



## National integration in the context of Northeast an overview

**Jatin Hazarika**

Indian Institute of Public Administration  
Guwahati, India

For reasons – geographical, historical, political and economic, we have to consider North Eastern Region as a whole. Our country has hardly another region which presents such a varied and diverse picture – the North East is in fact a miniature India with wide topographical climate, economic, social and cultural diversities. In no other part of the country we do find more than a hundred tribes living together, nor we do find such an area where people speak a hundred different tongues, where ways of life between one community and another are marked by such prominent differences and where people live in such diverse stages of human history – and yet it is a single region where an underlying sense of oneness and uniformity has woven all strands of different textures and shades into a composite and hybrid whole. Geography and practical needs of economic prosperity still continue to underline the inescapable truth that inspite of the Region's disintegration into separate political entities it has to thrive and strive together to accomplish the bigger economic tasks. Another very significant identity of this region is being the eastern Sentinel of the country having common boundaries with four foreign countries. In view of its strategic location and danger to any part of this Region is a danger to the whole of India. Therefore maintenance of peace and order as well as preservation of national integrity are supreme important for the interest of this Region as a whole and also of the country at large. There while discussing the problems of national integration in North East, we must take into account the over all scenario of the country.

At the dawn of twenty first century we are indeed living in an era of rapid change that both impels and compels quick responses. Externally, we find that the world is facing serious problems that relate to peace, disarmament, poverty, hunger, trade-barriers, racism, ethnic strifes, aggressive separatism, religious

fundamentalism, environmental degradation etc. Internally, the rise of communalism, fundamentalism, casteism, linguistic, chauvinism and regionalism (even separatism) are critical challenges to the very unity and integrity of our country. Given the vast religious, ethnic, linguistic, social and geographical diversities of India our 'range of vulnerabilities' has widened.

India is a vast country of continental dimension with diverse cultures, religions, languages, literature, art forms and thousands of years of history forming the evolving background of its civilizational development. It comprises a variegated mosaic of faiths, beliefs, ethnicities and identities. There have been schools of thought, many forms of belief and many types of governance but most people in the country have followed common ways of life. We must be proud of the Indian cultural diversity as perceived and realized in constructive and not confrontatory contexts. A country that stands for values of love, compassion, tolerance, non-violence and respect for all faiths, all classes and all callings. Faith in its true and higher meaning must bring people together, not divide them. Religion is a word that comes from the root 'regerio' which means to unite, which is what all religions, in essence, should be doing. In the world of faith, we may be Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis or everything else. In the world of life, we may be rich or poor, urban or rural, plebians or patricians, thinkers or doers, teachers or taught, intellectuals or luddites, but in the broad contexts of our national identity, we must be Indians first. In this respect there cannot be any compromise. As Gandhiji said years ago "we must cease to be exclusive Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, Jews whilst we may staunchly adhere to our respective faiths, we must be Indians first and Indian last". In the light of the globalization processes which are afoot one may add

that we have also to learn to become world citizens.

Indian has chosen for itself a republican, democratic and secular form of governance. These values and goals are enshrined in our Constitution. Yet religious discords communal conflicts and ethnic and caste strifes can be seen everywhere. These phenomena are at best symbols of quests for identity, security and power. At worse these are highly dangerous developments which can destroy the very fabric of the Indian nation. We see religion being used for political purposes as a result of which myriad problems of mutual distrust and suspicion, of heat and passion, of hatred, revenge and violence amongst various communities and castes arise, time and again. Ours is professedly a secular state, but, unfortunately, we are surrounded by some countries which are theocratic. Fundamentalism is used in these countries by the elites for staying in power. This phenomenon has given rise to deep apprehension in the Indian mind. The rise of fundamentalism is perceived as a serious threat to the Indian culture, the Indian identity and to the very unity and integrity of India. The origins of fundamentalism can be traced to traditionalism, economic and social backwardness and the manipulation of feudal elites to stay in power. Traditionalists have been forced by history and circumstances into rapid activism. They see themselves as under some kind of a political, cultural and economic siege with need to fight back using threat and violence, if called for, against the forces of secularism and modernism. They depend on a 'selective retrieval' of the past, on the finality of religious texts and on various forms of moral absolutism and intolerance which can go beyond national borders. Fundamentalism gives rise to equally unhealthy responses from those who fear it. A vicious circle gets formed causing serious problems for peace and order. One can observe world-wide trends which constitute different kinds of separatism. All around us, in the last several decades, we can witness sharp rise in the politics of "cultural exclusivism and xenophobia". Ethnic separatism, hatred and distrust are sentiments that have been on the rise. We can see the rise of different kinds of fundamentalism which may be religious racist or ideological.

The world is changing fast, politically, economically, socially and in terms of science and technology. It has shrunk and what happens in one place has quick repercussions at the other. This is the age of inter-dependence, the age in which the quest for a new world order is pursued from many quarters, many regions and many constituencies in the world. It is in this context that we need to gather an overview of the situation as it confronts us in our country today. In India the political and social cauldron is on the boil.

We have two kinds of culture simultaneously contending with each other, namely, a mass culture on the one hand and an elite culture on the other. And, it looks, as if, the mass culture with all its adverse consequences is dominating. The Indian system has become some kind of mass democracy characterized by severe conflicts and ruled by limpet like oligarchies. Our declared goals are somehow receding from us both in terms of reach as well as grasp. The consequence is that, as an essential value, discipline has become a causality. Institutions have lost legitimacy and credibility. All this has resulted in social unrest, corruption, violence and insecurity. The increasing concentration of political power, half-hearted implementation of land reforms, unjust dowry system, galloping unemployment, unbearable population pressures, the unending demands of the cake-staking organized sectors of labour including public sector employees and government servants, and a thoroughly corrupt and corrupting election system have contributed in no small measure to general unrest in the country and to the undermining of social, political, economic, legal and administrative institutions that every society needs for ordering its affairs in a civilized manner. A mass culture in which lumpen elements prevail is dominating in the country. While we swear by democracy it is oligarchies that rule. We are falling prey to highly acquisitive and competitive cultural ambitions and life styles which are basically alien to our culture and value systems. Wants and more wants have supplemented needs. The values of services, sharing, contentment and the exercise of ethical choices have all but vanished. The moral realm has lost ground to the political-economic realm where power and wealth have turned out to be the main engines of ostensible achievement. It is tragic but true that even saints and savants who are supposed to be renouncers have established proximity to the levers of power to wield it in back-seat driving stances. Labour and management, far too often, have become adversaries to the detriment of the economic system. Corruption is rampant in all walks of life. The political and social life is informed by violence. Character assassination has become a fine art which is fuelled by the circulation-seeking press that depends on sensationalism for promoting sales. There is political and social fragmentation to be witnessed all around. Politics has been criminalized and administration has become a willing or unwilling hand-maiden of this unholy nexus. The society has become permissive, the state soft. A state of normlessness has overtaken us. The judicial system is in crisis as conceded by even a few Chief Justices of India. Obtaining justice has become expensive, time consuming and wholly frustrating.

It is evident to all that India is facing

tremendous social, economic and political difficulties. The unipolarity of the power structure in the world, following the dismemberment of the Soviet block of countries, has created further problems for all nations. We are in the process of evolving and implementing reforms of historical significance. We hope thereby to release the forces of economic growth, social justice and political stability. We have the potential, we have resources, we have manpower, we have technologies or can obtain such of those as we do not. But, solving our enormous internal and external problems and meeting the great challenges ahead with success is not possible unless there is peace, security and unity in the country. We need a dynamic equilibrium. If every Indian is to become a strong, sincere and reliant partner in national development, if he or she is to share the country's prosperity with justice and equity we must all unite. Great issues of tremendous importance cannot be decided in the streets as seems to be the gathering impression. There have to be authority, discipline, communication, trust, accommodation and, above all, a shared vision for changing the national scenario and ushering in a happy dawn. Democracy, it must be remembered, does not imply a weak state. It is not, as Emile Durkheim stated long ago, a mode of minimizing the power of the state but a means of ensuring an active interplay between the state and the rest of the society.

India, the second most populous country in the world, has a very low human development rating according to the UNDP's report. We are big in size but low in results. This is a situation that needs to be changed and changed fast. China and many economics of East and South East Asia have amply demonstrated that this can be done. The Indian tiger has to be uncaged says the 'Economist', but how? One of the most vital truths to be remembered is that development needs a tranquil society, a well ordered state, proper climate of internal and external security and a participating, co-operating citizenry. Most of these elements have been missing in our polity. Hence the difficulties that have been, and continue to be, encountered in accelerating people-oriented development. The social, religious or ethnical unrests that are occurring, as well as insurgencies raising heads in different parts of the country and more so in North East, loss of life and property, loss of production, flight of manpower from producing centres and great traumatization of communities and individuals. Such examples could be multiplied, 'Bandhs', rallies, 'morchas', civil curfews, gheraos, strikes and violent protests have caused recurrent setbacks to the country's economy, Militancy and insurgency have brought commerce, trade and industry in many parts of India to near stand-still

levels. Ethnic strife prevails in many areas. The phenomena of private armies having been raised to secure sectional interests and harass opponents, criminal gangs and mafias have mushroomed. There is a general belief going in the minds of people that redressal is possible only through agitation, peaceful if possible, violent if necessary. Centralization of power has given rise to a feeling of deprivation amongst the states, local bodies and other people's institutions. The command lines in civil services and police have become attenuated and dysfunctional to be replaced by external loops of political and similar types of interventions. As the Police Commission observed in its report many years ago, "a sub-centre of pulls and pressure, sycophancy, nepotism, corruption and inefficiency in all public services, including the police" has arisen and become widespread. These, then, are the ground realities. The question that arises is how can the often pedaled lofty claims of fair, evenhanded and just governance be reconciled with the mess of real-world processes, namely, social unrest, communal discord, unaffordable populism, a corrupt political system dependent upon a corrupting election system, rank consumerism, smuggling, black-marketing, spineless administration, police that is feared and the rise of gangsterism in most walks of life. It is surprising that even with these negativities the fabric of democracy is still holding though its fraying is all, too, visible. In an ethnically pluralist democratic society whose members may disagree in the political, cultural, religious and philosophic beliefs, if the society is to become well-ordered, there is need for a constructive 'overlapping consensus' which can be the basis for preserving the integrity, unity and identity of the state. Such a consensus has to transcend narrow political considerations if it is to succeed.

Pluralism has been and is the soul of Indian civilization. Yet, pluralism has become very difficult to live with because an atmosphere of distrust, suspicion and fear for identity is prevailing. Several internal and external threats stare us in the face. These threats endanger the very fabric of the nation and its unity, identity, and integrity. We do not have a coherent polity that could offer justice and equity to people. It is uncertainty that continues to inform the long and arduous voyage of the nation.

We have chosen a democratic republican system for governing ourselves and given it a strong under-pinning of secularism. Democracy, particularly in multicultural and multi ethnic contexts, has its difficulties. As a system it is accompanied by the social opening up towards diversity. Its constituents and peripheries, therefore tend to develop pressures on the system that instil uncertainty. At the same time it has to

be remembered that while democracy may be perceived as a fragile form of Government that somehow manages to muddle through, more often than not, in terms of values and satisfactions, we have yet to find a better form that ensures. It was Winston Churchill who stated in the House of Commons in 1947 "Many forms of government have been tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those forms that have been tried from time to time"

We call our country the Union of India. The word "Union" emphasizes unity and integrity. We have clearly stated in the Preamble of our Constitution that India will be a secular state. Thus national integration and secularism are two extremely vital policy pillars of our polity and society. Both need debate, discussion and national consensus followed by national determination and national action.

We have tensions and conflicts of different types prevailing at different levels. Firstly, we have the Centre-State conflicts on the one hand and the State local government conflicts on the other. The States feel that the Centre has arrogated too much power and resources to itself. The local governments feel the same about the State governments. Secondly we have conflicts between the Centre on the one hand and entrenched regional elites on the other. One can cite the examples of the Tamil Nadu Government taking the Canvery waters dispute to the streets and State Government officially sponsoring bandhs and strikes as protests against central policies. Thirdly there are conflicts between elites and masses. Fourthly, again we see the new phenomenon of conflicts between national business groups and multi-national companies. Add to it caste and communal tensions and numerous aggressive sub-regional demands and we have a worsening picture. All this makes the country difficult to govern. Lastly, at this juncture, one would also like to point out to the tensions that have developed between the political class on the one hand and public institution on the other. For decades now the political classes have sought to bypass and, at time, even subvert the constitutional arrangements under

which power can only be exercised in a lawful manner. The political class has subverted the judiciary, intimidated the bureaucracy and rendered ineffective many other public institutions of importance.

The challenges to national unity and its integrity are manifold. To meet these challenges successfully we need strong and honest government, a performing administration and an alert citizenry. The State must become a moral agency to protect and preserve our unity, culture and nationhood.

The challenges that are faced by the country in respect of its unity and integrity are indeed urgent and compelling. These challenges need quick and decisive responses from the nation. It is at the political, administrative, moral and intellectual levels that the country has to respond. As a society we have become corrupt, soft and permissive. The cornucopia of immorality, deceit, bigotry, distrust confrontation and lust for power cannot sustain the nation. With the collapsing of systems and institutions, with high rates of violence, with dissent as the prevailing ethos, the nation is in the danger of being balkanized. The time has become turbulent and frightening. At this hour the country needs statesmanship in politics, promptness, fairness and responsiveness in the people. The need for remoralization of politics and the reconstruction of administrative integrity is both vital and urgent. Attention needs to be paid to the management of values and cultures in the country and this should be the prominent task of our leadership. We need 'politics of meaning' we need a new ethos of sharing and caring, of tolerance and accommodation, of unity and co-operation. Let us then, with full determination and abiding faith, take a vow to stand for India. Let India get a chance to be strong, united and resurgent. If the country is united and strong there will be room for every faith of flower, every class to prosper and every citizen to grow economically, intellectually and morally. This is the need of the hour. The grim challenges can become bright opportunities. We need statesmanship from our leaders, we need tolerance from our people, we need inspiring acts from our intellectuals, scientists, professionals and those who man administration and law and order forces in the country