

The discourse on the North-East revolves around three principal points of reference - politics, economics, and culture. These are, of course, not mutually exclusive; and, very often, in the actual debate, they are intimately connected with one another. Thus, an argument for political autonomy may include an argument for economic as well as cultural autonomy; an argument for economic self-sufficiency may be buttressed by an assertion - if not articulation - of cultural singularity and political freedom; and economic and political freedom may be seen as necessary constituents of cultural freedom. But, in spite of their intimate inter-relationship, the terms of reference are distinct from one another - and this distinctness frequently determines the specific quality of a movement or collective action in the North-East. Thus, think of the various so-called insurgency movements with names of such bewildering alphabetical variegation: KIA, NSCN, MNF, ULFA, BVF, BDSF, FGN, KNA, KNF, UNLF, TVNF, RPF, M-C-Z LF and so on. Also, think of the cultural movements pivoted by the Sahitya Sabhas and similar organizations of different linguistic communities and the various student organizations and the movements at different points of time for or against some economic 'developmental' measure or other.

In the matter of the *political* aspirations of the peoples of the North-East, the bounds of the debate are determined by concepts, such as national integration, national unity, and the Indian constitution. As very little debate is possible outside these bounds, movements for independence very quickly turn into armed struggles or insurgencies. The official Indian response to this is an armed solution, whether in the shape of considerable army operations, or of para-military and police action of various degrees of intensity. A factor which, perhaps, contributes towards a violent expression of aspirations for political independence is the absence of a language native to a community in terms of which to generate a complex, nuanced, authentic and imaginative articulation of the idea of freedom. In the absence of such a language, the articulation takes place in the language of ideologies fashioned elsewhere and not internalized to any appreciable degree. Reduced thus to a kind of muteness, it is, therefore not very surprising that

## India's North-East and North-East's India

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people express their resulting frustration and anxiety in violence. This - I repeat - might only be a contributing cause and certainly not the only cause. One must, of course, also remember the international ramifications of an armed struggle.

But, there are also those movements which accept - more or less - the bounds of the debate I mentioned a while ago, namely, national integration, national unity and the Constitution of India - movements for a separate state, more autonomy within a state, for cultural security, against foreigners and outsiders and so on. Some of them tend to take on a violent form, and some have armed wings which very frequently threaten to separate themselves from their parent body and acquire a life

point to realize here is, of course, that economic self-sufficiency is also the natural basis for a sense of moral, cultural and civilizational autonomy. And self-sufficiency is not something that can come as a gift - it must come through one's own effort and vision.

About *cultural* issues, the idea of a mainstream - never made clear to any appreciable degree - is no longer very popular. Pluralism - and not unity-in-diversity - seems now to be the central theoretical idea in terms of which we are to try and make sense of the cultural predicament of the North-East. But pluralism raises questions which are even more difficult than the idea of unity-in-diversity ever raised - questions such as: How is intercultural contact

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of their own. The official stance on these movements has, more often than not, been reactive rather than responsive - more like reflex actions than something informed by intelligence, sensitivity, care and concern.

The *economy* of the North-East - and it does not require an economist to say this - is stagnant. It lost its inner motivation ever since it was debarred access, through the drawing of international boundaries - a peculiarly modern and painfully divisive phenomenon - to the north, to the east, and to the south and to the west. In the entire economic discourse, while there are powerful arguments seeking to demonstrate colonial or quasi-colonial exploitation of the area by the 'centre' - and there are equally powerful pleas for modernization and industrialization - I do not find an argument for the economic self-sufficiency of the region. It seems that we have all accepted the inevitability of the dependent status of the North-Eastern economy. The important

at all possible? Is cultural solipsism the necessary consequence of the serious acceptance of the idea of pluralism? What really constitutes the integrity and identity of a culture? What does it really mean to respect, to be generous to, or to love another culture? It seems that these are deep philosophical and psychological questions to which there are no easy answers. Add to this the difficulty of a culture articulating its relationship to its own past - especially in view of the fact that many of the cultures of the North-East have lost, either through deliberate human manipulation and machination, or through the pulverizing social changes that are taking place, any vital contact with their own pasts. The anxiety of a lost past may be comparable - although it is dangerous to take such comparisons more seriously than one really should - to the anxiety about the personal identity of a person who suffers a total or near-total amnesia. The anxiety is not just one of finding the right logical

answer to the question, 'Who am I?', but has profound moral and spiritual dimensions. Many self-confessedly revivalist movements in the North-East are at once expressions of a similar anxiety and poignant attempts to recover a trampled past.

While cultural assimilation is open to the dangers of a distorting cultural egoism, cultural pluralism may - paradoxical as it may sound - lead to a blinding cultural solipsism where no moral or epistemic question about the cultural other can even arise.

I might end by mentioning a thought contained in a reported remark of Gandhi's to Phizo - a thought which might serve as a reference point for the Seminar. On the Naga question, Gandhi is reported to have said to Phizo: 'Nagas have every right to be independent... [but] we want you to feel India is yours... I feel Naga Hills are mine just as much as they are yours'. I cannot think of a better summing up of the problems as well as the prospects of the North-East - and I emphasize both problems and prospects.

At the end, I would like to say that the overwhelming majority of the people of the North-East - in spite of everything - feel, in Gandhi's words, India is theirs. What the mainstream India has not been able to show in response - and I say this as a totally committed Indian, not as a North-Easterner - is a sense of gratitude to the people of the North-East. Gratitude is a kind of knowledge - knowledge of the goodness of the one you are grateful to. A person or a people who is incapable of feeling gratitude is therefore blind to an important aspect of human life. He arrogantly takes over people's goodness towards him as his due, or he sees it as an expression of weakness, servility or stupidity in them. His conception of other people therefore lacks a vital dimension - it is terribly impoverished. Of course, I am not saying that there is an incapacity for gratitude; there is only a lack of it, and a lack can be removed much more easily than an incapacity.

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