upper Burma in what came to be known as the Crown Colony proposal. This was not because the vast multitude of tribespeople in this long border stretch had anything in common except their Mongoloid racial features, but because the British saw in their antipathy to the plains people of India and Burma an opportunity to forge together a political entity that would tolerate the limited presence of British power even after it was forced to retreat from India after the Second World War.

So, the British were only too keen to exacerbate the hills-plains divide. The Government of India Act of 1919 (Montagu-Chelmsford reforms) provided powers to the governor-general to declare any tract a 'Backward Area' and bar the application of normal provincial legislation there. Within a decade, the Garo Hills, the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Mikir Hills, the North Cachar Hills, the Naga and the Lushai hills districts and the three frontier tracts of Balipara, Lakhimpur and Sadiya were all designated as Backward Areas. The Simon Commission recommended designating these Backward Areas as Excluded Areas and the 1935 Government of India Act reorganized the Backward Areas of Assam into the Excluded Areas of the North East Frontier Tract (now Arunachal Pradesh), Naga Hills District (now Nagaland), Lushai Hills District (now Mizoram) and North Cachar Hills District, while the Garo Hills, the Mikir Hills and the Khasi-Jaintia Hills (later to become Meghalaya) were reconstituted as 'Partially Excluded Areas'. As princely states, Tripura and Manipur remained beyond the scope of this reorganization.

In 1929, the Simon Commission justified the creation of Excluded Areas in this way:

The stage of development reached by the inhabitants of these areas prevents the possibility of applying to them methods of representation adopted elsewhere. They do not ask for self-determination, but for security of land tenure and freedom in the pursuit of their ancestral customs. Their contentment does not depend so much on rapid political advance as on experienced and sympathetic handling and on protection from economic subjugation by their neighbours.⁹

The Simon Commission was boycotted by the Congress and the major Indian parties but when it arrived in Shillong, capital of Greater Assam, as many as 27 representations were made to it by the Bodos and other plains tribals, the Naga Club of Kohima, the Khasi National Durbar and even the Assam government.

Dr J.H. Hutton's representation on behalf of the Assam government was indicative of British thinking on how to administer the North Eastern frontier region. It also gave enough indication of the conscious attempt the British were to make subsequently to split up the huge province of Assam between its rich plains and remote hills. Hutton opposed joining the 'backward hills' with the 'advanced plains' because the 'irreconcilable culture of the two could only produce an unnatural union'. His key recommendation was:

[...] the gradual creation of self-governing communities, semi-independent in nature, secured by treaties on the lines of the Shan States in Burma, for whose external relations alone the Governor of the province would be ultimately responsible. Given self-determination to that extent, it would always be open to a functioning hill state to apply for amalgamation if so desired and satisfy the other party of the advantage of its incorporation.¹⁰

Hutton's influence (and that of N.E. Parry, the deputy commissioner of the Lushai Hills District) on the final report of the Simon Commission was evident in its recommendations for the North Eastern frontier. On 12 August 1930, the Simon Commission suggested that 'it might be desirable to combine the administration of the backward tracts of Assam with that of the Arakans, Chittagong and Pakkoko Hill Tracts, the Chin Hills and the area inhabited by the Rangpang

10 Troubled Periphery

Nagas on both sides of the Patkai range'.¹¹ The British were clearly contemplating a new political-administrative entity that would club together the hill regions of India's North Eastern frontier and Burma's northern and western hill regions.

A definitive proposal along these lines was drawn up by Sir Robert Reid, governor of Assam, between 1939 and 1942. In his *Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam*, Reid observed:

The inhabitants of the Excluded Areas would not now be ready to join in any constitution in which they would be in danger of coming under the political domination of the Indians. The Excluded Areas are less politically minded and I have no doubt as to their dislike to be attached to India under a Parliamentary system. Throughout the hills, the Indian of the plains is despised for his effeminacy but feared for his cunning. The people of the hills of Assam are as eager to work out their own salvation free from Indian domination as are the people of Burma and for the same reason.

Colonial administrators like Reid, Hutton and Parry, who were keen on the separation of the plains and the hills of Greater Assam, were reviving the idea of a North Eastern province of British Indian Dominions—a province that would bring the vast region from the southern tip of the Lushai (or Lakher) Hills to the Balipara Tract on the border with Tibet under one administration, encompassing the Chin Hills, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Naga Hills and the Shan states of Burma. Reid was also prepared to sever Sylhet and Cachar from Assam as he considered the union 'unnatural'. Reginald Coupland, Beit Professor at Oxford, also fostered the idea of a greater union of tribes and smaller nationalities on the India–Burma frontier that could emerge into a 'Crown Colony' once the British were forced to leave India. In his book, *British Obligation: The Future of India*, Coupland argued the case for a Crown Colony that would ensure British strategic presence, as in Singapore or Aden or the Persian Gulf, in the post-colonial subcontinent.¹² The only difference was that while Singapore, Aden or the Persian Gulf lay on key sea routes, the proposed Crown Colony on the India–Burma frontier would be an inland entity with possible sea access only through the Arakans.

However, London abandoned the idea of a union of tribespeople on the India–Burma frontier in 1943 in view of what it described as ‘immense difficulties’ involved in the exercise. Reid’s successor, Sir Andrew Clow, opposed the breaking up of Assam, which, without the hill areas, would become ‘a long narrow finger stretching up the Brahmaputra Valley’. He saw the Assam valleys as a ‘viable commercial proposition’ and preferred a future in which the Tribal Areas and the Excluded Areas were retained in Assam to provide for a stable administration of a difficult frontier. As the Second World War was drawing to a close, a meeting was held on 10 March 1945 at the Department of External Affairs in London. It was attended, among others, by Olaf Caroe, secretary of external affairs, J.P. Mills, adviser to the governor of Assam, and Jack McGuire of the Scheduled Areas Department. The Burmese government was opposed to the suggested amalgamation of its hill areas with northeast India and therefore proposed merely ‘an agency on the Burmese side and one on the Indian side under separate forms of administration eventually being contemplated as federating with Burma or India’.¹³ It was generally agreed that ‘the boundaries would be drawn with regard to ethnography rather than geographically’ so that individual tribes would not be split up between two administrations.

For similar reasons, the Crown Colony idea was given a silent burial in the humdrum of the transfer of power in the Indian subcontinent. By then, however, the tribespeople had seen a world war on their home turf. They saw in the imminent withdrawal of the imperial power an opportunity to regain the freedom they had enjoyed before the advent of the British. But if British manoeuvres had slowly turned this diverse hill area from a listless frontier into an administrative region held together to promote imperial interests, then the partition of the subcontinent and the break-up of British Bengal completed the process of turning it into a distinct geographical entity precariously detached from the Indian heartland. Cyril Radcliffe’s pen left Assam, its sprawling hill regions and the princely kingdoms of Tripura and Manipur clinging to the Indian heartland by a 21-km-wide corridor below Bhutan and Tibet.

Despite being incorporated into Assam, every distinct area on Bengal’s North Eastern frontier had historically relied on one or two border districts of eastern Bengal or Burma as their conduit to the

world. Assam and its southern belly consist of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills and the Bengali region of Cachar, and the trans-border reference point was Sylhet and Mymensingh. For Tripura, it was Comilla and for the Mizo Hills it was Chittagong and the Chin Hills of Burma. For the Nagas and the tribespeople of what is now Arunachal Pradesh, Burma's Kachin Hills, the Naga-dominated western Sagaing division and the southern reaches of Tibet were natural reference points as immediate neighbours. The geographical links that were sustained by proximity and trade were suddenly severed, forcing the inhabitants to look for alternatives. With Comilla in a different country, Tripura needed the Assam–Agartala road to stay in touch with India. With Chittagong gone, Mizoram needs the Silchar–Aizawl highway. Moreover, everyone in the North East—and the Indian heartland—need the Siliguri Corridor to make sense of what Hutton and Parry described as an ‘unnatural union’.

The Radcliffe Award forced all these frontier people to turn towards each other for the first time in history. The Bengal they knew was gone, having become a different country. Bengal's western half, always closer to the Indian heartland than its eastern half, was now the region's tenuous link to the rest of India. The North East slowly evolved as a territorial-administrative region, as Greater Assam petered out as the familiar unit of public imagination. As Delhi sought to consolidate its grip on 2,25,000 sq. km of hills and plains east of the Siliguri Corridor and manage the conflicting agendas of the great multitude of ethnic groups living in this area surrounded by China, Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Burma and Bhutan, a directional category was found to be more useful—much like ‘South Asia’ has been found to be more preferable to ‘Indian subcontinent’ after the Partition. Just as physical distance exacerbated the cultural divide between the two Pakistan and ultimately led to their violent divorce, the broad racial differences between India and its North East and the tenuous geographical link contributed to a certain alienation, a feeling of ‘otherness’ that subsequently gave rise to a political culture of violent separatism.

As the British left, the Constituent Assembly set up an advisory committee to make recommendations for the development of the tribal areas of northeast India. A sub-committee headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, later chief minister of Assam, was set up with four other

tribal leaders: Rupnath Brahma (a Bodo), Reverend J.J.M. Nichols-Roy (a Khasi), Aliba Imti (a Naga) and A.V. Thakkar (a Gandhian social worker active in the North East). The committee found that the assimilation of the North Eastern tribals into the Indian mainstream was 'minimal', and that they were very sensitive to any interference with their lands and forests, their customary laws and way of life. The sub-committee recommended formation of autonomous regional and district councils that could provide adequate safeguards to the tribals in preserving their lands and customs, language and culture. Opinions in the Constituent Assembly were divided, but persuasion by communist leader Jaipal Singh and decisive intervention by the Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar carried the day. Ambedkar argued that while tribals elsewhere in India had become Hindus and assimilated with the mainstream culture, in northeast India they had remained outside the Indian influence. Indeed, Ambedkar went so far as to compare their condition with the 'Red Indians' in the US.

Under Ambedkar's influence, it was decided that the district and regional councils would be provided with sufficient autonomy and their administration would be vested in the governor rather than in the state legislative assembly. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution was created, vested with the provisions for the creation of the autonomous regional and the district councils. The autonomy provisions were fairly extensive, covering powers to draft laws for local administration, land, management of forests and customary laws, education and health administration at the grassroots. In 1952, five district councils were created in Assam, one each for the Garo Hills, the united Khasi-Jaintia Hills (now in Meghalaya), the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram), the United Mikir (Karbi) Hills and the North Cachar Hills (still in Assam). The Naga Hills, where the Naga National Council had already demanded separation from India, was not given the benefit of autonomy under the Sixth Schedule for reasons never properly explained. As a result, armed separatism gained ground in the Naga Hills. The intensity of the rebellion there and the rout of the Indian army in the brief border war with China in 1962 finally prompted India to concede a full separate state to the Nagas in 1963.

And that was the first nail in the coffin of Greater Assam. Up until then, with the exception of Tripura and Manipur, the two erstwhile

7514

princely states administered as Union Territories since their merger with the Indian Union, the rest of India east of the Siliguri Corridor was Assam. Only the tribal areas of the frontier tracts bordering Tibet were administered separately from Assam as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). In fact, the North East frontier (as opposed to the region that it is today) began to emerge in 1875–76, when the Inner Line of the Lakhimpur and Darrang districts of Assam were brought under Regulation II of 1873. In 1880, the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation was passed by the British; it started the process by which the administration of the frontier tracts of Sadiya, Lakhimpur and Balipara was slowly handed over to the governor of Assam as distinct from the government of Assam. The Indian constitution put the president of India in charge of the administration of these frontier tracts (different from its hill districts) and representation for NEFA was provided by an Act in 1950. The administration of these tracts continued to be carried out by political officers and their assistants.

In 1969, the Panchayat Raj Regulations already in effect elsewhere in India were extended to NEFA, leading to the creation of Gaon Panchayats, Anchal Samitis and Zilla Parishads under the supervision of the Pradesh Council. The Pradesh Council was the precursor of the state legislative assembly and consisted of Zilla Parishad members and those nominated by the chief commissioner of NEFA. NEFA became a Union Territory in 1973 with its name changed to Arunachal Pradesh. It finally became a full state in 1987, along with Mizoram.

GREATER ASSAM OR 'NORTH EAST'

The Indian National Congress, which ruled the country until its first defeat in the national parliamentary elections in 1977, had favoured the creation of linguistic states even before independence. So, it supported the annulment of the Partition of Bengal in 1905. In its Nagpur session in 1920, the Congress made it clear that the 'time has come for the redistribution of the provinces on a linguistic basis'. This was reiterated by the Congress in its many subsequent annual sessions and was also reflected in its election manifesto of 1945–46.

In 1948, the Linguistic Provinces Commission of the Constituent Assembly argued that for purposes of state reorganization, 'apart from the homogeneity of language, stress should also be given to history, geography, economy and cultural mores'. The State Reorganization Commission (SRC) was set up in December 1953 to 'dispassionately and objectively' consider the question of reorganizing the states of the Union. Though it recommended formation of states giving 'greatest importance to language and culture', the SRC said in a note:

In considering reorganization of States, however, there are other important factors which have also to be borne in mind. The first essential consideration is the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India. Financial, economic and administrative considerations are almost equally important not only from the point of view of each state but for the whole nation. (emphasis mine)

Clearly, the SRC was unwilling to recommend the use of the linguistic principle in the North East because it was uncertain about how the stability of a sensitive frontier region would be affected by such a move. The Assam government, in its representation to the SRC, advocated the preservation of the *status quo*. It would not be opposed, it said, to the merger of Cooch Behar, Manipur and Tripura. Needless to say, all political parties in these areas opposed moves for a possible merger with Assam. Proposals were put forward for a Kamtapur state that would encompass the Goalpara district of Assam, the Garo Hills, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. (These proposals were recently revived by some tribal groups in the northern districts of West Bengal like the Kamtapur Peoples Party and the underground Kamtapur Liberation Organisation.) A proposal for a Purbachal state with the Bengali-majority Cachar district at its core was also placed before the SRC. Leaders of the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo Hills led by Captain Williamson Sangma also raised the demand for a hill state because they felt the autonomy provisions of the Sixth Schedule did not adequately protect tribal interests.

In its final recommendations, the SRC argued for a 'large and relatively resourceful state on the border rather than small and less resilient units'—in other words, for Tripura's merger with Assam so that the entire border with Pakistan could be brought under one