

Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru¹

Series II, Volume 21

TRIBAL WELFARE

1. To C.D. Deshmukh²

New Delhi January 29, 1953

My dear Deshmukh,

You will remember the talk we had about the Autonomous District Councils attached to the Assam State. These tribal areas are largely undeveloped. The people living there have hardly come in touch with the rest of India, as they were kept apart by the British. Civil administration also was in a rather primitive state, except for 'some parts. Some missionaries spread out there and did good work so far as education was concerned. There were a fair number of conversions also.

The tribes differ from each other considerably and have different languages. Indeed, even in one major tribe there are many languages, like the Nagas, and sometimes a person living in a village can hardly understand the language of some villages ten or twenty miles away. The people generally are physically strong and intelligent. Their womenfolk are particularly attractive and free. The Khasi women and the Lushai women are intelligent and attractive. The Nagas vary from the headhunter variety to others who, when trained and disciplined, are excellent stuff. The Naga battalion in the Assam Rifles is first-rate.

These people are very independent-minded and cannot easily be forced to behave in a manner which they do not like, but they make good friends.

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² JN Collection. Copy of this letter was sent to K.N. Katju and Jairamdas Doulatram

Where they have had a chance of proper education, they have made progress. They are artistic and their weaving is very good. Altogether, they create a fine impression.

They live near the frontier of India and some of the same tribes live on the other side of the border, like the Nagas in Burma. They occupy thus a strategic position of great importance which has grown in recent years.

Properly treated and encouraged, they can become a bulwark of our State.

Otherwise, they are a danger and a weakening factor. On the whole, thus far they look with friendliness towards India, except for a certain section of the Nagas who are troublesome and claim independence. But, while they are friendly to India as a whole, there is a measure of apprehension too about the future, as if they have not quite made up their minds. They do not get on very well with the Assamese who, in the past, treated them as inferiors. They are not prepared to tolerate any stigma of inferiority from anyone. As friends, they react well.

Because of all these factors, it is of considerable importance that we should help them to develop themselves. It was a happy thought to bring some of these people from the frontier regions for Republic Day celebrations here.

These celebrations have impressed them greatly.

It would have been far better if all these areas had been placed directly under the Centre. As it was, some of these areas were separated into the North East Frontier Agency and put under the Centre, through the Governor of Assam, who functions as an agent of the Central Government. The other areas were divided up into a number of autonomous districts, I think, six in number, corresponding to the various tribes, and placed under the Assam Government. I had rather vague ideas on the subject at the time the Constitution was framed.

If I had my present knowledge, we might perhaps have made somewhat different arrangements. It is difficult to change these now, though we need

not rule this out in the future. It was realized of course even at the time of Constitution making that these areas had to be treated separately and hence the formation of the Autonomous District Councils.

A peculiar position has been created. Here is this large area, mostly undeveloped, tagged on to the State of Assam which itself is rather backward. The valley of the Brahmaputra can hardly support these areas or do much to develop them. We are doing something in the Five Year Plan. Apart from the Naga District Council, which has not come into existence because of the non-cooperation of the Nagas, the other District Councils have been formed, but they start from scratch as far as administration is concerned as well as finances. Some of these District Councils show some enthusiasm, but they are hampered greatly by lack of finances. The Assam Government has given them some advances, but they are not adequate. If these District Councils fail to function right at the beginning, then this experiment will collapse and it will become more difficult for us to start afresh with these people. It is important, therefore, that we should help these District Councils to function and that they should have the sensation of some measure of self-government, as was intended by the Constitution. You are quite right that the responsibility for these areas rests with the Assam Government, but as a matter of fact this Government is just not capable of doing all that is necessary and we have to help them, at least to begin with.

So far as education is concerned, we are trying to get the basic education people from Sewagram to take this matter up there. Basic education is good anywhere, but it is particularly suited to these tribal areas.

I have been impressing upon the Assam Government to do its utmost to help these areas. I find that they have thus far given as advances or grants a sum of Rs 3 lakhs to them. In addition they have transferred some monies which had lapsed to them at the time the Constitution started

functioning. This sum amounts to about Rs 6Yz lakhs. Thus, altogether, they have given a little under Rs 9 ½ lakhs to these District Councils. This does not include the Naga District Council which has not come into existence and which, therefore, has to be governed directly by the Assam Government.

The Assam Government has thus done something for these Councils. I think that we should allot Rs 10 lakhs from the Centre for this purpose. We need not consider this a recurring grant or loan. Once the District Councils, begin functioning, they will have some sources of revenue. For the present, we have to get them started. The money we have allotted to the Five Year Plan is for strictly developmental work and can hardly be utilized for this purpose.

If we agree to give this money, it would go through the Home Ministry. I think it will not be desirable to hand it over to the Assam Government without some scrutiny and without deciding how best it can be utilized. The Governor has in fact suggested that an official of the Finance Ministry might go there to help these District Councils to fra1}e their budgets and their rules, etc. This official could advise the Home Ministry as well as the Assam Government and final decisions could then be made in consultation with the Governor.

A number of other questions arise about the division of certain taxes and revenues between the Assam Government and the Autonomous District Councils. The Finance official could also advise us in this matter.

There is a certain urgency about this and the sooner we take steps, the better. If you agree, as I hope you will, to allot Rs 10 lakhs for this purpose, the other steps can be taken speedily.

Yours sincerely,
Jawaharlal Nehru

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2. To Bisnuram Medhi³

New Delhi January 29, 1953

My dear Medhi,⁴

You have written to me previously about the autonomous District Councils. I have been pressing you to give them as much help as you can. You gave me some figures of the help you had already given. This appeared to be very uneven. Some District Councils got much more money than the others. I should like to have your latest figures and an explanation as to why you have helped some more than the others.

In the Naga Hills there is no Council and I suppose, therefore, that the expenditure there is being directly borne by your Government.

I have had some difficulty with the Finance Ministry here on this subject. They said that this was clearly the responsibility of the Assam Government and they did not wish to assume any such responsibility on behalf of the Centre. However, I am having talks with them and I hope it may be possible for us to give some financial assistance for these areas. I think it will be desirable for a senior official of the Finance Ministry to visit these areas and give advice about financial matters relating to the District Councils. This will be helpful to you and to us. I have suggested accordingly to the Finance Minister here....

Yours sincerely,
Jawaharlal Nehru

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³ JN Collection. A copy of the letter was sent to Jairamdas Doulatram, the Governor of Assam. Extracts

⁴ Chief Minister of Assam at this time

3. To Jairamdas Doulatram⁵

New Delhi January 29, 1953

My dear Jairamdas,

You will remember writing to me on several occasions about the Central Government helping financially and otherwise the Autonomous District Councils in Assam. I had recommended this to our Finance Minister. His first reaction was against it, because he said that he was not prepared to accept the responsibility of the Centre for this, it was the Assam Government's responsibility. I had a talk with him subsequently and he more or less agreed to give some help provided this was not supposed to be a recurring item and the Assam Government did not consider it the Centre's responsibility.

I have now written to him again and suggested that Rs 10 lakhs might be given for this purpose, also that he might send a senior Finance Officer to advise in various ways, as suggested by you.

Deshmukh wanted to know what the Assam Government was doing in the way of financial help. I have given him some figures supplied by Medhi. I should like to have fuller details. The figures that Medhi sent me were very uneven, i.e., some District Councils had been helped considerably, others to a much smaller extent.

Yours sincerely,

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4. To All Union Ministers⁶

New Delhi 1st March, 1953

⁵ JN Collection.

⁶ JN Collection"Extracts.

This gives some idea of the difficult problems we have to face in these frontier tribal areas. We are apt to judge of people in various parts of India by the same standards and measure them by the same yardstick. The fact is that they differ in many ways in their customs, ways of life, etc. This is particularly so in the North-East areas, where they have been cut off from India. They are a tough and likable people. They can be won over by friendly treatment and alienated by any attempt to suppress them or impose different ways on them. I am afraid, not many people approach them with sympathy and understanding. We go with our own ideas and presume that they are the best. What is necessary is to try to understand the ways of life of these fine people in the mountains and try to help them. It would be a great pity indeed if they lost their artistic background and became crude imitations of something else.

Yours sincerely,
Jawaharlal Nehru

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5. Welfare of the Tribals⁷

Our tour⁸ is in fulfilment of the desire of the two Governments to confer together in dealing with the common problem of the welfare of the tribal people.

There will be no joint programme by the two Governments, but we shall learn from each other and keep in constant contact so that we might profit by our own actions.

⁷ Talk to press correspondents at Imphal, 28 March 1953. From the National Herald, 29 March 1953

⁸ Nehru and U Nu, the Prime Minister of Myanmar, undertook a joint tour of the tribal areas on either side of the Indo-Myanmar border.

The Burmese Prime Minister is already on the other side of the border. Tomorrow, I will be sending my plane to bring U Nu to Kohima, where the first meeting between the two Prime Ministers will take place. Together we will visit the border two days on this side and two days on the other. I am going to Imphal and later across the border into Burma because some three months ago U Nu invited me to do so. This has nothing to do with special problems or special situation that might have arisen there. U Nu said that he was going to the Naga area and, therefore, I would like me to join him there. The idea appealed to me and I promised to do so. This was when U Nu came to India for the Sanchi celebrations.⁹ No date was fixed at that time and we were waiting for the air-strip to be constructed on the other side of the border and for suitable weather conditions. U Nu had in the meantime fixed his programme and it was forwarded to me. I was glad to have adapted my programme accordingly and then invited him to join me on our side at Imphal and then to go together to the other side.

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6. Aims of Joint Tour¹⁰

My discussions with the Burmese Prime Minister, U Nu, who arrived here today, will have nothing to do with any recent occurrence or any particular situation that has arisen.

⁹ He came to Sanchi on 29 November 1952 on the occasion of the opening of a new vihara and to attend the International Buddhist Cultural Conference held there

¹⁰ Talk to press correspondents at Imphal, 29 March 1953. From the National Herald, 30 March 1953

The present joint tour follows a letter from U Nu some months ago, giving his ideas about tribal people and what his Government is doing for them in Burma.

During my meeting with U Nu we intend to discuss common matters because there is a great desire on both sides to cooperate in the largest possible measure. Both Governments have various welfare schemes for the tribal people on both sides and we will compare our respective approaches and discuss what we have done and intend to do about them.

It is obvious that KMT troops have absolutely no business to be in the Burmese territory. Normally, they should be disarmed or they should go away.¹¹

Burma has been keeping India informed of this development during the past years regularly. The new development has arisen because, it is stated that KMT troops have been helping the insurgents. This is a development which Burma will not like.

KMT troops seem to be better uniformed and equipped now than they have been a year or two ago. But for this they would have simply plaid their way. There must be a source of supply and it is suspected it is either Formosa or Thailand.

¹¹ Myanmar faced a problem from the military operations of the Chinese Nationalist troops in the northern and eastern parts of the country. These troops were the remnants of Chiang Kai shek's army who fled from their country in 1949. In addition to harassing the people of Myanmar they trafficked in opium and other contraband goods, which they obtained from Thailand, an ally of Chiang's regime and the US Government. These troops also got military supplies from other countries through Thailand, and Americans helped them in operating their airfields. The Myanmar Government could not succeed in persuading the Chinese Nationalists to withdraw and the US Government to bring pressure on Chiang's Government to halt their support to them

It is quite possible these equipments might be American, as there are plenty of American materials in Formosa. The American Government can, of course, say they are not responsible for this.

Welfare measures for the tribal people on the India-Burma border cannot be undertaken jointly by both Governments because administrative operators in India and Burma in these areas are different. Perhaps U Nu wants to discuss this matter with me because India has some greater experience administratively in these areas than on the other side of Burma. But it is possible officers on both sides may go across the frontiers for consultations with their opposite numbers.

* * *

7. Tour for Better Understanding¹²

The Burma border is a friendly frontier, and Burma is our neighbour, but it is marked only in the map. Let there not be any border in the hearts of the people of these two countries.

I welcome U Nu as the Prime Minister of a neighbouring country and as an affectionate comrade. It is significant that in these days when frontiers are usually guarded by forces and people on either side are afraid of another, here we do not have any need to take any protective measure of that kind. It is a friendly frontier. We are going to talk not about our disputes and difficulties but rather about the peaceful pursuits of life so that we can advance the interests and welfare of the people on both sides of the border. I wish the representatives of both the Governments meet occasionally and discuss such peaceful pursuits rather than about their difficulties or differences.

¹² Address at a public meeting at Imphal, 30 March 1953. From the National Herald, 31 March 1953

Unless the people cooperated with the Government and worked hard, they can neither solve their problems nor can build up their country. Manipur is beautiful with great natural resources. They should develop the State by joint efforts shunning all group rivalries and feuds.

An advisory council for Manipur will be formed soon. Later, other steps will be taken. An advisory council can be formed only with four or five people. I have talked with leaders of different parties, and I find each one attacking the other. If things are what they say, they should have an advisory council with at least a hundred members.

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8. Outsiders Misleading the Nagas¹³

The outsiders who are misleading the Naga people against the best interests of the country may face serious consequences if they continue to indulge in their activities. We shall have to put an end to it.

I have seen the memoranda submitted to me by the Nagas demanding independence.¹⁴ I feel none of them is drafted by any Naga nor by any Indian. They are drafted by outsiders who do not know what India is. These memoranda contain foolish things.

There is some boycott of the district council by the Nagas. The Government wants them to rule themselves in their own way and to manage their own

¹³ Address at a public meeting, Kohima, 30 March 1953 From the National Herald, 31 March 1953

¹⁴ The Naga National Council demanded a sovereign Nagaland comprising, besides the Naga Hills district, the Naga Tribal Area (administered by the Central Government} and the contiguous Naga areas of Sibsagar and Nowgong districts and of Manipur State and Myanmar

Letter to Chief Ministers

New Delhi 1 March, 1953

My dear Chief Minister,¹⁵

I am sending you a note¹⁶ on the tribal people in Manipur. This deals more especially with the Nagas in those areas. The note has been drawn up by an expert¹⁷ who went there at the instance of the Governor of Assam.¹⁸

This note¹⁹ brings out some of the difficult problems we have to face in these areas. We are apt, too often, to forget that our country has a variety of people who differ from each other greatly and who have often to be dealt with separately. This applies to all tribal people in India, but more particularly to those in the North-East Frontier, who have hardly had any contact with the political or cultural life of India in the past.

We have, therefore, to proceed not only cautiously in this matter, but with deep understanding and sympathy. Unfortunately, most of us have not

¹⁵ A Special Letter in addition to the Fortnightly Letters.

¹⁶ Not printed

¹⁷ Verrier Elwin (1902-1964); English anthropologist who worked amongst the tribals in Central and North East India and became an Indian citizen in 1954; Deputy Director, Department of Anthropology, Government of India, 1946-49 and Adviser for Tribal Affairs, NEFA, 1954; member, Scheduled Tribes Commission, 1960-61; awarded Padma Bhushan, 1961; wrote *Folksongs of Chhatisgarh* (1944), *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (1955), *Myths of North East Frontier* (1958) and *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (1964)

¹⁸ Elwin visited Manipur and other areas for six weeks and submitted his report to Jairamdas Doulatram, the Governor of Assam, on 2 January 1953

¹⁹ The note while stating that the people desired "a separate state and westernization", attributed the growing conditions of "stress and tension" to the persisting conflict between the Government and the people, the Nagas and the Kukis, the Christians and non Christians and. to the decay of the traditional arts. It suggested that the right kind of officials should be appointed, good literature about India be distributed among the Nagas, and a few sympathetic people be settled amongst them to "strengthen their love of their own culture."

given much thought to this matter and we treat these people in the same way as we would treat others. Often we try to impose our ways on them, imagining that we are doing them good. As a matter of fact, we merely alienate them and, at the same time, probably injure them in many ways. They lose their artistic way of life and become drab imitations of something else.

In the North-East Frontier Province, the problem is political also, apart from its social and economic aspect. It requires the most careful, sympathetic and understanding approach. Officers dealing with tribal people should always be very carefully chosen and should have this understanding. They should never try to impose themselves upon them. Their approach should be a friendly one. They should meet them on an equal level and try to participate in their life and their games as much as possible. Only thus can we win them over.

Yours sincerely,
Jawaharlal Nehru

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North-Eastern Frontier Situation²⁰

I have read these papers with interest. It is clear that we should remain wide-awake about our North-Eastern frontier situation from Ladakh right up to Bhutan and Assam. Mr. Sinha's²¹ note is helpful in drawing our attention to various present and possible dangers.

2. But I find Mr. Sinha's approach to be coloured very much by certain ideas and conceptions which prevent him from taking an objective view of

²⁰ Note to the Secretary-General and Secretary, MEA, 5 March 1953. JN Collection Extracts.

²¹ S. Sinha, who was officer in charge of the Indian Mission in Tibet in 1950, was Officer on Special Duty in the Ministry of External Affairs at this time.

the situation. The note starts by reference to the lust for conquest of the Chinese and is throughout based on this. Mr. Sinha looks back with a certain nostalgia to the past when the British exercised a good deal of control over Tibet and he would have liked very much for India to take the place of the British of those days. As a matter of fact, the weakness of our position in Tibet has been that we are successors, to some extent, of an imperial power which had pushed its way into Tibet. When that imperial power has ceased to have any strength to function in the old way, it is patent that we cannot do so, even if we so wished. We do not, in fact, wish to do so in that particular way. What we are really interested in is our own security maintenance of our frontiers intact.

3. It serves little purpose to think regretfully of past days and past ways. That is only done by people who have been pushed aside by the advance of history and who can only think of the past when they played an important role in the historic process. The biggest event since the last War is the rise of Communist China. It is totally immaterial whether we like it or dislike it. It is a fact. It followed naturally that a strong Chinese Government had done with more or less success. It followed also that there was no power, however big, which could resist that claim in Tibet. Certainly we could not do so. To take up an attitude of resistance without the strength to follow it up would have been political folly of the first magnitude. Therefore, we had to accept the changes that took place. We shall have to accept any other changes internal to Tibet. But one thing we are not prepared to accept is any modification of or intrusion across our frontiers. Therefore, we must concentrate on that and not think vaguely of other matters.

4. While there is much in Mr. Sinha's report that has a basis of truth, this is put forward in such an exaggerated and emotional way that it loses force. I am sorry that a representative of ours should allow his objective analysis to be affected in this way. That does not help in understanding a situation.

5. We live in a revolutionary period when the whole of Asia is in a state of turmoil and change. We have to keep up with that change and not merely regret the days of pre-change. In the ultimate analysis we have to build up our strength. That strength means not so much frontier outposts and the like but internal strength—political and economic. One of the biggest things in Asia today and in the future is the rate of progress of India and China. . If India makes good, more especially on the economic front, in the course of the next five to ten years, then India's future is not only assured but is very promising. If we fail internally, then of course anything can happen on our frontiers or elsewhere.

6. We have, of course, to be alert and vigilant on our borders. This is not so much from the point of view of resisting any major incursion but rather to make clear to China and the world that we are going to stick to our frontier. Any challenge to our frontiers will have to be met. In fact, it means a challenge to the whole of India, and not merely to the frontiers.

7. As Mr. Kapur²² says, and many other reasons can be advanced also, no major challenge to these frontiers is likely in the near future. If we are alert, no challenge will take place within a reasonable time and possibly even later.

8. It must always be remembered that the strength of our position lies in certain geographical factors which cannot easily be changed or overcome—not so much to Himalayan mountains but the added and inhospitable land of Tibet on the other side which cannot support or logistically provide for any large forces. The weakness of our position on those borders lies in the fact that Bhutanese etc., are closely allied culturally and socially to the Tibetans and naturally look towards Tibet from that point of view.

²² B.K. Kapur, India's political officer in Gangtok, Sikkim.

9. The weakest parts of the frontier are those lying between Bhutan and Sikkim. In a sense there is graver danger in Nepal, if that country goes to pieces.

10. The general policy we should pursue is:

a) Strengthen our communication system with the border areas and have well-equipped check-posts there.

b) Strengthen our Intelligence system.

c) Develop these border areas economically and otherwise and thus bring them more and more within the orbit of India's economic and national life by making them feel that they are integral parts of India and profit by it.

11. In regard to Bhutan the difficulties arose because we do not function there at all or hardly at all. Nevertheless, as Mr. Kapur pointed out, the position in Bhutan is not so bad, so far as we are concerned, as Mr. Sinha seems to imagine. We should develop these relations and more particularly communications there. This has to be done with tact.

12. For the last year or possibly two years the UP Government has been writing to us about their border with Tibet and the difficulties of maintaining any check-posts there because of lack of communications and accommodation. In spite of urgent reminders from the UP Government, the matter has got stuck up either in the Home Ministry here or in the Finance Ministry. This should be looked into, as this is important.

13. We should like, of course, to have as full information as possible about Tibet. How exactly to do it is not clear to me. If Mr. Sinha would apply his mind to this rather than indulging in fears and speculations, he would be much more helpful.

14. There is no question of our making India the main route of supplies to Tibet for the Chinese. We should not agree to this. But, on the whole, even from the larger political point of view, it seems desirable that a trickle of

supplies should be allowed to go through and this type of contact maintained. That itself has a certain psychological significance, demonstrating the reliance of Tibet on India. Of course, trade should be encouraged, where possible.

15. Whenever any incident takes place in Tibet involving any affront or discourtesy to Indians or India's interests, we should take a strong line. A strong line does not mean an offensive line, but it does mean that we do not intend to submit to such treatment. As I have said above, we can only remain in Tibet in any shape or form with China's acquiescence. But so long as we remain there, we must remain there with dignity.

16. There are references in Mr. Sinha's note to Tibetans boasting about their claims to Bhutan or parts of North-East India. Whenever any such thing is said publicly or formally or semi-formally, we should take immediate objection to it and make it clear that we are not prepared to tolerate any such claim language.

17. When Sardar Pannikar was in Peking, the question arose of our settling our frontier with Tibet, that is the MacMahon line, finally with the Chinese Government. Mr. Panikkar was of opinion that we had made our position clear to the Chinese Government and that it will serve no useful purpose to raise that question formally at that stage.²³ We agreed at the time. Perhaps the present is not a suitable time to raise this question. But if occasion offers itself and especially if any challenge to that frontier is made, then we shall have to make this perfectly clear.

18. We have to deal directly in our Ministry with the North-East Frontier Agency. That is our responsibility and we should keep the development of those areas constantly in mind. Fortunately the Governor of Assam is

²³ In a cable to Nehru on 17 June 1952, K.M. Panikkar argued that India's position on the frontier with Tibet was well known to China, and as Chou En-lai had not raised the border issue in his interviews with him, his silence should be presumed to be acquiescence, if not acceptance.

deeply interested in this matter and has helped greatly by extensive tours. In a wider sense, it is our responsibility to look after the entire border even apart from the North-East Frontier Agency. External Affairs should keep itself in close touch with developments along this frontier in Kashmir, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam so that a coordinated policy might be pursued in cooperation with the other Ministries or State Governments concerned.