

Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru

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TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Basic Problems of NEFA¹

During my brief visit to Shillong² I have had the opportunity to discuss some of the problems of the North East Frontier Agency with the Governor and others here. I am not referring to the little trouble we are having in the Tuensang Division, but rather to the basic problems we have in these tribal areas and our general approach to them. Broadly speaking, we have indicated our approach in the past and I believe that, on the whole, this is being followed. And, yet, new problems arise from day to day and we have to be wide awake so as to learn from experience and adapt ourselves to the experience gained by our work.

2. About a year or more ago, we appointed, after careful selection, a new lot of political officers and other senior officers.³ So far as I have been able to judge, these officers that we have appointed both at headquarters and as political officers in the districts, have justified their choice. They are competent, enthusiastic and friendly to the tribal people. That is a great gain because I feel that practically everything depends upon the quality of our

¹ Note to Jairamdas Doulatram, K.L. Mehta, Verrier Elwin, Secretary-General, Foreign Secretary and Joint Secretary (E), MEA, Shillong, 28 August 1955. JN Collection.

² On 27 August 1955.

³ In 1954, the MEA decided to form a cadre of officers to be known as the Indian Frontier Administrative Service which required men with open minds to be able to grasp the broad essentials for dealing with the tribesmen; to be prepared to forego the comforts of living in towns and to spend the entire span of their service amongst the hillmen.

officers in these areas, much more so here than in places where there is a settled administration.

3. I have had talks with the Governor, with Dr Verrier Elwin, the Adviser K.L. Mehta⁴, the Development Commissioner Colonel P.N. Luthra,⁵ the Deputy Adviser Lieut-Col Yusuf Ali⁶ and others. The Governor has taken deep interest in the problems of the Agency and has devoted a great deal of his time. He has travelled about a great deal and visited many places where hardly any officer had been previously. He has thus acquired an intimate and detailed knowledge of these areas and the people who inhabit them. Dr Verrier Elwin is a recognised authority in regard to tribal affairs in India and he brings to his task sympathy and understanding which is unusual and most helpful. I do not think it is possible really to understand the tribal people unless one approaches them with this sympathy and understanding. Dr Elwin's advice, therefore, is of great value. The other senior officers I met also showed a keen interest in their work and a friendly approach to the tribal people.

⁴ Kanhaiyalal Mehta (I 913-91); Joined ICS,] 937; Deputy Commander, Kumaon Division, Uttar Pradesh, 1947-48; Chief Commander, Ajmer, 1950-51; Chief Secretary, Himachal Pradesh, March 1952-January 1954; Officer on Special Duty, Ministry of External Affairs, December, 1953-January 1954; Adviser to the Governor of Assam (North East Frontier Agency Shillong), 1954-59; Joint Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, 1959-62; Indian Ambassador, in Turkey, 1963-66, in Ethiopia, 1966-68, in Chile, 1968-71, and in Afghanistan, 1971-74; author of *In Different Worlds*.

⁵ Pran Nath Luthra (1917-2000); commissioned in Indian Army, 1939; joined Indian Frontier Administration Service, 1955; Special Officer, Frontier Area, MEA, 1956; Commissioner, Nagaland, 1957-60; on special duty with Border Roads Development Board, 1960; Adviser to the Governor of Assam, I 963-April 1971; Additional Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation at Calcutta, April 1971-March 1973; author of *Administration and Constitutional Growth of NEFA. Glimpse into Naga/and*.

⁶ Rashid Yusuf Ali.

4. In dealing with these tribes in the NEFA we meet a great variety of them. They differ from each other in many ways, some being more primitive than others. On the whole, the tribes in the NEFA are more primitive than those of the autonomous districts of Assam. In large areas of the NEFA there has been no administration and their contacts with the outside world have been very limited, if at all. For various reasons, we have been spreading out our administration over this area and thus, rather suddenly, we have brought these tribes face to face with some aspects of the outside world. They have come in contact with our officers, the men of the Assam Rifles and to a small extent some shopkeepers and the like.

5. This sudden contact of the stone age, or something approaching it, with certain technical developments of the modern age produces a variety of intricate problems. The most important of these problems is psychological. What effect has this contact produced on them?

6. It has often happened in other areas of the world that such contact has been disastrous to the primitive culture and gradually the primitive people thus affected die out. They cannot survive the shock of modern conditions which, of course, they normally saw at their worst.

7. It is obvious that the sudden extension of our administration must have produced enormous psychological reactions in these people. It is difficult for us to judge of these because it is quite impossible for us to put ourselves in their place. And, yet, it is of the greatest importance that we should try to understand what is happening and in our well meant efforts to improve them, not do them grievous injury. How we can do this is more than I can suggest, except that we should always think of this aspect of the problem and keep wide awake. A relatively minor result is some kind of a petty revolt against conditions which they do not understand and the invasion of

agencies which are foreign to them. A deeper result must take place somewhere within their minds. Thus, we may well succeed in uprooting them from their way of life with standards and discipline, and give them nothing in its place. We may make them feel ashamed of themselves and their own people and thus they may become thoroughly frustrated and unhappy. They have not got the resilience of human beings accustomed to the shocks of the modern world and so they tend to succumb to this shock.

8. I suppose that all our officers have this aspect of this question in mind. Nevertheless, I should like to emphasise it. It is for this reason that we have always talked about proceeding cautiously with this problem and not disturbing their old habits and cultures and ways of life. And, yet, what we do may well result in a complete upset of their way of life and thus bring about undesirable consequences.

9. I am laying stress on this aspect, although it is obvious, because it is just possible that in our enthusiasm for doing good we might overshoot the mark and do evil instead. We are up against a fascinating problem of exceeding complexity.

10. Normally speaking, I would have suggested that we should go slow and should not be in a hurry to introduce the civilizing process in these areas. We should give them some time to adapt themselves to it and not try to make them change too rapidly. But, in some ways, we have little choice in this matter. Our frontier in the North East has become an important one for us. We cannot leave it untenanted or unprotected on our side. If we have to look after the frontier adequately, we must have communications leading up to it. Also, we can hardly leave a political vacuum between the frontier and the administered area.

11. Thus, we cannot avoid coming into frequent contact in various ways with these tribal people of the North East. We have to spread our administration there or at least the skeleton of it. This naturally leads to other steps and so we get entangled more and more and the people of these areas tend to be overwhelmed by our many-sided approach. All one can say, therefore, is that while we have to spread out in this way, let us not overdo it and let us be cautious in our approach all the time. Every step taken should be watched carefully for its reactions so that our next step may be a wiser one. It is no good at all for us to come to rigid decisions in our minds as to what should be done, regardless of the consequences. We have to proceed by trial and error and take a further step, as far as possible, after consolidating the earlier one.

12. I have been reading through a long note on the development work in the NEFA. There are charts attached to it of the progress made and these charts and statistics are impressive. The note itself is full of enthusiasm and the urge to bring the benefits of modern life to this isolated area.

13. In this note the pattern of development is discussed and it is pointed out how essential it has become to give these people some of the amenities which they so woefully lack.

14. All this is good. But suddenly I come across a statement that the scout movement and cooperative societies should be introduced in these areas. It is further said that we must not be afraid of the cry for de-tribalisation if it is raised. We need not be afraid of anything. But it does seem to me an extraordinary remark to make that we should introduce the scout movement or cooperative societies, as we know them, in these areas. Tribal folk, by the very nature of their ways of life, are self-reliant, alert and excellent scouts, though they are not aware of the technique of the Scout Movement. Also,

certainly we should encourage cooperative efforts among them. But to talk of our normal cooperative societies growing there appears to me to be far-fetched indeed.

15. It is this approach that rather frightens me, because it is an approach of imposition of what we consider good for them and it fails to take into account the deeper nature of the problem. I am not for a continuation of the tribal structure. Indeed, as I have often said, the essence of the caste system in India is tribal and the sooner we get rid of it the better. But the tribal structure of these primitive people is something much more than a mere form. It is the very texture of their lives and we break it up at our peril. It will break of course, but this must come more through their own agencies, helped by us, than as a thing from outside. That is to say, some of their own people who have been trained in other places should undertake this task. They will do so with full knowledge and sympathy for the inner working of the mind of the tribal people, a knowledge which with all the goodwill in the world we cannot possess.

16. Again, reference is made in this note to education leading to mass unemployment. It is obviously a correct remark. But it makes one realise that the person who is writing this is thinking not of conditions in the tribal areas, but much more so of what prevails in the rest of India.

17. The culture of the tribals is referred to and the necessity for preserving their folk laws, songs and history. Quite right again. But how exactly do we approach this problem? Do we do so in some superior way preserving for future generations the anthropological record of these tribes or do we rather seek to understand their way of life and endeavour to bring about changes without breaking it up?

18. We seek in India to cultivate self-reliance among our people and the capacity to use their hands as well as their minds. The Community Project Scheme has succeeded in this to a remarkable degree. Let us remember, however, that the tribal people have this self-reliance, provided we do not break it up, and have an innate sense of discipline. It is on this basis that we should build.

19. In the various development schemes a good deal of money is allotted to buildings. Buildings are necessary. But I should like this matter to be examined afresh as to the type of buildings required. Why should we put up brick and mortar buildings which, apart from being costly, do not fit in at all with their surroundings. Can we not go in usually for attractive and comfortable huts which may not last very long, but which will be much cheaper and will fit in with these surroundings? It does not matter if these buildings are temporary. Even so, they will be cheaper and more money can be spent on more worthwhile activities or even on higher scales of pay for the subordinate staff.

20. I entirely agree with the statement that we should employ, as far as possible, the tribal people and train them up for it. Some of them should be sent for training abroad so that they can come back to their homelands and be leaders of their people.

21. The basic system of education is obviously the right one for these people, provided always that it is adapted to them and to their needs. We must not reproduce an exact copy of what might be suitable in Allahabad or in Sevagram. In fact, in everything we do we must keep in mind that this must fit in with the life of these people. I heard sometime ago that in some of the schools Ragho Pati Raghav Raja Ram was taught to be sung. This seemed to me totally inappropriate. None of the boys and girls in the tribal

areas have the faintest conception of what this means. Indeed, I would say that the singing of Jana Gana Mana would also have little meaning to them at this stage.

22. I find that among the stories supplied to some of them is the story of Robinson Crusoe and the story of Jawaharlal. I have nothing against these. But I would say that a more intelligent choice could be made of the subjects which interest them and which they understand.

23. The question of script for the tribal languages has arisen. In the autonomous tribal districts of Assam the usual script for the tribal languages is Roman. In most of NEFA Devanagari is being used as the script. In the Tuensang Division, however, there is some difference of opinion as to the script. Devanagari has some obvious advantages. It is easier to transcribe the sounds of the tribal languages into Nagari. Also, as Hindi is being learnt separately, it would simplify the work of learning the tribal language if the script was the same. The objection to this, however, is that in this Tuensang Division, where at present we are having trouble with the Nagas, the imposition of the Nagari script might itself lead to further trouble. This objection has validity. I cannot say to what extent this introduction of the Nagari script in the Tuensang area would be resented by the people there, and therefore, I cannot express a firm opinion. The Governor feels strongly that there is this danger of opposition and we should not complicate our task further. Others feel that this danger is not great and anyhow we shall have to go over to the Hindi script later. Why then perpetuate something which we shall have to change some time or other? It may be more difficult to change it then than now.

24. I confess I find it difficult to say what should be done and how to balance these various factors.

25. It seems to me that in all these areas of Assam and the NEF A Devanagari should be the script not only for the tribal languages but for Assamese also. This would be a tremendous gain and would lessen the burden on the students. They could then learn not only their own language, but also Hindi and Assamese through one script only. It is only when they try to learn English that they will have to study in another script. I asked a number of Khasi leaders about this today. They all agreed that sometime later Nagari must be the common script. But they wanted Roman to continue for some time, as they were used to it. I asked the Chief Minister of Assam about Assamese. He agreed that it would be helpful and promote growth if Assamese adopted the Nagari script. He added, however, that there was much opposition to it. For the present he suggested that either script could be used, i.e., the present Assamese (which is near to Bengali) or the Nagari.

26. Thus, we have to move in the direction of the adoption of the Nagari script for all the tribal languages as well as, I hope, the Assamese language and it would be better not to take any step which comes in the way of this change later. But if there is any difficulty at present, then we will have to delay this change.

27. I am anxious that the artistic tradition of the tribal people should be preserved. I have learnt with horror of cheap textiles and other totally unnecessary articles being imported into the NEF A and sold at some Marwari shops which have been opened. I think that such shops should not be permitted there and a list of articles to be imported should be carefully made. We must not encourage the tribal people to get into bad artistic habits which normally follow the wake of what is called civilisation.

28. It is proposed to cover the entire Agency by NES blocks during the next ten years. Presumably, a number of these blocks will be community projects.

I would welcome the spread of the community projects and NES blocks in these areas. And, yet, I am a little anxious that in our enthusiasm we might not go too far and too suddenly. I should like each step to be watched and its consequences studied. I do not mind if the process slows down a little because of this.

29. What I am anxious about particularly is to avoid large numbers of outsiders being sent to the tribal areas in some capacity or other. If that happens, however well we may train them, the mere numbers will produce what I would call a revolutionary situation in the tribal areas. We will lose grip of the situation then and will have to content ourselves with drifting and accepting many things that we do not like.

30. I have said above that even if we train all the people we send there, the consequences are likely to be bad. It is obvious, however, that we cannot give adequate training to every minor official who is sent there. Some of our people who go there look upon the tribals in a superior way. They make fun of them and sometimes they run after their women folk. All this creates a multitude of problems. Any person from outside who goes there must show respect and understanding for tribal ways. Otherwise, he is a misfit.

31. It must be remembered, and I think our officers understand this fully, that a community project or an NES block has" to evolve a new pattern there different from the normal pattern elsewhere in India. Because of this new pattern, it becomes all the more necessary to go warily and to find out by experience what the right pattern is.

32. It seems to me that the priorities in regard to developmental work in the Agency should be:

- (1) very careful choice of personnel going there;

- (2) communications;
- (3) agricultural development; and
- (4) some simple health services, including water supply, education, tribal languages and cottage industries.

33. This note deals with my immediate reactions after the talks I have had. There is much else to be said because the problem is a fascinating one and very intricate. I am happy, however, that the men in-charge here both at the headquarters in Shillong and the political officers in the districts are competent and enthusiastic. I should like them to be given a good deal of discretion in handling their problems within the ambit of our larger policies. They are on the spot and the spot is rather cut off from headquarters. Generally speaking, they will be in a better position to judge.

34. I would further add that every person who goes to the tribal areas, whatever his grade or degree, should be given to understand as to how our people should behave there and how they should treat the tribal people. This should include the people of the Assam Rifles or our Army who go there.