

CHAPTER XVI

ASSAM

677. We now proceed to consider the proposals for the reorganisation of States in north-eastern India with particular reference to the future of Assam. In the preceding Chapter we have examined the claims of the West Bengal Government to the Goalpara district of Assam. Before we deal with the other problems concerning this region, it may be desirable to describe briefly the background against which the various demands should, in our opinion, be considered.

678. The State of Assam is made up of the Brahmaputra (Assam) and Surma river valleys and the hilly areas to the north, south and east of these two river basins. The Brahmaputra valley, which is the most important and fertile tract in the State, contains six out of the seven plains districts. Communications between this area and the rest of the State, or for that matter with the rest of India, are still relatively undeveloped. Indeed, a former Governor of the State during the British period described the Brahmaputra valley as a broad central corridor or hall, from which small rooms corresponding to the hill districts open out on both sides, with, however, no connecting doors between them. This description remains substantially true to this day. The hill districts have to-day even more intimate administrative and economic links with the plains, in which incidentally about seven lakhs of tribal people are to be found.

679. From a historical point of view, Assam and north-east India seem to have been intended by nature to be the meeting place of many tribes and races. Right through its history, there has been immigration into and settlement in the state from various sources, with the result that till comparatively very recent times, that is to say, up to 1931, when linguistic tabulation was last undertaken, Assamese was not in fact a language spoken by a majority of the inhabitants of the State.

680. Assam also owes a great deal to capital and enterprise from outside the State; and its tea, coal and oil industries have been built up mainly as the result of such enterprise. The Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act, which is intended to regulate the recruitment of labour in the other States of India for the tea gardens in Assam, is a notable but not an isolated illustration of this statement.

The contribution which permanent or temporary immigrants into the State can make to the development of its economy is important even at the present time.

681. The major proposals regarding the eastern and southern boundaries of Assam will need to be considered in this perspective. These proposals as presented to the Commission can broadly be summarised as follows. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, the local Communist party, the Tripura State Congress Committee, and the Government of Assam are broadly in favour of the *status quo*. Assam, however, would welcome the merger, if possible, of Cooch-Bihar, Manipur and Tripura, and closer connection with the administration of the North-East Frontier Agency, which is now constitutionally part of Assam. The hill districts have pressed the case for the formation of a hill state. This demand, reiterated at the Tura (Garo Hills) Conference of tribal leaders in October, 1954, contemplates the unification of all the hill districts mentioned in Part A of the table appended to the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution, including also the Naga Hills district. The Naga National Council seeks independence from Assam and India and to remain aloof from the proposed hill state. As a compromise between these extreme positions, but for entirely different reasons, the formation of a Kamatapur State consisting of Goalpara, Garo Hills, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, or of a Purbachal State consisting of the area round Cachar has also been suggested.

The Hill State

682. We first deal with the demand for the creation of a hill state. This demand, it may be noted, is of comparatively recent origin. When the Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly on the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas, popularly known as the Bardoloi Committee, reported in July, 1947, the Naga demand for independence, as the Committee noted, was not supported by moderate elements. The other proposals made to the Committee ranged from a quasi-independent status to cultural autonomy for the individual districts. The scheme for a hill state had already been put forward and discussed in certain quarters, but had not yet taken any concrete shape. The Sub-Committee's report whose proposals are substantially incorporated into the Constitution rejected these various alternatives either directly or by implication. This report, it may be of interest to note, was supported by the tribal representative.

683. In the period of about eight years that has passed since the Bardoloi Committee reported, there has been an attempt on the part of certain elements in the hill districts to reopen this entire problem. The proposals which have been made for replacing the existing arrangements have, however, been various and conflicting.

684. It is of paramount importance to establish a stable administration in the north-east based on the goodwill of the tribal people, and it is clear that such an administration will have to be primarily concerned with the well-being of the tribes. We have, therefore, examined the proposal for a hill state with great care and sympathy and with particular regard to these objectives.

685. The problem in the hill areas at this stage is at least as much psychological as political. There is no denying the fact that the demand for a hill state partly reflects the separatist pull of the extremist elements. Other factors, however, appear to have lent support to the demand and these are:

- (i) suspicion and distrust of the people of the plains by the tribal people of this area;
- (ii) the diversity of races and cultures and the different levels of social, educational and political development in the different areas of this region which have prevented the tribal people from coming up to the level of the people in the plains;
- (iii) lack of communications in these areas which has made it difficult for the various tribes to come in close contact with the rest of India; and
- (iv) the economic backwardness of the region.

It has also been alleged that the Government of Assam has not been as sympathetic and helpful to the tribal people as it should have been.

686. The problem is, in a substantial measure, an inheritance from the pre-independence days. The extremist demands of the present time reflect what has sometimes been labelled the "national park" approach. This was fundamentally the British policy and there were attempts to demarcate the tribal zones and to isolate them, as far as possible, from external influences, preventing, in particular, immigration from elsewhere into the scheduled areas. This went to the extent of stopping Indian officers from entering these areas. The "inner line" regulation in the pre-independence period, although it was ostensibly intended to discourage unnecessary interference with

and the economic exploitation of the tribal people was administered rigorously so as to exclude all contact between them and the inhabitants of the plains districts.

687. The demand for a separate tribal State is partly a hang-over of this policy. With the departure of the British, however, conditions have changed radically in the sense that there is now a growing awareness amongst the tribal people of their political rights as full and equal citizens of the Indian Union, which they did not have, and, indeed, under the conditions which prevailed, could not well have had before Independence.

688. It is clear that, in these changed conditions, it is neither necessary nor desirable to confer on the tribes any immunity from external contacts to such an extent as to hamper their development. Legislation in order to prevent the rapid transfer and alienation of land and efforts to discourage money-lenders and to ease the transition from one level of economic development to another are, of course, necessary. But this policy cannot obviously be so administered as to freeze existing economic and cultural patterns and to inhibit healthy growth.

689. The results of the "inner line" regulation policy, as administered by the British, illustrate the dangers of deliberate and complete segregation. That policy, however, in point of fact, was not enforced so much against Europeans and Christians as against the other Indian communities. The broad effect of throwing the tribal areas open to some but not to all external influences during the period of the British occupation has been to divide the tribal people themselves, and to create, as a result of British and missionary influences, a new class, which has so far remained quite distinct from the general population either in the hills or in the plains. The creation of a new hill state will, in our opinion, accentuate these distinctions. It will, therefore, prove, in the long run, against the interests of the scheduled tribes.

690. During the initial phase of the changeover after 1947 the hill districts may not have received adequate attention. We do not, however, propose to examine the allegations of indifference to the needs of the hill districts, because the whole of Assam is, in a sense, backward. Assam, moreover, has had to face the consequences of Partition, so that the genuine grievances of the hill districts, such as the loss of Pakistan markets for the Garo and Mizo (Lushai) hills districts, or the inadequacy of rail or road communications, have

been the inevitable results of the disruption of Assam's economy rather than the consequences of any policies pursued by the Assam Government.

691. Some of the causes for misunderstanding have also been removed recently, as the implications of the various development and welfare schemes have come to be somewhat better appreciated. It seems to us that there has been, of late, a sincere attempt to bring into existence the machinery of District Councils, which is contained in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution, and to initiate welfare and development programmes with assistance from the Central Government, provided for in the second proviso to Article 275(1) of the Constitution.

692. The Government of Assam has tried to provide temporary relief by arranging for the subsidised sale of food, the air-lift of essential commodities and the building of essential roads. Important schemes for reclamation, like the Rongkhong and Nambhor reclamation schemes, pilot projects for *jhum* control and proposals for extending railway lines have also been under consideration. A major amendment to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation brought into force some years ago permits the creation of tribal belts where normally no non-tribal can acquire land. It is also possible that irrigation-cum-flood control projects on the Dihang and the Barak, proposals for the establishments of some industries in the Garo hills and schemes for the diversification of agriculture in the hills may be undertaken in the future.

693. It is naturally not possible at this stage to forecast the details of the development plans proposed for the hill areas. For our purpose, however, we take note of the important fact that, individually or together, the hill districts will not be able to command, even with such aid as may be granted by the Government of India, the resources in money, material or man-power needed to implement these development programmes.

694. Separation will add to the cost of administration, and the co-ordination of policies and programmes between the State of Assam and the hill areas on the one hand and between the hill districts themselves on the other will become more difficult. The scheme for a hill state, it must be noted, also contemplates that the capital of Assam and of the proposed hill state will be common, and that many institutions, apart from the Governor and the High Court, will be shared—an arrangement which will involve, in practice, a great deal of inconvenience and even conflict.

695. The impression which we have formed as a result of our tour of the area is that a substantial body of public opinion, even in the tribal areas of Assam, has not, by any means, been converted to the view that a new hill state should be formed.

696. Generally speaking, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills and the Mizo (Lushai) Hills are not in favour of a separate hill state and the district council in the Lushai Hills and the Karbi-a-Durbar (Mikir Hills National Council) are in favour of the *status quo*. The agitation in favour of a hill state is, therefore, confined virtually to the Garo and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Owing to their geographical position, these two districts have necessarily a closer association with the adjoining plains districts than the rest of the hill or tribal areas; even in these two districts, therefore, an influential section of opinion views with disfavour the formation of a separate hill state.

697. Taking all these factors into consideration, we have come to the conclusion that the formation of a hill state in this region is neither feasible nor in the interests of the tribal people themselves. The hill districts, therefore, should continue to form part of Assam and no major changes should be made in their present constitutional pattern.

Autonomous bodies

698. A question which figured prominently during the course of our enquiry concerning this region was the working of the district and regional autonomous bodies which were created under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. The consensus of opinion seems to be that the scheme is not working satisfactorily. However, as regards the lines on which the schemes of autonomy should be improved, we came across two diametrically opposite views.

699. One section of opinion representing the tribal interests desires as great a measure of autonomy as possible. This section complains of lack of sympathy from the administration, inadequacy of financial resources, interference from above, neglect of the tribal areas by the government, imposition of the Assamese language and culture, and the opening of tribal lands to the settlers from the plains. A private member's bill which is now before Parliament, to amend the Sixth Schedule in certain respects with a view to providing much greater power and autonomy to these bodies, broadly

700. On the other hand, there have been complaints to the effect that the experiment of delegating power and authority to the district councils has so far not been quite successful. It has been represented to us that the administration of these councils has tended to be bureaucratic; that the powers delegated to these bodies in respect of primary education have been used only for the benefit of certain classes; and that the system of judicial administration, which the councils have evolved has been unnecessarily expensive and not suited to the special needs of the tribal population. The Assam Government has complained that, while it has surrendered revenue in favour of these councils, the functions which, under the Sixth Schedule, have been allocated to these bodies have not yet been taken over by them, with the result that the local government is saddled with an unnecessarily heavy burden of expenditure. Even in regard to projects which are in the general interest, like the Umtru hydro-electric scheme in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, there have been difficulties and misunderstandings, largely because of the unhelpful attitude of the district council.

701. We do not propose to examine the merits of the two contending views. All that we would say would be that no proposal for the amendment of the Sixth Schedule, which would have the effect of encouraging disruptive tendencies, should be entertained. The Schedule is intended, by and large, to secure to the tribal population of Assam a simple form of government and a simple procedure for the settlement of disputes consistent with their present state of development and to moderate the impact of outside influences on their lives. Subject to this observation, we would recommend that the question of the working of the Sixth Schedule be examined comprehensively by a body specially constituted for this purpose. Paragraph 14 of the Sixth Schedule empowers the Governor to appoint such a body. This body should, in our opinion, consist of persons of adequate standing from outside the State, who have sympathy with the tribal people and understand their problems. The question should be examined with due regard to the promotion of the best interests of these people and the need for checking disruptive tendencies and securing good administration.

Commissioner for the Hill Districts

702. In the meantime, it seems necessary that some measures should be taken to ensure proper liaison between the Government of Assam and the autonomous district councils and to facilitate the formulation and implementation of schemes for the development of these areas. It is clear to us that a great deal of misunderstanding

is now due to a lack of adequate contact between the Assam Government and the district councils as regards both ordinary administration and development work. We were surprised to note that no use was being made at present of the district officers by the district councils and that no provision had been made in the Sixth Schedule for the maintenance of any contact between them. An important step in the direction of providing better liaison, in our opinion, will be the appointment of a Commissioner to be in charge of the administration and development of all the hill districts. We envisage that the Commissioner would act as the Governor's agent for the various purposes laid down in the Sixth Schedule; and that he with the assistance of the district officers would help the district councils in their various day-to-day problems so as to remove difficulties speedily. He may be assisted by a development board consisting among others of representatives of the different district councils. This should help to focus attention on the economic needs of this area and promote rapid development.

703. The natural resources which are available in the hill districts and the possibility of promoting schemes, which may increase the opportunities for gainful employment and the revenue now accruing from these areas, can be more fully investigated as a result of the constitution of the board. The scope for development, so far as we have been able to judge, is, by no means, negligible. The Umtru hydro-electric project in the Khasi and Jaintia hills, for example, has recently been sanctioned, but the power potential of the Umling river is believed to be much greater, and the second phase of this project and a thermal station at Cherrapunji are now under consideration. In the neighbouring Garo hills, there is believed to be some scope for the development of the coal and cement industries, and the proposal to construct railway lines in this district has been investigated more than once in the recent past, and even engineering surveys were completed some time back.

704. The extension of the north-eastern railway system, so as to cover the two western hill districts, namely, the Garo and the Khasi and Jaintia hills, and the extreme southern district, namely, the Mizo (Lushai) hills, may also have to be investigated. With the extension of communications in the future the development of cottage industries and the progressive replacement of *jhuming* by well-managed forests or fields and plantations growing marketable crops, the economy of the hills can be more completely integrated with that of the plains.

Purbachal

705. The proposal for the formation of a Purbachal State, like the demand for the creation of a hill State, is not new. It was examined by the Congress organisation in 1948 but was not pursued; and in one of the forms in which it has now been revived, the Purbachal scheme provides for the constitution of Cachar, Tripura, the Mizo (Lushai) Hills, the Naga Hills, Manipur and the NEFA into a new state; it, therefore, reproduces to some extent the proposal for the separation of the hill districts from the Assam (Brahmaputra) valley.

706. Some of our objections to the proposal to create a hill state are, therefore, applicable to this case. Moreover, the organisation sponsoring this demand, namely, the Cachar States Reorganisation Committee, itself recognises that this new State will be financially in deficit for quite some time to come. The proposed Purbachal State, under any of the schemes that have been suggested, will have an international boundary on three sides. It is clear that it will have neither the resources nor the stability to provide for the security of the Indian border in this part of the country. It is also obvious that substantial minorities speaking languages other than Bengali will be found in it, with the result that it will provide no real solution of the existing difficulties.

707. The genesis of the Purbachal demand is that since the major part of Sylhet was cut off from India at the time of Partition, the Bengalis in Assam, who used to feel that culturally and even geographically they belonged to Bengal, have found themselves somewhat isolated in what they may now be disposed to regard as an uncongenial environment. It has been represented to us that the activities of the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha and the policies of the local government have not only not reconciled the Bengalis in this part of Assam, but have had quite the opposite result. The Bengali-speaking people have cited for instance the fact that the number of government primary schools in Goalpara district with Bengali as the medium of instruction has fallen from 252 in 1947-48 to 1 at the present time.

708. These complaints in so far as there is some *prima facie* justification for them deserve to be carefully examined. It is difficult for us to believe that the arrangements which have been made at present adequately meet the needs of the Bengali-speaking population in this district, and in particular the problem of primary education in this area should receive early attention. But the creation

of a new State, which may well mean only that one set of problems is exchanged for another, is not in our opinion an appropriate remedy for the grievances of the minorities, if any.

Kamatapur

709. On the grounds which we have already discussed we are also unable to entertain the demand for the creation of a Kamatapur State north-west of Purbachal consisting of Goalpara, Garo Hills, Jalpaiguri, Cooch-Bihar and Darjeeling.

Tripura

710. Tripura is a Part C State with a population of 639,029. The predominant language in this State is Bengali, which is spoken by about 59 per cent. of the population. The capital, namely, Agartala, is connected by air with Calcutta, but the State is contiguous to Assam, and while Agartala is equally well-connected by air with Gauhati and Silchar, an important road from Agartala to Churaibari in Assam is now under construction. It will be easy to extend this link and to connect Agartala with Shillong, by means of a road passing through Silchar and Jowai. We recommend that high priority should be accorded to the construction or improvement of these links.

711. As a small Part C State, Tripura cannot obviously stand by itself. The West Bengal Government, moreover, has not claimed this area; and its merger in Assam, in our opinion, can be supported among other reasons on the ground that it will be desirable to bring the entire border between India and Pakistan in this region under one single control, namely, that of the Assam Government.

712. Such a merger will also make it possible to co-ordinate development in Cachar and the contiguous area of Tripura. The Bengali-speaking population after the merger will be a little more than one-fifth of the total population of the State. It should not be difficult for the Assam Government to allay the apprehensions of the Bengali-speaking people by treating this area, which requires development, as a separate administrative division under a commissioner. The special position of Bengali in this division should be recognised for official and educational purposes.

713. If safeguards on these lines are provided the merger of Tripura in Assam will achieve for its people the fulfilment of their aspirations for representative government at the state-level without prejudicing their linguistic and cultural interests. Suitable safeguards can and should also be provided for the tribal people in the proposed administrative division.

The North-East Frontier Agency

714. We have now to deal with the suggestion that the North-East Frontier Agency should be more fully integrated with Assam. Constitutionally, the North-East Frontier Agency is part of Assam, but it presents special features of its own. In the whole area of about 35,000 sq. miles the population has been estimated at only eight lakhs. It is a difficult mountainous country extremely deficient in communications. The work of any administration which is in charge of this area, will, therefore, have to be of a special kind for quite some time to come.

715. In recognition of this fact, the governance of this area has been entrusted for the time being to the President acting through the Governor of Assam, and a separate cadre for the superior posts recruited on an all-India basis, has been created. Central expenditure in this area has been increased very considerably during the last few years, and it is now widely recognised that an efficient and progressive administration is being gradually built up. In these circumstances, the suggestion made by the Assam Government for the early integration of this frontier area is not feasible and the existing arrangements regarding the North-East Frontier Agency should continue.

The Naga Hills District

716. The Naga Hills district presents another special problem. Owing to the activities of the extremist elements, the law and order situation in this area has been unstable in recent years. The Nagas boycotted the elections to the autonomous bodies, with the result that the area has had to be administered directly by the Assam Government.

717. It has been represented to us that the law and order problem in the Naga Hills district is the same as in the Tuensang area of the N.E.F.A., and that unless the entire area is brought under the authority the situation cannot be effectively dealt with. However, it has been stated on behalf of the Assam Government that the Naga Hills district has been relatively quiet during the last two or three years and that there are indications of the people of the area abjuring violence in favour of peaceful methods. After taking the relevant factors into account we have come to the conclusion that it would not be desirable to suggest any change in regard to the Naga Hills district at the present juncture.

The New State of Assam

718. The results of these recommendations may now be summarised. The proposed new State of Assam will include all the areas now constituting the existing State as well as Tripura and will have an area and population of about 89,040 square miles and 9.7 millions respectively.

719. The linguistic complexion of the existing State establishes very clearly its composite character, in spite of the very interesting post-1931 spread of Assamese according to the census figures. It is not surprising that the rapid increase in the past two decades in the number of persons speaking Assamese has been disputed; and the veracity of the 1951 Census figures has been questioned in certain quarters. We have not deemed it necessary to enter into this controversy, but we would like to draw attention to the fact that in spite of this rapid increase the Assamese-speaking population still constitutes only about 55 per cent. of the population of the State.

720. Racially, linguistically and culturally, even the tribes which are described compendiously under a single name, for example, the Nagas, are in reality different each from the other. In spite of a certain tendency towards 'Assamisation', about which the minorities in Assam have complained, the heterogeneous character of Assam has so far been substantially preserved, and our proposals merely recognise this fact.

721. The new State which we propose will have important problems to tackle. This area has been subject to periodical floods, against which protection will have to be sought in part by building irrigation or flood protection works not considered so far; and flood control has to be handled as a regional problem. The road and rail system in the north-east of India is moreover admittedly unsatisfactory in relation to the growing needs of this area including Manipur. Although the position has improved partially since the restoration of rail travel through Pakistan, a well planned programme for the development of communications is clearly necessary. The economy of this region, which depends overwhelmingly on a few industries, also needs a balanced expansion.

722. The task of economic development can be undertaken and substantial cultural autonomy can be enjoyed by the various linguistic and racial groups only if two conditions are fulfilled, namely, that the state of Assam is compact, rich and resourceful, and that

there exists within this State, mutual tolerance and goodwill. Particularist and, if we may say so, chauvinistic trends are bound to retard the progress of the state. They should, therefore, be discouraged in every way. We hope that the recommendations which we have made will be considered in this spirit.