

## **The Loveliest and the Loneliest Frontier!: Arunachal**

The establishment of Arunachal, first as a UT, and then as a state runs counter to the general format of this column: the aspiration, if at all for a separate entity was rather muted, and there was no assertion either. While Arunachal does have a boundary dispute with Assam, and there are issues with regard to the Tibetan settlements, the Chakmas and Hajongs this does not take away from the description of the state as ‘the loveliest, loneliest and the least known outpost of the North East, a vast variegated swathe of territory that encompasses much of Barhmaputra Valley in a giant horse shoe’. The state is marked with extraordinary diversity: with one hundred and ten tribes, of whom twenty six are considered to be major tribes, many of whom migrated centuries ago from Tibet and Burma, stayed on in isolated hamlets as movements across the mighty rivers were not easy to negotiate – thereby explaining the diversity of culture and the babel of tongues.

While the earliest history is now being reconstructed on the basis of archeological finds, Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee opines that this region was part of the sacred geography of the Mahabharata and Jambudweep. As per popular legend, this is where age Parashuram atoned for his sins, king Bhismaka founded his kingdom and Lord Krishna married Rukmini. During the mediaeval period, Mahayana Buddhism held its sway over Tawang, Dirang, Kalaktang and Mechuka

We also get some idea about these tracts from the writings on Mir Jumla’s campaign against the Ahom kingdom in 1662, which apart from describing the rugged terrain, also talk of the mesmerizing beauty of the Mishmi women! Détente ensued between the Ahoms and the Mughal governors of Bengal, but as the East India Company, with its capital in Calcutta became the dominant political power, in 1818, the Ahom king sought the assistance of the British against the armed incursions from Burma. The Treaty of Yandaboo saw the Ahom kingdom cede part of its territory to the Company. From 1875 to 1904, the areas inhabited by sub Himalayan tribes on the borders of Darrang and

Lakhimpur between the Bar Nadi on the Darrang Kamrup boundary on the north of Brahmaputra and the Disang river on the extreme South east of Lakhimpur district on the south bank of Brahmaputra, touching the Sibsagar district were brought under British control. In 1914, the Foreign and Political Departments extended the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation, 1880 to the Hills inhabited or frequented by Ais, Miris, Mishmis, Singphos, Nagas, Khamtis, Bhutias, Akas, Nyishis and designated it as the North Eastern Frontier Tract.

With the Constitution of India coming into force, a change was visible in the administrative set up of the Frontier Tracts. The Government of Assam was relieved of its responsibility for the administration of North-East Frontier Tract and the discretionary powers were re-vested in the Governor of Assam, as the agent of the President of India. Although the region was still part of Assam, the legislative jurisdiction was not extended to the Frontier.

Prime Minister Nehru's policy was based on the views of the defrocked missionary, Verrier Elwin who as the Adviser on Tribal Affairs had considerable clout in the policy making for the region. In 1954, a full-scale administration of the area was inaugurated, with the promulgation of North-East Frontier Areas (Administration) Regulation of 1954 and the acronym of NEFA became the new descriptor. The establishment of the IFAS was not without strong resistance from the Home Ministry, the Government of Assam and the members of the Opposition, and it was perhaps because of this that NEFA was placed under the MEA of which he was also the Minister. Writing to his Foreign Secretary Subimal Dutt, Nehru said 'The real question is of building up a cadre, specially selected, and specially trained ...I think that Mr Verrier Elwin could be of great help to us because of his wide knowledge and experience and human sympathy for these (tribal) folk'.

However, after the 1962 debacle, when the Chinese forces occupied substantial parts of NEFA, and certainly after his death, NEFA was moved from the External Affairs to the Home Ministry, the IFAS officers were seconded (and finally merged) with the IAS and the IPS, and the isolationist policy was reversed. It was rightly felt that political participation of the people at all levels would be best way to integrate the region with the country. In fact based on the recommendations of Daying Ering Committee, the President promulgated the North-East Frontier Agency Panchayati Raj Regulation, 1967. In fact, it can be

said that this was the pre cursor to the 73<sup>rd</sup> CSTA for the implementation of Panchayati Raj structure to the rest of the country in 1992.

The North-East Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971 provided a new political status to the region as Arunachal Pradesh, and in 1972 it became a Union Territory. The credit for the new name goes to Sri Bibhabasu Das **Shastri**, the then Director of Research and K.A.A. Raja, the then Chief Commissioner of NEFA !