

## **Introducing the Spirit of the North-East India**

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A number of distinguished scholars have contributed enlightening papers for the seminar which is being inaugurated on 10th January, 2009. The over-arching theme of the seminar is "Spirit of the North-East India." While this region intermingling of races have taken place, and is even now an ongoing process the region presents a mosaic of cultures. While forming part of a whole, each culture maintains its distinct identity. In this context it seems to be an anathema to speak of the spirit of the region.

But the nature of the terrain and the geographical location of the tract have helped in sustaining a spirit of adventurism on the one hand and of wide ranging accommodation without accepting subjugation of any entity on the other.

The mountainous and sub-mountainous nature of the terrain with its friendly and not so friendly flora and fauna on the one hand, garlanded by the mighty Brahmaputra and its torrential tributaries and branches and waterways on the other, awaken the dormant spirit of adventure which is a species attribute of humans.

Geographical location of the region in the tri junction of South, South East and East Asia provided the impetus and the opportunity to serve as the link among the three subcontinents of Asia. In fact there is reason to believe that through Tibet the region served as a link with Central Asia also.

Pre-history and history of the old world provide evidences of long distance trade emanating from the South-East Asia being carried out through the different parts of the region till the disruption of the same with the emergence of the marine trade in the medieval period.

Long distance trade used to be carried out through an interlinked relay system among a large number of communities. In other words a large number of communities played bridge and buffer roles in international relations, in which the North-East region was the nuclear area.

By and large this spirit was manifested by the people of the North-East India during the colonial rule and even in the post-colonial period.

Tirhut Singh, the syiem (King) of Nokhalau in Khasi Hills, Prince Tikendrajit Singh of Manipur, the leaders of peasant uprisings in Assam, and Tripura, the chiefs and peoples of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal, who resisted colonial impositions all through the 19th and early 20th centuries embody this spirit.

Tirhut Singh fought against the British for four years during 1829-1833 and then was captured and lodged in jail in Dhaka. The British offered to restore his kingdom provided that he accepted their suzerainty. In response he wrote "It is better to die in prison than

to reign as a slave king". Tikendrait Singh was a warm hearted person and was personal friend of many British he preferred to go the gallows.

Even today one can see the spirit of accommodative confrontation in the North-East. The Naga militants have been carrying on their struggle for five decades, but except for stray incidents no physical violence has been perpetrated on civilian population, except for those who are suspected to be spies. They however, did not spare their factional rivals. It is more remarkable that except one, there was no reported case of rape or molestation of women. When the heinous crime of rape was committed by Naga youth, the Mothers union, some of whose members were sympathetic to the militants, came out in a procession in Kohima, to mark their protest. The youth was forced to leave Nagaland. In Assam the students carried on struggle for expelling from the state, the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. They declared that the struggles will be a non-violent one. Though, lakhs of persons, males and females, young and old.

Participated in the processions, sit-in strikes, except for stray cases, by and large, the movement remained non-violent. Another aspect of the struggle was worth mentioning. At first the students wanted 1951 to be the cut-off date for expelling the illegal migrants. Their attention was drawn to a fact that in 1965 in the wake of Indo-Pakistan war, when large influx of refugees had taken place from the then East Pakistan, while West Bengal refused to settle any refugee in that state on the ground of shortage of space. Assam agreed to settle 12000 refugees, the student leaders were asked whether they would go back on the magnanimity of their elders. They agreed to 1971 as the cut-off date. This shows the great civilization value entertained by the people of Assam.

The P.L.A. in Manipur, while carrying on bank looting, arms snatching etc. has not done physical harm to civilian population, except for those officials who were accused of doing excesses against them.

One particular incident is perhaps unique anywhere in the world. In 1980, Smt. Indira Gandhi visited a village in an insurgent prone area in Manipur. The insurgents through an intermediary offered to look after a security of the Prime Minister provided that the army outpost located on the village was removed. The village elders were consulted. They confirmed that if their sons had made the offer they would certainly stand by the same. Prime Minister was informed. An extra-ordinarily courageous lady that she was, she ordered the removal of the army outpost. Not only the army personnel were removed, the barrack was raged to the ground and the place was turned into a helipad. The helicopter carrying the prime minister landed on the spot. The Prime Minister went to the destination at a distance of 2 km in an open jeep as a gesture of her confidence in the people. The insurgents joined the armed police to ensure the security of the Prime Minister.

All these speak of the great civilizational value cherished by the people of the region. Most people in India disagree with the politics of the militants, it is however hoped that most people will admire and respect the civilizational value cherished by the people of North-East India. This value is the spirit of the region. At the same time it must also be

recorded that the cowardly action of serial bombings, alleged to be carried out by ULFA, is not only against the spirit of the region as whole; it is against the spirit of Assam in particular