



# ***Panchsheel* and the pioneers and philosophers of NEFA: Studying the role of the Indian government machinery in the assimilation process of the tribal state of Arunachal Pradesh**

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to understand the history and process of state-assimilation of the frontier state of NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) and the role of the pioneering officers. In the present times, many aspects have shaped the present scenario of the state. Despite its strategic location bordering China, Myanmar and Bhutan, the state of Arunachal Pradesh is one of the most peaceful states in India. This paper critically evaluates the policies, programmes and approach of the government of India to the Frontier tribes through the officers and policy makers.

**Keywords:** Frontier tribal policy, Panchsheel, Precarious legacy, Achingmori tragedy

## **Introduction**

The state of Arunachal Pradesh and the tribes of the region have come a long way. The state today boasts of many modern amenities, like higher educational institutes, railways and Airports. However, the real achievement of the state and nation as a whole is the peace and patriotism of the tribal people. This dimension separates Arunachal Pradesh from the rest of the North-Eastern States. Despite its strategic location bordering China, Myanmar and Bhutan, the state has no home-grown Militants except Nagaland-based Naga Militants plaguing the Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts. The neighbouring state Assam has 3, Nagaland 4, Meghalaya 2, Manipur 8, and Tripura 2 prominently active militant outfits. Mizoram, though at peace now, saw the uprising of the MNF against whom the government of India even had to resort to airstrikes to subdue them. The linguistic rivalry, as well as feelings of alienation and exploitation, have paved the way for different organisations demanding separation from India. The present attitude of the Arunachalees, which is a departure from other sister states towards the nation, has been borne out of the good intent of the Indian government at the dawn of the evolution of India as a nation.

## **Precarious legacy**

A cursory glance at the history of Arunachal Pradesh since early times will reveal that the tribes of the region had been free and averse to all forms of authority and rule. The *Ahom Buranji*, the earliest documented chronicles on the tribes records, records numerous confrontations with the rulers of Assam due to raids on the Ahom territory. The actions of the

frontier tribes earned them exonyms that primarily meant uncontrollable and independent. Buranji even observes that it may be easier to put an elephant in a rat hole than to control the tribes of the frontiers. To subdue the raids, the Ahom Empire imposed a protection tax on its citizens. This policy came to be known as *the Posa system*.

The colonial British government followed a similar policy in dealing with the tribes, however, with more brutality and viciousness. The British adopted the divide and rule policy by promoting the intra-tribe and inter-tribe antagonism. Despite hard efforts, the tribes did not yield and at times gave in to the Raj. Therefore, the mighty British Empire also had to pay once again the Posa, a protection tax to the tribes. This payment was extraordinary as the colonial power that had conquered most parts of the world and enslaved millions of people had to pay protection tax to sparsely populated, unorganised independent tribes.

The British government's attitude to the tribes and region changed after identifying the economic potentialities of the newly colonised Assam. They discovered oil, coal and found the region conducive for the tea industry. To protect their economic interest, the imperial government enacted the inner line and outer line, the administered and partially administered land, up to a few pockets of frontier foothills in the tribal land. This step also led to tribal retaliation and military expeditions. The general attitudes of the colonial masters remained unchanged and are reflected in the observation made by the Under Secretary of the government of India in reply to Hopkins' proposal (1862). He observes... 'these savages are utterly incapable of reasoning, and I fear they attribute our

bearing towards them to timidity and either cannot, or will not understand our real motive'.

In 1947, India inherited a 'precarious legacy' in the North East Frontier region. The challenge for the Indian government was how to win the heart and Indianise the tribes who hitherto had been isolated, suspected and exploited by the colonial rulers. Moreover, as a young nation, India had many unresolved issues all over the country. Despite these aspects, it's noteworthy to observe that the government took initiative for the welfare of unrepresented tribal people with the best intentions.

This article attempts to remember the people from other parts of the country who took tireless initiative to implement the policy of the government with heart for our people and soil. Their gestures won the heart of our people, and they readily accepted India as their nation, and for many decades up to the late 1980s, the salutation of the tribal people of Arunachal used to be *Jai Hind*. Hindi today is the lingua franca of Arunachal and is more widely spoken than in any other state of North East India.

The Chief Minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, was entrusted to head the committee for the rational administration of the tribes of Assam. The committee, which included prominent Anthropologists, recommended that tribal issues be dealt with in tribal law and conventions. This recommendation in due course became the 6<sup>th</sup> schedule (Part B) of the Indian Constitution.

According to the plan, Gopinath Bordoloi and Governor Akbar Hydery began to replace English officers from the Frontiers with efficient Assamese or other Indian officers. These early officers were remarkable people who were able to earn a good impression upon the Tribes of the region. The next important step was a conference, organised by the Indian government in parliament to chalk out policies for tribal development in 1952. The two-day programme was attended by Sociologists, Anthropologists and Tribal leaders. President Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Prime Minister Nehru, participating in the conference, agreed with the scholars on the development of the tribes without destroying their cultural heritage. These recommendations were given final ideological framework by Elwin in *A Philosophy for NEFA*. Through the book, Elwin shaped a clear conceptual framework on the approach to tribal people of the frontiers.

### Forward policy

The policy gained momentum with the coming of Jairamdas Daulatram as Governor of Assam (1950 to 1956) and his Advisor Nari Rustomji. They both were very sympathetic to the tribal cause, and it was the duo who prepared a blueprint for the development of the frontiers and their people. Jairamdas Daulatram was a Gandhian and a Freedom Fighter who had even been shot at during the Freedom struggle. A close confidante of Gandhi was also admired by his contemporary leaders. Before coming to Assam, he was the Governor of Bihar and the Union Minister for Food Supply. Jairamdas Daulatram was the Governor under whose guidance the foundations of the present Arunachal Pradesh were laid. His determination and

inexhaustible drive ushered in the new 'forward policy' with remarkable pace. Jairamdas had a thirst to know the tribal people and therefore instructed the officers to maintain tour dairies. Elwin in his Autobiography, writes about his Governor, 'He rarely went to bed before two in the morning and studied every report and tour diary, even of the most junior officers, in minute detail, making notes on every possible point.' Daulatram also organised festivals, inviting the different tribes for cordial relations and cultural exchanges about such events. Elwin recounts, 'Then we also had the Hills and Plains Festival. For somebody new to Assam, this was very exciting, for the tribal people from most of the Hill Districts attended it, and parties from all over NEFA came down to dance and enjoy themselves. The Governor, Jairamdas Daulatram, gave a big lunch party on the lawns of Raj Bhavan, and I was greatly struck by the way all the visitors mixed up together, and the Governor himself sat on the ground between two of the NEFA tribal ladies. There was nothing in the atmosphere that I had met elsewhere; when at a party, the officials are given chairs while the tribal people sit on the ground or where different kinds of food or cigarettes are given to the two classes of visitors. In his own words, Jairamdas Daulatram expresses the idea of tribal development thus: 'Each section of our large population contributes to the making of the nation in the same manner as each flower helps to make a garden. Every flower has the right to grow according to its own laws of growth; it has the right to enrich and develop its own colour and form and to spread its own fragrance to make up the cumulative beauty and splendour of the garden. I would not like to change my Roses into lilies nor my lilies into rose. Nor do I want to sacrifice my lovely orchids and rhododendrons of the hills. Nari Rustomji, witnessing the efforts of Governor Jairamdas, refers to him not merely as the Governor of NEFA, but as it's High Priest.

Advisor to the Governor, Nari K Rustomji studied classical Latin and Greek at Cambridge University and was a secretary of the Musical Society there. He was well-versed in piano and violin. After clearing ICS, he was posted as Advisor to the Governor of Assam in 1948 at the age of 29. His artistic sensibilities and love for tribal people made Rustomji one of the most endearing political administrators of his era. He and Verrier Elwin were best friends, and their advice was relied upon greatly by Nehru and resulted in a policy for the Northeast that has been described as Nehruvian humanistic paternalism. Rustomji was deeply drawn to the tribals of the region. In his book *Enchanted Frontiers*, Rustomji says, "The people of the hills have had for me a special pull. I feel utterly and completely at home with my (tribal) hosts. I am, at heart, very much a tribal myself. I share much of the bewilderment and loss of identity of the tribal of today". He learned the local language at every posting and even wore indigenous costumes to work. Further, Rustomji wrote in 1953 about the tribes of the region, 'Much of the beauty of living still survives in these remote and distant hills, where dance and song are a vital part of everyday living, where people speak and think freely, without fear or restraint. Our workers must ensure, therefore, that the good that is inherent in the institutions of the hill people

is not tainted or substituted by practices that may be "modern" and "advanced", but are totally unsuited to their economy and way of thinking. Moreover, he directs, 'Officials or social workers must go to the people not as 'masters who dictate but as elder brothers who have suffered themselves and wish through their experience to spare others the pains they have had to endure'.

It was Jairamdas Daulatram and Nari Rustomji who initiated the policy for inclusion of the tribal territory in the administrative map, and NEFA was reconstituted under the North East Frontier Areas (Administration) Regulation of 1954. Thereafter, the region was divided into Kameng Frontier Division, Subansiri Frontier Division, Siang Frontier Division, Lohit, Tirap Frontier Division and their headquarters were established at the Tribal heartland Bomdila, Ziro, Along, Tezu and Khonsa respectively.

There were many fronts to deal with and many policies to be implemented. There were also many circumstances and occasions that strengthened the ties and brought the tribal people close to the government. However, there were also episodes that could have soured the relations.

### Challenges and setbacks

The earthquake of 1950 brought NEFA to the notice of the country. There was spontaneous sympathy from all parts of India, and the government even declined the services of volunteers on account of inability to find accommodation, rations and transport for so many workers. The efforts of the government in relief and rehabilitation, though inadequate in remote parts due to a lack of communication, covered most of the affected people. Nari Rustomji himself was in the field monitoring the calamity and was able to arrange an airlift provision for the marooned people. This step on the part of the government also brought the tribal people close to the government.

On the other hand, there were the welfare measures of the government, which had the potential of earning the wrath of the tribals. One such issue was that of slavery. It was a practice prevalent during the time, and tribals were unlikely to free their slaves. In 1954, a delegation of prominent people from NEFA was invited by the government to witness the Republic Day celebration. In Delhi, Nehru invited them for lunch, which was joined by the President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad. There was a discussion about the tribal issues, including slavery, after the meal. Nehru advised the delegate to formulate a solution for the inhuman practice and offered compensation. The tribal delegate knew that the proposal would never be accepted by the people, but they proposed the highest amount possible of ₹ 500, which at that time could fetch 15 to 16 Mithun (bOAS Frontli). Nehru, to the utter surprise of the delegate, readily agreed, and therefore, a whopping sum at that time was paid to slave owners for their release. Many tribes accepted the proposal. During the British days, the runaway slaves were given protection in British territory and no amount was paid to the owner.

A major challenge to the government emerged after the Achingmori tragedy, where a government convoy of 47 people

consisting of Assam Rifle troops, Porters and PIs was all massacred by Tagins. The reason arose out of misunderstanding, and primarily the Tagins saw the move as an intrusion into their land and had attacked the other tribes who had accompanied the convoy. The Assam Rifles were out for blood. An innocent column had been treacherously massacred, and they assumed that the tribals of the entire surrounding area must be made to pay the price. They were of the view that everybody was involved, that the crime could not have been committed without the connivance, if not the active co-operation, of all the surrounding villages. It was the time; they argued that the Administration showed its strength, as without the slightest provocation, the troops had been brutally murdered. The Army and Air Force felt that the government had been too soft in the approach; the only argument the tribes understood for them was the bullet. They even wanted to bomb and strafe from the air.

Jairamdas alone remained unmoved by the mad hysteria. The guilty, he felt, must be tracked down and punished, but he very properly and firmly insisted that there must be no indiscriminate vendetta against the innocent. The Army and the Air Force rallied to the Assam Rifles' support, as the prestige of the armed forces as a whole was held to be at stake. But Jairamdas and Rustomji refused to yield. They authorised the force to fire only in self-defence, and made it clear by detailed, written instructions delivered personally to every unit commander involved in the operation that random burning of villages and destruction of property were strictly forbidden and that there was to be no bombing or strafing by air. As tempers were running high and the spirit of revenge was fierce, Jairamdas and Rustomji moved their headquarters temporarily from Shillong to Jorhat, the base of the proposed operation, so that they could personally ensure that the directives were faithfully implemented.

The operations were concluded according to plan, and 7 ringleaders were tried and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment for the massacre of 47 government men. The Assam Rifles were throughout impatient of Jairamdas' restraint, and relations between the Governor and the force were, for a time, severely strained. Rustomji, in his memoirs, observes, 'But there can be no doubt at all that Jairamdas's stand was correct and that indiscriminate lashing out at innocent tribals would have done incalculable harm to our relations with the hill people not only in NEFA but throughout the hill districts of the north-eastern region. It was through adhering strictly to a policy of restraint and correct conduct that it was possible to maintain conditions of comparative peace in NEFA during those critical years when the foundations of the present administrative structure were first laid. In the earlier days, the practice of the British had been to punish the whole tribe by indiscriminate killing, arrest and destruction of property.

### Documenting the undocumented

Dr Verrier Elwin, the eminent social anthropologist, was also enlisted in 1955 to assist in training the new cadre of officers and give general counsel to the administration. Until his death in 1964, Elwin was mainly preoccupied in helping to

implement the policy of promoting deeper and wider respect for the culture and way of life of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in general and of the North-Eastern Frontier in particular. Although he enjoyed no statutory powers, his influence and inspiration permeated the entire administrative fabric. The first step taken was to build up a Department of Tribal Research, to collect material and publish a series of monographs on NEFA's manifold tribes. A team of young research scholars was recruited and quickly put to work under Elwin's overall guidance. The objective was to make available to the Administrative Officers, in a compact and easily readable form, the basic data regarding the tribes amongst whom their work lay, their customs and beliefs. The officers would be briefed thoroughly about the tribal people, their traditional values, and their aspirations, so that they would cause offence through unintended indiscretions. The government also wanted the tribal people to know that their culture was important enough to be worth studying and telling the world about. For nothing is so damaging, according to Rustomji, as 'a tribal's vitality and sense of well-being as loss of self-respect, as devaluation in their own estimation of their own culture and heritage'. He further lauds the efforts of Elwin in this aspect, thus, 'Had it not been for the inspiration of Elwin, his burning enthusiasm and his unflagging efforts, the battle for the tribes might well have taken a very different turn. Elwin's books on the art of NEFA, lavishly and beautifully illustrated by his own photographs, presented a fresh and exciting concept of the primitive tribal. The tribals' unerring instinct for colour combinations was confirmed in the reproduction of their lovely textile designs. Elwin's translations of tribal folk-poetry were also proof that their folklore was as rich in imagery as the Literature of the most advanced societies.

### Administrative reforms

K. L. Mehta, who was serving as Chief Commissioner of Ajmer, an officer of great charm and ability, succeeded Rustomji as an advisor. He introduced 'single line administration', the reform which excited the admiration of all visitors to NEFA.

Another important pioneer who served as a counsellor for five years was Brigadier D. M. Sen. Formerly Judge-Advocate in the Army, he guided the legal policy of the Administration in NEFA, and later in Nagaland, with great wisdom. The Khebang policy, which still prevails, was structured and framed by him. Elwin proudly claims that the system of solving the issues was so effective and acceptable to all the tribals that there were only half a dozen NEFA tribesmen in jail in the early 1960s. Gentle and affectionate, Sen had brought a tolerant and sympathetic philosophy into the government's dealings with the tribal people.

Another important pioneer was Khemlal Rathee, Financial Adviser to the NEFA administration and being himself a Jat, had an instinctive feeling for the tribes and made it his business to understand them thoroughly.

The early Political Officers were Europeans: Bob Menzies, Peter James and Geoffrey Allen. Menzies guided the shifting of the Subansiri division headquarters at Ziro from Kimin. Peter James, who was at Pasighat, could speak Adi fluently,

was fully conversant in Adi social customs, and lived with and like them when on tour. Peter was an expert in Moshup Abang and, at times, took charge of a *miri* in a ponnung dance.

The early three Assamese plains officers, Laksheswar Sharma, Bipin Burogothain and Bharat Bhuyan, were appointed as Political Officers, and Indira Miri, an exceptionally able lady from the Assam plains-tribal community of Miris, as NEFA's Education Officer. A few bright young men from respected and educated families of tribals in the hill districts in and adjoining Assam were also recruited, partly in the interests of ultimate integration, partly as it was expected that tribal officers from the hills would find less difficulty in adjusting themselves to the hard life involved in frontier service. Bob Khathing, a Tangkhul Naga, was given charge of establishing Indian administration at Tawang in 1951. Rina Sailo, son of Pu Lalsailova, President of the Lushai Chiefs' Council, also joined the team, and Khawtim Khuma, an erstwhile Mizo leader. Aliba Imti, not so long before a firebrand in the Naga National Council, 'the gentle but forthright' Zopianga, 'the slow but deep thinking' Lalbiak Thanga, 'Yao' Haralu, Hranga, Hipson Roy were some of the earliest Administrators in the Hills.

### Conclusion

The challenges to the concept of Arunachal, its ideals and founding principles had emerged from time to time. In the present times, issues of influx from outside, cultural assimilation, the Citizen Amendment Bill (CAB) and granting of PRC to non-APST are the challenges that have the potential of weakening our founding principles. In this aspect, the people in power need to understand the founding fabric of Arunachal Pradesh, arguably the most strategic state in India. The people of Arunachal also shouldn't forget the philosophy behind certain laws and regulations. Tribals need to preserve their culture and through the goodness of it should enrich the plurality of our great nation, as aspired by the pioneers during their time.

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