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The Nation and its Northeast

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The Nation and its Northeast*

Mrinal Miri

Introduction

In most discussions of the northeast, the history—even the very recent history of the region does not (by design?)—figure. This is unhelpful in many ways, particularly, if we are interested in understanding the political, economic, and cultural contingencies of the region today. A very cursory historical overview since about the time of our independence tells its own story. Barring Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and now Sikkim, the northeast was a singular political and administrative unit within the federal union of India. It went by the name of Assam. Assam was divided into four political and administrative units at various points of time between 1957 and 1972. These were: Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. The latter three passed through a period as union territories before becoming full states. Manipur, a princely state during British rule, acceded to the Union of India in 1949; after a period as a union territory, Manipur became a full state in 1972. Arunachal Pradesh, first known by the rather colonial sounding name of North East Frontier Agency, was, to begin with, and very interestingly, under the administrative aegis of the Ministry of External Affairs; in 1972, it acquired its present name and was given the status of union territory; it became a full state in 1987. Sikkim, as we know, is the most recent addition to the northeast fraternity, and its recent history is similarly interesting.

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Cultural diversity

The magnitude of the cultural diversity of the northeast almost defies imagination. Perhaps there is no comparable geographical area in the world which is home to cultural diversity of this magnitude. The linguistic diversity of the region is an inalienable part of this cultural diversity. Difficult as it is to individuate languages (is there one Bengali language or is there a cluster of fairly distinct languages individuated as a single language for a variety of reasons?), there may be, on a fairly stringent count — close to two hundred languages spoken in the northeast. Many of these languages are on the UNESCO list of 'endangered' languages. Although the number of languages may not quite coincide with the number of cultures because a single culture can frequently embrace considerable linguistic variations, languages that are, in very large measure, independent of each other (e.g. Bhojpuri and Khasi) embody distinct cultures.

A culture, in a rough way of looking at it, is the web of meanings that shapes the collective as well as the individual awareness of the members of a community—awareness of the significance that the world and things in it have for them. This sets it apart from other such webs of meanings, and language, being the primary carrier of meanings, is a sure mark of the distinctness and therefore, of the identity of a culture. But it is also clear that language does not encompass the entire world or web of meanings that constitutes a culture. Nature and objects in the natural world—the sun, the moon, stars, the sky, trees, animals, rivers, water bodies, and phenomena like eclipses of the sun and the moon are all part of the matrix of meanings constituting a culture, and language, the primary seat of meanings embraces them in a wide 'fellowship of meaningfulness'. By 'fellowship of meaningfulness' I mean something like the following: words—inescapable elements of language—have meanings by virtue of the fact that their role in the language is guided by rules of correct and incorrect use. Of course, it is extremely important to realize that these rules are highly flexible, subject to unpredictable change and therefore are incapable of

precise, definitive statements. Think of a word like 'pressure' or even 'table'. But things, entities of different kinds—like the sun, the moon, trees, mountains, rivers etc. have meanings primarily by virtue of their sensory qualities like size (of the mountain), light (of the sun and of the moon, of lightening), smell (of the earth, of the flower, and of the tiger) speed (of the river's current), sound (of the bird's call, of thunder, of the brook) and so on. Things also acquire meanings by virtue of their links with the emotional life of the community or members of the community. Meanings of things in this sense and meanings of words interpenetrate and while meaning-laden things become part of the language, words frequently acquire or have particular sensory properties like texture, sound and so on. ["Dream work" in Freudian psychology provides fascinating examples of how words can acquire the status of things and can have meanings in the way that things have meanings in life. The untranslatability of poetry might have much to do with a word being employed primarily for its sensory properties and not just in its dictionary meaning.] This interpenetrative mix of words and things is what I call 'fellowship of meaningfulness' and is the stuff of poetry and myth. The distinctiveness of this mix is the basis of the distinctiveness of a culture and it is in this sense of distinctiveness of a culture that the diversity of cultures in the northeast is of enormous significance for our national life.

The most important thing about such distinctiveness is that each such distinctive culture has its own norms of good conduct, its own sense of right and wrong, its own ideas of human fulfillment, its own notions of what is of importance to life and what is not, and, perhaps, most importantly, its own answer to the question, "What is it to live well?" While such distinctiveness is an inescapable fact of the human condition, it is also a fact that cultures have interacted, learned from one another, some have dominated others, meanings have coalesced, and, in many cases there has been a diminution of the distinctiveness.

Respect for cultures

Cultures of the northeast, because of their long common experience of the world around them and of each other in their manifold manifestations of humanity, have a natural understanding of and respect for each other. Since respect for diversity—including respect for cultural diversity—is part of the accepted ethic of our national life, the crucial question to ask in this context is: what is it to cultivate such respect? This is a large philosophical question; and I shall merely suggest the outline of an argument in answer to it. Genuine respect presupposes genuine understanding and genuine understanding involves an authentic insight into the right and wrong, good and bad as conceived and articulated in terms of the culture's own resources of meaning and as permeating the culture's springs of action, insight into the culture's ideas of fulfilment, flourishing and of the good life, and its day-to-day normative sizing up of people, actions and things, and the contextual subtleties and variations of such ethical practice.

But all this presupposes a distinction between a culture's inner life and its outer life. The inner life is where meanings are located and the outer is the expression of these meanings. But the important point is that meanings are inarticulate and, therefore, not meanings at all, independently of their expressions and, conversely, expressions without meanings are not expressions either. Meanings and expressions form, as it were, a hermeneutic circle: meanings derive their sustenance from their expressions and expressions from the meanings they express. The extent of one's *understanding* of another's culture is also the extent to which the inner life of the culture becomes available to one.

One might say that the normal (in precisely the Kuhnian sense of "the normal") social scientific approach to cultures as objects of study is that of the observer of a culture's external life. I might be allowed to call it the externalist approach.[1] Take the

[1] It may be thought that anthropologists frequently use a method which can ensure access to the inner life of a culture. This is the method of participant observation. Participation requires sympathy and, more importantly, empathy.

functionalist account of cultures—popular, knowingly or unknowingly, among anthropologists and sociologists (those in any case who do the ground-level work in these disciplines); it is quite obviously externalist. For example, the functionalist understanding of marriage as an institution would consist in treating the institution as fulfilling a particular role (function) in the organization and regulation of society and in its continuity. Marriage regulates human procreation in ways that ensures social stability, prevents uncontrolled promiscuity of predictably undesirable consequences and makes possible a stable continuity of the life of the community. A purely externalist approach is all that is needed to establish "truths" such as this. This may be regarded as the general functionalist account of marriage—the different practices in different societies and communities are variations of this general theme. Contrast this with the inner view of marriage: couples hardly ever, if at all, enter into the

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The advantage of this method is supposed to be that participation by the observer gives him access to the inner life of the observed in such a way that he is able to emphathize with him, and this empathy affords, as it were, a direct knowledge of the meanings that inform the life of the observed. For me to empathise with someone, X, may mean one of two things, (a) I know what it would be like for me to be in X's position, situation, and (b) I know what it would be like for to *be* X. The first position cannot be of much help to the anthropologist—for her to empathise with the subject of her observation would simply mean that she imagines herself, with all her anthropological scholarship and all her own personal background, to be in the subject's position. The unexamined persistence of her own background will ensure that her understanding of her subject is vitiated. the second position is not possible, because to know what it would be like to *be* the subject, is already to have a deep enough understanding of the subject - an understanding that would not be possible without an authentic access to the subject's background and a corresponding successful, if temporary and intermittent, withdrawal from the anthropologist's own background. There must therefore be knowledge and understanding *before* empathy. Participant observation cannot, therefore, be the first method of the anthropologist, or if it is, empathy can come only at the end, not at the beginning. It must begin much like groping in the dark—a painstaking exploration of meanings with the server's own background at a distance, and yet tentatively drawing upon similarities, mindful of subtle differences until the observer is at home in the world (background) of the subject being able to move about in it with ease and confidence.

relationship of marriage with the intention ensuring the continuity of the life of the community, or of its stability and harmony. Even if we leave aside romance either leading to marriage or arising within marriage which may be regarded as a peculiarly modern phenomenon, marriage in most human communities involves multiple human relationships which are associated with a whole range of emotions that can be understood only from an internalist perspective. Emotions embedded in expectations, hopes, and uncertainties, with their normative overtones, surrounding the fact of marriage, shaped by diverse contingencies, form its inner life. It is access to this inner life that makes the meaning of marriage in a community available to an observer. No doubt the subtleties of these emotions must necessarily find their expression in equally subtle variations of expressions, and, equally necessarily, greater the observer's grasp of the palpable interconnections between subtleties of expression, the greater is her understanding of the inner life. A fictional narrative of marriage may be the best example of this logical play between the inner and the outer. Roger Scruton's interesting book *Modern Culture* has a very telling criticism of the functionalism of the Anthropologist:

> Anthropologists study people from an external perspective. They justify practices that would never be used by the people themselves, whose perspective is internal one of membership. To a visiting anthropologist who observes the rites and customs of a tribe, piety towards the dead has a function: it is justified by the benefit that it confers upon the living. But this benefit is far from the mind of the tribesman. He honours the dead because honour is due to them: his own and other's future has no part in the calculation. Indeed if he adopted the perspective of the anthropologist, the tribesman would be a threat to the very order that he wishes to protect. For he would be opening the door to doubt, both in himself and in his neighbours. Piety is a means to social unity only when not treated as a means. The function of piety is fulfilled when people do what piety requires, but for no other reason than that piety requires it.

While I agree with Scruton about how functionalism self-defeatingly misses the mark, a point needs to be made about his use of words such as "honour" and "piety". While the use of such words may be justified on the ground of palpable similarities between "funeral" rites and the tribesman's rites surrounding the dead—the latter might have depths of meanings that words such as "honour" and "piety" are unable to capture.[2]

It should be clear that functionalism might be a useful enough methodological tool in mapping the place of institutions in a given society in the perspective of a particular social–scientific theoretical framework. But that is as far as it goes. Intentions and desires that are read off by observing the functional fit of institutions hardly ever form part of the intentions and desires that are the real springs of actions within a culture. And it is a grasp of the latter that allows an authentic understanding of the culture. Such grasp is possible only within the internalist perspective.

In our current political and cultural context, the obstacles to authentic understanding, and therefore to genuine respect come from two sources—both powerful and frequently, quite invidious. The first is the widely accepted norms of governance in a republic of great diversity, such as India—the bureaucrat's rule book. Bureaucratic rules are largely insensitive to contextual differentiations and subtleties. Concepts such as equality, decency, civilised, free, ugly, welfare, promiscuity, justice—to take an extremely random sample—are generally used in abstraction from the density of contexts and their variety, and thus very often end up with only a surface and frequently distorted, therefore, dangerous assessment of a community's life and springs of action. I have no doubt that this has happened with communities, particularly, tribal communities in the northeast and that substantial part of the anxiety of the people of the region arises from this fact. I wish, however, to warn at the same time that the general issue is complicated and is currently the subject of a fairly

[2] Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture,* Continuum, London, 2005, p. 10

intense debate in philosophy. The debate can be variously seen as the communitarian vs the universalist debate, or the thick vs thin ethical concepts debate, or even the modern vs the pre-modern debate. But perhaps a useful approach to the debate is to see it as arising out of a crucial mandate—if we can call it that—of the modern state and the imperative of recognizing plurality within the state. The modern, and we might add the adjective liberal, state has citizens and potential citizens (e.g. infants and children) as its basic human constituents. The state is responsible for providing the infrastructure for a relatively conflict-free and, therefore, discrimination-free society so that citizens can go about pursuing their lives' ends in peace and with relative freedom from hindrances. For this the state needs rules that are general and abstract, as free from contextual variations as possible. These rules might have an ethical edge, e.g. rules relating to the concept of welfare, right, public honesty, equality, matrimony, etc.; but their ethical content is only on the periphery, they do not enter into the density of our context-bound, palpable matrix of every-day ethical life. The latter is plural and culturally contingent. The modern liberal state acknowledges this ethical plurality but, for that reason, is in the permanent predicament of having to reconcile it with the bureaucratic imperatives of state[3] functioning. Frequently, attempts at reconciliation are themselves taken to be contrary to the best interest of the state, and are abandoned and bureaucratic abstraction triumphs. I would like to suggest that the very best bureaucratic practice is flawed by the need to adhere to the imperative of 'state interest'. (Of course interest of the state is not the same as and does not coincide with the interest of the nation. The nation, in spite of the wooliness of the concept, is a very different category from that of the state.) The Verrier Elwin intervention in the northeast in the early 1950s was a mild and groping attempt at such a reconciliation, but it was very quickly

[3] An example of such attempts at reconciliation is the willingness on the part of the state to recognize, at least in parts of the northeast, "traditional" customary laws as part of bureaucratic instrumentality. But what is almost never recognized is that "customary laws", once they are codified and written down for the bureaucrat's use, instantly lose their flexibility and dependence on specific spatio-temporal contingencies.

cut short and abandoned.[4] While the very best bureaucratic practice may be thus flawed, one can imagine what a bureaucratic practice which is both incompetent and insensitive to 'alien' local perspectives, but at the same time, armed with state power, can do to the life and spirit of a vulnerably placed culture.

The second obstacle to authentic understanding is the widely prevalent "mainstream" cultural baggage with which cultures on the peripheries of national life, such as tribal cultures, are sought to be understood. Politicians, bureaucrats, corporations, traders, and even academics and intellectuals carry this baggage. This cultural baggage is a huge hindrance to understanding. As a contemporary historian of culture, Peter Burke says "…judgments which are inevitably made from the view point of the historian's own culture … act as so many hindrances to understanding." (*Varieties of Cultural History*, OUP, 1997, p. 194). And freedom from such hindrances will require a degree of self-examination and self-awareness, and, therefore, unselfishness, that is hardly ever achieved. Such is our human predicament—the 'ego-centric predicament'—as some philosophers termed it many years ago. Remarking on such an ego-centric distortion of a very different perspective than his own, William James, the early twentieth century psychologist, said, "I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they would have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic way of life at Cambridge." ("On Certain Blindness in Human Beings" in William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers, eds. Harvard 1983. p. 134). Of course, the blindness on the part of the tribesman is of little consequence in arresting the march of the mainstream because the latter's blindness is, as it were, an empowering encouragement effectively to ignore both the "ideality" and the blindness of the former.

[4] See Ramachandra Guha's extremely interesting biography of Elwyn entitled, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, his Tribals, and India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1999. Also Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*.

As I have just said, while even academics and intellectuals tend to carry the baggage of so-called mainstream culture, these groups are vulnerable to another, related, but even more invidious source of biased perception and this is the hold that ideologies and theories have over them. Marxism, liberalism, evolutionism, behaviourism, utilitarianism, Kantianism, and add to them their counterparts in the Indian intellectual tradition—helpful as they are in many ways—each of them imposes a framework of understanding that is not open to experience which is opaque to its way of looking at things, to its own community of ideas. This results either in being dismissive of such experiences as meaningful at all; or in imputing meanings to them which are not theirs at all. Thus take the Frazerian view that rituals in tribal communities are to be understood as pre-scientific, pre-rational magical practices and, therefore that, such communities are 'primitive' at the lowest level of human evolutionary development. The damage done by such theoretical perspective on our understanding of tribal cultures has been quite incalculable. Similarly, the brahmanical conceptions of *dharma*, and *adharma*, and categories such as *asura*, *raksasa*, *dasa*, *dasyu* are just as responsible for the horribly dim view of tribes that still persists in our country.

The economy

I wish now to draw attention to two or three somewhat more ground level, concrete issues. There has perhaps been more said and written about the need to enhance the economic well-being of the northeast, than about such need for any other region. Yet northeast's economy has never gathered sufficient energy to give it a sense of autonomy and confidence. There is good reason why, in spite of the great diversity of the region, and political skirmishes within it, the northeast should be regarded as a sort of unit that must be economically integrated and strengthened. For one thing the entire region is almost cripplingly economically dependent on the rest of country; combined with the sense of historical autonomy that the region, as a whole, enjoys, this absence of economic self-reliance is a powerful impetus for

profound dissatisfaction and anxiety among the people; and, this, negative though it is, is a very strong binding force for the people of the region. Much of the spirit of the ideology of militant subversion and violence is fuelled by this dissatisfaction and anxiety. Also let us remind ourselves that economic exchange and mutual interdependence among the communities of the northeast are a part of the living memory of the people of the northeast. Strengthening and integrating the economy of the northeast has been on the national agenda for half a century and more – but with almost nothing to show for it. Economic dependence on the mainland has only increased, if anything, and there is only a minuscule presence of the northeast in the general economy of the country. Opening up the eastern boundaries of the region for infrastructure development, trade, commerce, industry, vigorous renewal of old cultural ties, education and research can make the crucial difference. This however must not mean opening up of these boundaries to facilitate economic ties with our eastern neighbours through a narrow northeastern corridor. This will only ensure that economic status quo in the northeast is not disturbed, and culturally, turning the northeast into a mere trade corridor might result in even more depressing consequences. It may lead, at best, to peripheral growth of wealth among sections of people living along the corridor, and, at worst, it may lead to trade and commerce of extremely unsavoury kinds.

Of memory and history

Next I wish to say a little about the importance of history for a people and the dangers of either ignoring it, or attempting to replace it by a past that is in no way theirs. Think of an individual and her idea of what or who she is—in short, her identity, and let us also remember that without a sense of what or who I am, I am lost in the world—an "unaccommodated" denuded creature. ["unaccommodated (by language, memory and community) man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal." William Shakespeare, *King Lear*]. The individual's identity is inseparable from her past, and it can only be articulated in terms of her emotional, ethical and reflective engagement with it. Take away

her past, and you have taken away her capacity for any meaningful, sustainable self-awareness. Without self-awareness, there is no self-identity. It is similar in the case of a community or a culture. A community's self-identity is similarly premised on its awareness of its past and its emotional and yet reflective and critical commitment to and engagement with it. [There are obviously important differences between individual memory and what may be called cultural or social memory; and cultural memory is kept alive in ways individual memory cannot. Perhaps we can say the following: individual memory is limited to the individual's own experiences and the constructions she willy-nilly puts on them—constructions that are dependent on the various contingencies that life places her in. Cultural memory can extend to a past far beyond the lives and experiences of innumerable generations of individuals of the community. It is subject to the vagaries of time and countless contingencies that time is liable to throw up. Its survival through time and these contingencies ensures the survival of the culture.] The past of a community, like our tribal non-literate communities, comes down to it orally from generation to generation, through its language, music, songs, other forms of creative expression, and its great variety of narratives—tales, stories, legends, and myths. These, as it were, constitute the thickness or density of their history. Such thick history is to be contrasted with the formal, abstract, lifeless, thin histories of these communities that we attempt to write in our universities. It is in the creative engagement with its thick past that a community can be at home with itself. Such engagement, of course, does not exclude a critical look at oneself and openness to the other. Our attempts—frequently unwitting—to deprive our communities of their past come from different sources. Two of them are: 1. The totally misconceived so-called "strategic" reason that for purposes of national integration, it is best that memories of an autonomous past are not rekindled. It is misconceived strategically, because national unity cannot be built on erased memories. In fact memories, cannot be totally erased. They have a way of surfacing in different guises some of which may be quite dangerous from whatever point of view we look at them: whether of national interest or of the interest of the communities whose

memories are in question. 2. The so-called civilising mission that some cultures engage in in relation to other less powerful cultures. The aim of such missions is to convince the "victim" culture that its past is so murky that it is best for it to disown and abandon it and live life as though it didn't have a past at all or, even perhaps worse, equip it with a new past – a past that is in no way its own. It requires only a little reflection to realize that such attempts have indeed been made—sometimes perhaps with "noble" intentions—in relation to the cultures of the northeast. The idea that the tribes can be saved for humanity only by "lifting" them out of their "savage" and "brute" existence and placing them in the lap of some mentally and spiritually "evolved" form of life is deeply ingrained in the ideologies of many religions as also, I am afraid, in the ideology of scientific rationality. I can think of but shall not elaborate on profound moral objections to such missions. Suffice it to say that the ethical maturity of an individual or a community is firmly based on the way it is able to own up its past, come to terms with it and overcome its hold on it when one's ethical compulsions so demand, and not by being given a past which is not its own.

Nation and national unity

To my mind national unity is our work in progress. Commitment to a nation has an ethical edge, but it is also deeply interest-driven. The ethical edge comes from the fact that the nation gives one a sense of belonging that can enhance one's self and, if you like, one's personhood[5]. Being an Indian means that one is the inheritor of the great wealth—moral, spiritual, cultural, and intellectual wealth—that is India's. The wealth, of course, also means the wealth of diversity. Such inheritance can give one an enhanced sense of identity, which brings with it a special sense of 'responsibility. And this responsibility can become part of our total ethical being. National identity may sometimes acquire an

[5] During a conversation Gandhi had with Phizo, before independence, he suggested to Phizo that he would like to think of Naga country as his own just as he would like to think of the whole of India as his (Phizo's) own.

overriding ethical dimension; but it is not necessary, nor does it, of course, exclude respect for other national identities. But commitment to a nation is a powerful challenge—the challenge needs to be met with much ethical energy and sensitivity. The challenge—it is important to remind oneself—is, to a very large extent, the challenge of developing respect—genuine, deep, as opposed to surface—for diversity. The other aspect of national unity is the strength of the self-interest that is involved in being part of a nation. The interest ranges from security, both internal and external, economic well-being and sharing a world of peace, harmony, freedom and equality. Freedom and equality are however extremely abstract notions; the challenge for nation building is to find a meaningful place for them in the extraordinarily dense context of our national life. Thus ethics and self-interest combine to provide us with a powerful motive for engaging in the adventure of building a nation. It is crucial however to realize that this is a motive that all of us—all communities, all cultures all regions including the northeast—have to cultivate in order to turn this land of magical diversity into a thriving, pulsating nation. The onus on the northeast is just as crucial as the onus on the rest of the country.

It is, I think, important to reiterate at the end that nation is not a natural kind. Treating it as a natural kind or as near enough to a natural kind can have, as indeed it has had, disastrous consequences. The concept had its origin in the context of a set of particular historical–political contingencies; and through time, it has changed its meaning, but to most people who believe that it is a concept that is used legitimately to organise an important cluster of our experiences of the world outside ourselves, it has a very significant ethical and emotional content. This content has to do with the concept's deep association with ideas like unity, belonging, co-operation, territoriality ("my land"), etc. and our ordinary day to day ethical experience is intricately embedded in ideas like these and others. [Some of the best expressions of this ethical and emotional content of the idea of a nation is to be found in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's two songs, *jana gana mana…* and *amar sonar bangla*, have been adopted as

the national anthems of two independent nations, which have had a somewhat erratic political relationship. These two songs are perfect examples of how emotions associated with ideas of unity, belonging and attachment to land, can be elevated to a level far beyond the confines of any community, religion and political ideology]. It is for us Indians to determine the proper ethical contours of the concept of a nation; and this is a major part of the challenge I referred to above. Bernard Williams, the distinguished British philosopher says this about the concept of freedom:

> Whatever our various relations may be with others in our world who do or do not share our conception of freedom, we will not understand our own specific relation to that value unless we understand what we want that value to do for us – what we, now, need it to be in shaping our own institutions and practices…"
>
> (*In the Beginning was the Deed*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 75).

This is even truer of the concept of a nation.

Education

Let me say something at the end about education and the role it might play in the light of what I have said about the twin attractions of the idea of a nation, namely, its ethical edge and the motive of collective self-interest. It is generally thought that education has a very special value, although frequently, it is not clear what this special value might be. Without going into the possible philosophical debate on this,[6] I would like simply to assert that this special value of education lies in the fact that it is a process that is aimed at enhancement of the self, or, if you like, enhancement of the person. Education targets the human being as a whole and aims, with varying degrees of success or

[6] I have something rather more detailed to say about this in my recent book, *Philosophy and Education*, OUP, India, 2014, pp. 1–24.

failure, to seek the enlargement of its unity and prevention of its fragmentation. In its various forms and in its various stages, education involves engagements of different kinds—engagements that lead to such enhancement of the self or enlargement of the person. Such engagement requires a form of attention on the part both of the teacher and the learner that enables each to overcome the natural urge to be preoccupied with concerns about oneself, urge to be self-involved. It isn't as though education alone requires the development of such a form of attention. Human relationships of certain kinds quite outside the arena of education can thrive only on the basis of such attention. Take friendship and love. Friends must pay attention to one another beyond any selfish, ego-centric preoccupations. And love, when it arises in us, moves us outward from the self to the other, as we aspire to connect in a desired manner with the object of love. It is the energy of engagement, whether that engagement is with an individual, with a community, with a form of art, with an activity, or with the public good; and it is a developmental force, a way for the self to become more. The process of education may be said to be a continuous process of engagement at different levels. The teacher's dual engagement with what she teaches and with the taught, the learner's engagement with what is being taught and with fellow learners. As we move up the levels of education, the required kind of attention is focused more and more on the world of ideas – communities of ideas (e.g. ideologies), traditions of thought, the ways in which one tradition of thought may or may not give way to another; on how creative energy within a tradition may change the course of the tradition, on coherence and conflict among communities of ideas.

The underlying purpose of such engagement is the enhancement, on the one hand, of the world of ideas, and on the other, of the self—both of the recipient of education and of its giver. And it should be obvious that this purpose cannot be external to the process itself; the process can be fully understood only in terms of its purpose. Of course, after a certain stage the role of the teacher gradually merges into that of the taught, but the purpose of the two way enhancement—of the world of ideas and of the self—remains.

Given that engagement such as the kind I have indicated is internal to the very process of education, how must such engagement serve the value of national unity without compromising the very nature of this engagement? The idea of national unity or identity has, as I mentioned earlier, an ethical edge, and this is best understood as consisting of an abiding sense of belonging, participation, and warmth of affection for, as we say, "one's land" – a sense which has its source in one's emotional ties with one's home, village or place of birth. Of course, a deeply felt sense of national identity would require a vastly expanded sense of belonging, participation and warmth of affection. Such an extended sense must, at the same time, be inclusive of the great diversity of the forms of human life within the country. An identity bereft of this inclusiveness would have built into it an active source of fissure which would militate against the sense of belonging. The concept of national identity necessarily also implies the possibility of other such identities informed by a common ethical commitment and a sense of co-operative engagement with the social and economic life within its own territorial bounds. One's own national identity, therefore, presupposes a multiplicity of such identities; and the only ethically acceptable attitude towards such identities is respect for them.

National unity in the sense we have outlined, is, then, a proper subject of education. If the value of education consists in enhancing our capacity for self-overcoming, pursuit of inclusive national unity requires just such self-overcoming and it demands just the kind of attention that it is the aim of education to promote. Informed respect for other cultures, and other ways of being human, a wider sense of belonging and acknowledgement of the need for cooperative endeavour for one's as well as the neighbour's must be part of the content of education at all levels.

Northeast, as indeed the entire country, has almost unseeingly meandered its way around issues relating to educating its children and adults. Non-availability of teachers at all levels of education, inadequate and flawed training, language in which to teach, and

languages that a school child must learn are problems which seem to have defied solution. I wish merely to raise two issues which are both connected with education's role in meeting the challenge of national unity: the first has to do with the language of teaching at the pre-primary and primary levels of education; and the second with the content of education both at the secondary and higher levels of education.

The view that mother tongue teaching at least at the pre-primary and primary levels is best for the child has a great deal of theoretical support, and is generally advocated in our pious policy declarations. But the practical difficulty of translating it into reality is well-nigh insurmountable. In the Northeast itself there might be, on a fairly stringent count, close to two hundred native tongues – not just dialects of one language or another, but independent autonomous languages. Modern school teaching—even if at its earliest stages—is not possible in each of these languages. There are no teachers, and certainly no trained teachers, and for most languages, there is no teaching material. But a great advantage our country, and particularly its northeast, enjoys is its deeply ingrained multilingual character. Most children in our rural and semi-urban communities grow up wielding multiple languages.

Perhaps a few general remarks about language might be in place here. "Language lights up the world"—this remark, made by St Augustine, one of the great philosophers of medieval west, remains one of the most penetrating things said about language. Language lights up the world, because it is only through language that one becomes aware of, can sharpen one's awareness, of the great diversity that makes up our world—its minute particularities, its subtle unities, its surprises and its magnificence. Without language, without the ability to articulate, the world would be for most part, a chaotic mass. Another thing, equally profound that Augustine said about language was that language is a "gift". Augustine of course thought that it was a gift from God. But the truth of the remark does not diminish even if we leave God out of it. It is a gift because it is in a very basic sense,

given. I do not invent language—I get inducted into a language by the particular language-wielding community into which I am born. To be inducted into a language thus is also, at the same time, to be inducted into the particular life of the community, into its specific way of being a human community, into its culture, if you like; and, therefore, into its rights and wrongs, good and bad.

But an interesting fact about many human societies, including ours, is that humans are inducted into not one but several languages; and, therefore, to a greater or less extent to several linguistic communities. In other words, many human societies are naturally multilingual. Although my mother's language was Assamese, she spoke Bengali as naturally at home as her "mother" tongue; But there were many other tongues to which I was naturally exposed, almost from the time I was born : Missing, Nepali, Khasi, Nagamese, and perhaps a few others. This meant that I grew up as at least a part insider in the lives of several linguistic communities, several cultures, several ways of being human. For me to move from one language to another was not like a schizophrenic leap from the one to the other; moving from one to the other was as natural as being in what might be called my "mother tongue".

Looking back at my primary school days, and having added a few other languages to my repertoire of languages—although I must admit I am an extremely poor wielder of language generally—and having done a little philosophy I am now convinced of the truth of the following: 1. Diversity of human kind—marked by linguistic diversity—is perhaps the most magical fact about humanity; 2. And yet, there is only one human kind informing this great diversity; 3. No language is intrinsically better or worse than another. My early exposure to multiple languages gave me unmistakable intimations of the truth of these three propositions. I also cannot help thinking what a tremendous difference it would have made to my understanding of my immediate social reality, if formal teaching early in school was somehow informed by our community's multi-lingual practice.

The multi-lingual environment in our country, particularly in the northeast, suggests the following possibility which may be worth serious consideration: Political and other contingencies may make it necessary that teaching at the primary and preprimary levels is done mainly in a language that is not the language spoken within the community – preferably a politically neutral language. It may also be the case that the teacher is a "stranger" within the community. In such a situation, ameliorative measures that can be taken may be schematically presented as follows: (a) the teacher must learn to use at least the major (spoken by the majority) language of the community; (b) the use of the main language of teaching should be punctuated by the use by the teacher—even if not with much proficiency and competence—of the language or languages of the community; (c) the teacher must encourage children to communicate in the class-room in their own languages, just as she must occasionally break into her own language to emphasise a specific point of cultural similarity or difference; (d) the aim of the teacher should be to bring home to the children the crucial fact that while diversity of native languages is a very important aspect of human life, and must be accepted and respected as such, forays beyond the boundaries of a language can be a very enriching experience.

What has been suggested above is well within the bounds of possibility. Naturally, we must begin with small measures and in areas where steps are relatively easily taken, say, in our "ashram" schools.

The success of these measures is likely to have at least two enormously significant consequences: (i) it will vastly reduce the "strangeness" that characterises teacher-child relationship in a large number of our schools, and, thereby, enhance self-confidence of the child, and, perhaps, even of the teacher; (ii) it will have given in the child a stable basis for the thought that linguistic and cultural diversity is a totally natural phenomenon, which is intrinsically worthy of being respected and that it adds immeasurably to the richness of human life.

What I have said above is meant to be applicable generally in our country; but it is much more so in our tribal regions, particularly in the northeast.

It is accepted that our school curriculum must introduce the child to the diversity of cultures in our country adequately and with great sensitivity. But there are enormous difficulties—both textual and pedagogical—of preparing such a curriculum. The difficulties spring from issues that I touched upon above (pp 15–18).

Every living culture has an inner life and its outer face. The outer—the various so-called manifestations of culture—is the form of the inner and inner, therefore, is inarticulate without the outer. For the native there is a seamless concurrence between the inner and the outer; the latter, as it were, is the embodiment of the former in much the way in which language is the embodiment of thought. The inner is, as it were, the life of the outer. The seamless connection between the inner and the outer and vice-versa of the native is not immediately available to the outsider. It is only through the painstaking exploration of the intricacies of the outer that the inner, begins to light up for the outsider. Effective textual and pedagogical interventions at various levels of learning in the area of intercultural understanding will demand a rare level of maturity, sensitivity, wisdom, and sympathy all at once. It is extremely doubtful if our textbooks can claim to have fulfilled even a modicum of this demand.

Conclusion

In this rather unwieldy talk, I have tried to look at the northeast of India via an understanding of the ideas of (i) nation, (ii) culture and cultural diversity, (iii) respect for another culture, (iv) economic fellowship and (v) education. While there is a great deal of debate about (i), (ii), and (iii), and very little about (iv), I have argued that our approach to the northeast must be based on a sound understanding of these concepts. Such an understanding is the key to an ethically and psychologically acceptable and challenging commitment to be partners in a

multiple pluralistic nation within the framework of a single state. We also need urgently to reflect on and work towards a practice of education particularly for our children which will be deeply commensurate with this understanding. This reflection must include close attention to the very complex linguistic situation in our country and the intimate link between language, culture and one's sense of being oneself. The idea of economic fellowship is not perhaps part of the general idea of economic development. We do, of course, talk about "development with a human face". It is difficult to decipher what this means. One might perhaps be allowed to say the following about development that does not have a human face: it is (i) measurable and mechanical, (ii) economic growth driven purely by consumerism and greed, (iii) growth that is premised on inequality of distribution and exploitation, etc. As opposed to this, 'development with a human face' would take seriously into consideration, so it might be said, factors such as universal health care, drinking water, electricity and housing for every citizen, sufficient food for everybody, leisure time, facilities for play, relaxation and entertainment for all citizens, old age care and so on and, of course, universal education. But all these, except perhaps education, could be advocated by an exceptionally enthusiastic animal lover for the entire animal kind. What then about the '*human face*'? Occasionally, the phrase 'human dignity' crops up in the debate. My sense of my own dignity arises from the fact that I am a self-reflecting, self-evaluating creature and that I would like to think of myself as the central spring of my own actions. Similarly, the dignity of a community arises from its self-understanding and the idea that its springs of action are located in this self-understanding[7]. Of course, the actual self-understanding of a community as we all as of a person may not be very deeply self-reflective, nor, therefore, adequately articulate; and it is always subject to questioning and, therefore, revision. But it is the potential for such reflection and articulation that is distinctive of humans and human communities. And the dignity of the person as well as of the community is located in this potential. A

[7] see above Section on Respect for Cultures

recognition of this is the basis of what I have called economic fellowship, an economic community whose economic activities keep the dignity of and respect for its fellow members centrally in focus. Whether this is possible in an economy driven by the kind of interests that our economy is, is quite another matter. But for economic development to acquire a recognizable specifically human *ethical* content, this is a minimal requirement. With all our talk about 'grassroots' consultation and decentralized decision making, it is doubtful if anything other than large-scale self-interests of powerful economic players including the State has anything like a pivotal role in the economy. The unhappiness of the northeast has much to do with this; perhaps historical necessity—such as is evident in the corporatization and globalization of economies—grinds its way into the stage where this unhappiness will turn into inexorable human selfishness.