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Negotiating Modernisation

Challenges and Response¹ in Arunachal Pradesh

Tajen Dabi

Modernisation² has brought about tremendous change in Arunachal Pradesh³. Though contact⁴ with the world outside has been there in some form or another, the nature and degree of contact and the consequent impact has changed dramatically in the post-Independence period; since the beginning of the 1960s all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have come under the scope of state-sponsored development⁵. The state boasts of an assortment of rich and diverse culture⁶ and a plurality of ethnic communities distanced from each other by language⁷ and geography. Evolved gradually⁸ into a full-fledged state from the remnants of a colonial past, the experience of varied ethnic groups under a single and uniform political setup has been a remarkable story of (re)discovering⁹ itself; recognising and accepting the other¹⁰ as part of a given political identity¹¹; and negotiating a secure¹² and honourable¹³ place in the cultural and political space of the emerging nation. The article makes a modest attempt to capture the dynamics of the recent episodes—socio-religious movements, language initiatives, and the changing socio¹⁴-cultural climate in the context of modernisation. The emphasis will be on the central belt¹⁵ of Arunachal Pradesh, the so called *Tani belt*¹⁶. In many fora¹⁷ there have been observations as to why there is no insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh¹⁸ (!). The Arunachal Dragon Force (ADF) is one reported outfit based in Lohit; there has been no report of its activities in recent times¹⁹. In the recent past there was the National Liberation Council of Taniland (NLCT)²⁰. It is all too obvious that there will be enquiries given the presence of a plethora of insurgent outfits present in the Northeast: there are 36 in Assam, 39 in Manipur, 04 in Meghalaya,

03 in Nagaland, 30 in Tripura, 02 in Mizoram, and 01 in Arunachal Pradesh, totalling 115,²¹ an average of one outfit for every three and half lakh population against the country's average of one crore and seventy seven lakh. It would not be improper to surmise that the logistics and social climate necessary for insurgency to take root and emerge has simply been absent in the state.

One possible reason lies in the way statehood was achieved; there was no prolonged democratic movement for the same. Consequently, any scope for germination of a common identity corresponding to the political boundary, based on which a common linguistic identity²² might have evolved, or any issue(s) which in succeeding years could become a possible agenda for a separatist outfit to exploit—like in neighbouring Assam²³—was seriously negated. If the history and experience of the other regions and communities of the Northeast is any indication, one most plausible explanation would be the absence of state-formation in this frontier. Second, the space that was created with the coming of statehood was enough, initially at least, to absorb the steadily growing educated youth in government jobs and related contract assignments. This, added with the cushion of the Nehru-Elwin policy²⁴ and continued enforcement of Inner Line Regulation, made sure that forces and circumstances for the growth of insurgency did not find a pasture in Arunachal Pradesh. Consequently, we do not find any informed group of people venting their voice against the state as such. The possibility of a section of people having a perception of being 'alienated' by the Indian²⁵ state is thus negated.

Third, the natives being distanced by geographical and language factors, did not portray an ideal picture from where a common agenda could evolve to inform their collective consciousness to fight for, if necessary, against the state, for a separate state or sovereignty, as is witnessed in the rest of the region. This brings us to the issue of how the natives perceived the modern democratic system and responded to it, so as to, one, further compliment the absence of militancy in the state, and two, thereby to carry forward the narrative of response to development.

The New 'Democratic'²⁶ Space in Elwin's Sanctuary²⁷

With the coming of electoral politics, the process of democratisation has been accelerated. This has been followed by a liberal grant²⁸ from the Centre from time to time, post-1962, in this strategically

Negotiating Modernisation

There is a particular pattern in the articulation of these neo-religious movements. Their target has primarily been (the spread of) Christianity. The other agencies of change are neglected. Therefore, we do not find any serious attempts at reforms at the social level⁵⁶—polygamy, child marriage, etc. Given the wide momentum and enthusiastic investment in religion, the absence of a similar counterpart in the social arena is conspicuous. The economic and psychological aspect of conversion has not been explored; focus is only towards 'preserving' the native faith, if possible, by re-inventing it, as is being done. The potential for genuine reform is becoming a casualty in the process. For example, in the case of the Nyishis "the dominating factor for the spread of Christianity...is undoubtedly, the perennial nature of rituals and sacrifices that are involved in tribal religion. Spirituality has never been a driving force behind the conversion..."⁵⁷

Conclusion

The broad contours of modernisation that emerge thus, are suggestive of the fact that the ethnic assertions and religious movements seek to create a niche in the broader space of the Indian nation⁵⁸—state rather than an attempt to create an independent and differing ideology as posited against the latter. It is the nature of the participation that offers an array of competitive ethnicism, and some semblance of collective imagination at times. Dynamics of underlying fissures and constant re-adjustment emerges in-between. Given the experience from other states in the region, (relative) peace—within and beyond the state—for long is neither argued.

Notes

1. The phrase is borrowed from B K Roy Burman's 'Challenges and Response in Tribal India' in M.S.A. Rao (ed.); *Social Movements in India: Studies in Peasant, Backward Classes, Sectarian, Tribal and Women's Movement*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2006, p. 317.
2. In using the term *modernization* I follow Giddens standard definition.
3. *Arunachali* is the term presently being argued to be used to refer to the people of the state, in an apparent attempt to build a common identity. Local dailies are the medium of this emerging debate. This paper also avoids the suffix 'Pradesh' for sake of brevity, as is being done by other researchers and commentators.