

27TH – 30TH SEPT, 2005
INTACH CONFERENCE ON
INTERPRETING THE HERITAGE OF THE NORTH-EAST.

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Chairman of INTACH S.K. Misra, Vice Chairman Hasmukh Shah, Member Secretary Ambassador Dalip Mehta, Members of the INTACH team, Scholars, Historians, and distinguished participants from our region, our own Arunachal Govt. officials, particularly colleagues from the Departments of Culture and Protocol who have laboured hard to plan and deliver logistic arrangements here. We owe you all our sincere thanks for being here to help conduct this Conference, and to make our guests comfortable. Thank you for the labour, love, and hard work you have all invested in this cooperative effort in Arunachal. I am pleased also amused somewhat sardonically that my friends from Delhi and elsewhere will now understand how difficult are our connectivity problems of road trips, and how thin and meager the facilities available to us, and, therefore, how laborious any effort to organize events here. But enough of whinging.

You have chosen to Interpret at this Conference the heritage of the North East, a subject broad enough to accommodate all facets of the subject: cultural heritage, historical evolution of society, works of art and archeology and heritage, our ecology and environment, the beauty of Eastern Himalayas and our lush rain-fed forests and the treasure-trove of bio-diversity which we possess. All of us are united, I believe, in our conviction that tribal culture needs to be cherished, protected and maintained. So also tribal communities and clans and groups and above all their philosophy based on the purest forms of cooperative endeavour. All of us also do believe that at this moment, through acts of omission and commission on the part of our indigenous population and tribes, but far more due to the ignorance and insensitivity of the broader society that surrounds us has rendered our tribal heritage fragile. Modern world is invasive and globalisation at a certain level tends to interfere with the habitat and cultural sensibility of innocent and simpler

population groups of areas and regions like this one, and these include also the tribal and indigenous communities.

I propose to leave out of my discourse this morning all other aspects which many of you are far better equipped to do. I propose to speak principally about socio-economic sensibilities of our indigenous groups of population in Arunachal Pradesh. With all Arunachal's strengths and beauty also our people's gentle and naive generosity, Our people do need to safeguard their own long term, not merely short term, interests and this involves concepts of protection and preservation. In suggesting this I recognize that I may perchance step into territory forbidden for all un-elected Governors, who are meant to decorate Conference and meetings but not expected either to observe things too closely, or to guide anyone or anything requiring comment outside their in-purdah existence in Raj Bhavans.

58 years after the Country's Independence however, we can not but assess sustainability and success of our collaborative efforts, marketability of our traditional tribal art and culture;

also assess how much of the awareness of tribal sensitivity has survived? to what extent are platforms provided for the intermingling of tribals and non-tribals, and the respect shown by the wider Indian civil society for their environment, the sanctity of rights, and for all these how much success has crowned the efforts of those responsible for the governance of tribal States of the North-East.

The seven States of the North-East, sometimes referred to as the seven sisters, all abutting on Assam present the Indian Republic and nation, certain challenges and considerable opportunity to work to ensure that all the indigenous and tribal peoples of this region are re-assured, and encouraged to achieve peaceful growth and a better quality of life, without anyone arrogantly interfering with their traditional style of living, in the Eastern Himalayas, its huge forests, enjoying the bio-diversity that the Lord has endowed them and their region with, something which they alone know how to cherish and enjoy. After all they have known over several dozen millennia how to work hard, play hard and structure their dances and music, and colourful dresses,

enjoying them all. The first head of our post-Independence Government, Jawaharlal Nehru was fascinated by this region and its peoples and communities, their courage, fortitude, culture, dances, colourful dresses, the simplicity of their weapons, bows and arrows, daggers and spears, their capacity to live in isolation and build a great cooperative space for their own tribes and clans, and above all their gentle simplicity and generosity. Curiously enough they failed to build and structure this between their own clans, and the clans of the tribal communities occupying the next valleys and plateaus. Nehru insisted on asking the people of India who had to come into contact with the Societies of North-Eastern States and region to keep them re-assured that the rest of the Indian nation, of which they were a sterling part, view them, and their identity respectfully, and that the nation would always wish them to maintain their own space and never be made to feel crowded. Ever since the Nehru era the Indian Republic has been content to follow the philosophy of encouraging them to evolve gradually, and at a pace determined by themselves.

We, in this post-Nehruvian phase need to devise norms and mores required for enabling these societies to fit in effortlessly with the 21st Century world, in which only those globalising units capable of greater productivity find respect in national, regional, and international market-places. Alas, it is impossible today to wish away the existence of this cynical, invasive, occasionally cruel world that refuses to vanish from our surroundings. There are two experiments going on in our vicinity: one in Bhutan that of an extremely ethical and consistent effort to build a net happiness quotient for their own people, and subordinate other considerations to that objective. The second relates to China's Tibet Autonomous Region and their other tribal communities in the Chengdu region; the experiment of relentlessly and ruthlessly subordinating the tribal to the modern. We are alone in our experiment of pursuing the Middle Path laid down by the Buddha almost three thousand years ago. Let us assess how much security we have delivered to the citizen (both tribal and non-tribal) of this region, and how much 'development', which perhaps is a misnomer for the creeping modernization, consumerism, greed, and

lack of all ethical considerations. People have been pretending that they are pleading for trusteeship when they seek controls. And in this what has been the role of the control fiends within these tribal societies themselves. How mindful have they been of the net happiness quotient for their own people?

Amongst North-Eastern States Arunachal Pradesh has the largest area, and the third smallest population. A combination of factors of history and geography have resulted in Arunachal Pradesh sharing borders with China, Burma (now called Myanmar) and Bhutan. Bangladesh too is close enough via Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Manipur and Meghalaya. China has been tiresome ever since our Independence and its transformation into an overbearing Communist giant exercising hegemony over Tibet with whom Arunachal Pradesh has had cultural and religious and close relations of certain tribal and ethnic familial character as also of close border trade. These were all affected by the Chinese aggression and damage to Arunachal in 1962. Myanmar, almost against its volition, and due to its weak military and economic situation has been helpless about Nagas,

both of Isak-Muivah and Khaplang groups, establishing their camps in their territory. They have watched helplessly even when these camps came to be used by elements of ULFA. Bangladesh through a variety of ways, has been engaged in exporting large numbers of its people into India for employment and other purposes, not all of them entirely innocent. However, in this matter there have been errors of both omission and commission on the part of certain political groups in certain of our States too.

The geography and ecology of our region of Eastern Himalayas; long months of heavy monsoons, with huge tracks of our territories under forest cover which are also very fecund and productive. These elements have enriched our States by producing rare and valuable varieties of flowers and fruits, medicinal and aromatic plants and shrubs. The birds and animals in our forests have combined to make this region a veritable treasure trove of vastly attractive and scientifically valuable biodiversity. That too requires to be protected, with care, diligence and scientific seriousness. We have seen extremely positive indigenous communities and hugely attractive, diligent and

productive tribal groups, but also certain extremely negative and destructive ones, like the Lisus.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had found the people of this area warm, gentle and generous. He had first hand experience too of occasionally not finding them all that easy to persuade. Some of them, specially Nagas and Mizos have tended to view concepts of a larger territorial nationhood and sovereignty with serious suspicion and hesitation and have taken a long time in appreciating the geopolitical and geo-economic factors of a wider world coming to terms with unity and sovereign diversity, and the psyche of the peoples of the world at large. Nehru pleaded with the rest of our country and countrymen not to be impatient or intolerant and, to learn the merits of gradualness. He pleaded with us all to provide this region and its peoples with dignity, identity and space.

The motivations of the British colonial administrators, in 1873 when they instituted the Inner Line Permits and Prohibited Persons' Permits, were different. These were to keep the

indigenous communities out of touch and contact with different types of citizens of India. Any Indians who wished to include the indigenous communities in the national our freedom movement and struggle were to be excluded from this region, as dangerous criminals, as far more undesirable than any potential economic exploiters from the rest of India. This denied the North East a prime opportunity to get integrated with India and Indians. The other permit system was meant to exclude foreigners other than those of the U.K. nationality, and was quite obviously meant to prevent this region avoiding any significant contamination from the other whiles from “across the Black Waters.”

Panditji’s prescription bought us and our tribal countrymen time to arrange not only for schools primary and middle level schools but also for creating high School level institutions, Colleges, Universities, Engineering Institutions and Medical Schools to be established in this area. One must here confess that the bad example or virus from Assam; that of All Assam Student Union which became a training school for storm troopers who could organize Bandhs and agitations for political groups and

parties. Instead of striving for excellence in their studies and research, they indulged in all kinds of Socially deleterious activities. Luckily our students unions here have been unable so far to produce effects as destructive of industry and oil economy as their Assamese counterparts. But then we have also been unable to build significant level of modern industry. Insurgencies in the region have not responded positively to the use of force.

Tribal groups and indigeneous communities have made no progress towards greater unity amongst themselves. Curiously they have also tended to distance themselves emotionally and culturally from non-tribals, often citizens of their own States. Economic entrepreneurship too has failed to emerge. This peculiar combination of negative elements has resulted in certain exploiting types being invited by those in our population who have capital to invest. Local proclivity towards greed has thus got encouraged without either entrepreneurship or industry sprouting. Unfortunately, all this has led to the wealth-owning elements in the community getting attracted to a certain genre of growth which is entirely without any reference to either law or

taxation. American society too in the late 18th early 19th century North America had tended to design and structure a robber-baron society in which those who wielded either money power or muscle power alone were able to command political and social following, and not others.

I am still new to this region but I can see certain developments and a kind of evolution when I travel to districts and as I read and study literature on the politics, economics, tribes, and philosophies that surround tribal history, language, philosophy, and religion. I do not agree with those scholars like Sanjiv Baruah who feel that politics of the North East States and region should be seen as something that produced a Permanent and Durable Disorder. My own predilection is to popularize the concept of our tribal brethren, and more particularly our tribal sisters, to structure adequate amount of what the poet called 'divine discontent' within their souls to reform their own concepts, perceptions, attitudes and demands for a moral and ethical system based on yesterday's aspirations, and today's realities that surround themselves.

What were Buddha, Bardhaman, Gurunanakdevji, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramhans or indeed Raja Rammohan Roy attempting to do in their own respective areas and eras? They were trying to modify the thinking of their own communities about society and morality, indeed social uniformities of their conduct. Let us be clear. We from the rest of India, and researchers from abroad who have studied tribal societies in India and have pontificated, much like I am doing today, on what should or should not be done or what may or may not happen in respect of this region and its peoples without caring to study what kind of social and philosophical reform movements are emerging in the thinking of the tribal and indigenous peoples of the North East. Outsiders cannot and must not impose their subjective thought processes on philosophical and practical aspects like the role of women, the philosophy of education, the decision making on the land record and land management system, municipal regulations or building bye-laws in urban and semi-urban habitats etc. There are within-tribal-groups thinking and their broader perceptions which may require reformation from

within their own societies. They themselves has to prescribe for themselves. Has enough thinking, soul-searching been going on within tribal groups? There have been outstanding economists, political thinkers and leaders, good Nibuses or Priests, some excellent Doctors and Engineers, produced here. Education happily is very popular here. One, however, does not hear of a single social reformer or philosopher from within this region. There is thus no movement to unify the tribal groups. Indeed some of the larger tribes have shown a trend towards fracturing. I have not heard of any discussion within our tribal societies if the trend to fracture is considered useful or deleterious? Whether a greater unity amongst the larger tribes all of which pursue the same Donyi Polo religion is seen as useful or otherwise? How do they view their problems and issues and which way would they wish their people to go. As I tend to identify with the poorest and least empowered Arunachalees, I am troubled by some of these issues. I should know of my Pradesh far more intimately I have therefore started teaching classes every week in a School. Some may be troubled by my un-Governor-like statements and

observations. I do hope in the long run to create ferment in the thinking of the inner-tribal communities, arousing their ambition to move towards more practical, more ethical, less greed-oriented objectives which have to emerge from within the tribes themselves. Only they themselves can prescribe a well thought out direction and path for themselves as also what they expect from the rest of the country's civil society. Only then can we expect to achieve anything.

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