Ethnicity and Nationalism on the Northeastern Frontier

New Scenarios and Alternative Future for the China-India Disputed Border

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Abstract   The Seven Sisters states are a region in the North-eastern India frontier comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war, China raised territorial claims on this wild region, rich in resources and featured by a strategic position. If China considers those areas be part of the national territory, due to an ethno-linguistic continuity of some people who live there, nevertheless the backbone of the region consists of an environment dense of historical and cultural elements that belong to India and, indeed, that go beyond its boundaries.

Summary   1. Introduction. — 2. The Century of Asia, Geopolitics and Economics. — 3. Nationalism, Ethnicity, Violence, a Theoretical Approach. — 4. Conclusion.

Today's ideological quarrel between the two Asian powers on the dorsal border of the eastern Himalayan clashes with the collective imagination of the Asian Century, where China and India are leading the markets and are potentially able to dictate the agenda of global development. Huge economic interests – the achievements of years of bilateral agreements and international trades – seems to be challenged by territorial claims over a still very problematic area in which critical issues, such as the so-called 'low-intensity' conflicts, are not yet resolved.

Separated by the rest of the Subcontinent by the Bangladeshi border, the North-eastern frontier has suffered for decades a condition of administrative isolation from the rest of India, with particular reference to a chronic lack of development planning. A region historically subject to inner tribal wars, the Seven Sisters host a number of separatist ethnic movements. The ethnical and cultural identity of indigenous minority groups has been often used to foster such pushes. Yet despite the exploitative nature of such efforts, indigenous tribes have managed to remain among the most important repositories of the local ancestral cultural heritage.

Our analysis consists in a comparison between historical studies on the region and the data collected during a two-years field research among the tribal communities of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The analysis suggests

that the dialogue with minorities, as well as the adoption of measures to protect the cultural heritage of the area and to foster a path of ecologically sustainable development could be a possible key for the normalization process of the area. It is indeed a policy that – in a historical perspective – could be pursued more effectively by Indian authorities than from any other country.

Moreover, just as during the Second World War, with the making of the new global order, the region played a major role due to its strategic importance, I argue how today – at the dawning of the Asian Century – this will be one of the most relevant focuses for the balance of the South Asian quadrant.

1 Introduction

The North-eastern border of India, known as the Seven Sisters, is composed by the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Despite the geographical-territorial peculiarities of each region, it is possible to outline the common characteristics to the entire North-east area. While we note the valuable specificities, such as a rich cultural heritage and an abundance of resources, there are other critical issues – such as isolation, lack of infrastructural development, the presence of centrifugal forces – the resolution of which will be the key to the future of India and its equilibrium with the surrounding countries. Since my fieldwork took place mainly in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, I will principally refer to the problems of these two States in order to draw a valid paradigm, at least on a theoretical level, for the border policies of the whole area.

I analyse the case of the recent Chinese claims of approximately 90,000 square kilometres of Indian territory which would include, therefore, the whole Arunachal Pradesh (83,743 sq. km). The question is, in our view, serious and delicate as it threatens to plunge the fragile regional balance and trigger a controversial scenario in the South Asian quadrant.

According to an historical approach, the origins of the so-called cartographic dispute between China and India ground their roots in the colonial context. In 1913-1914 was traced the famous McMahon line that more than an ancient Indian frontier, was rather a new border that replaced the previous boundary defined by the Outer Line. What we found interesting today is to note that the effective control and the practice of colonial authority of the areas included on the natural Himalayan dorsal – even in terms of exploring a wild and often little known territory at that time – focused in key periods of the modern history of the Indian subcontinent, in case of essentially strategic emergency. The Shimla agreements of 1913-1914, at the dawn of the First World War, served to expand the areas of British control by creating buffer zones around India and especially to keep China

away from the rich Assamese plain. Paradoxically, there was a period of political and administrative latency in the coming years, followed by a new increasing interest in the prelude to the Second World War. Then, the consolidation of boundaries became extremely relevant, because the area could alone spark off a chain reaction that would lead to the collapse of British colonial rule in India, something the Japanese invasion via Burma and the establishment of the Indian National Army of Bose were actually trying to achieve.

In contemporary times we see how the policies of border security and international pressure are accentuate in crucial moments, and both processes are taking place in the country, influenced and shaped by global processes as well. The policies of the 1950s in fact emerge from the matrix of nation-building process: whereas the line of Nehru's foreign *pañcaśīla* fought hard with the fact that China had never really recognised the validity of the McMahon line. Hence, the unexpected Sino-Indian War of 1962 took place. Likewise today, at the dawn of the third millennium, as the Asian powers seem to contend among themselves the supremacy to lead the global markets, the issue resurfaces with renewed vigour. To be exact, we might add in parenthesis that an upsurge took place in 1987 with the incident of Sumdorong Chu Valley, only a skirmish between China and India, shortly forestalling, perhaps not coincidentally, a transition period for Indian politics and a change in the global order (the fall of the Berlin Wall and its consequences).

The conflict of 1962, however, creates an important precedent. While India was to reclaim the Aksai Chin on the side of Jammu and Kashmir, the overwhelming and unexpected advance of the People's Liberation Army along the eastern ancient pilgrimage route to Lhasa, in Arunachal Pradesh – and its strategic retreat – have provided the pretext for the Chinese to claim not only on the disputed area of Tawang, but the whole region. But if for a moment we disregard the mere border issues or the military closely-related matters we will notice that the two Asian powers have no conflicts of interest substantially insoluble. Indeed, as stated Subramanian Swami, the tension between the two countries is probably dictated by the position of the Indian Government on the issue of Tibet, evidently perceived as ambiguous (Chen 2006, pp. 54-101). Not by chance that Arunachal Pradesh is defined by the Chinese as Southern Tibet (Subramanian Swami 2000).[1]

To conclude this historical introduction, I notice that anywhere in the world the post-colonial policies have created *ad hoc* new boundaries, often summarily without taking into account the pre-existing socio-political fab-

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[1] For a Chinese perspective on the issue, I suggest the interesting work of John W. Garver (2002; 2006, pp 86-130).

ric, for self-interest or in order to accelerate a hasty exit-strategy. So have been formed flashpoints of conflict still today unresolved. This is true in Africa, the Middle East, India, where for decades wars have been fought at different levels of intensity but that are generally considered hot spots on the planet. The most glaring example for India is clearly the Kashmir issue, unresolved since the time of Partition. In relation to the Western issue, it is interesting to note that after September 11 and the nominal accession of the Governments of India and Pakistan in the fight against international terrorism, the United States were expected to mediate on the Kashmir issue. At that time, A.B. Vajpayee and P. Musharraf demanded the intervention of the Bush administration, as well as the Pakistani side until now has been asking that of Obama. This mediation, even at the diplomatic level has been always denied, considering the Kashmiri issue as a matter of exclusive bilateral agreement between India and Pakistan. This choice seems blunder because on the one hand – in our opinion – is a refusal to participate in a peace process by a nation that has always wanted to rise herself as a leading power for the West and as a global model of democracy. Indeed under a strictly technical perspective, the so-called Line of Control would be considered *de facto* a diplomatic pact of bilateral nature signed through the 1972 Shimla agreement on a previous consensus of non-aggression between two countries (cease-fire line). On the other hand, the question of the Line of Actual Control, or the current China-India border, seems to be different: whereas coinciding with the layout of the old McMahon Line, this had to be a tripartite cartel never accepted *in toto* by China (Warikoo 2009). The intrinsic fragility of the border seems emphasized by the word 'Actual', in fact, broken by numerous accidental crossings in recent years. After several agreements to reduce tension on the border, the last agreement of 2005 is based on a previous exchange of maps between China and India primarily aimed at defining the respective perceptions of LAC. Despite the positive statements of intent for the future of China-India bilateral relations (Text of India-China Agreement, 2005), the cyclic undertow of Chinese claims on the northeast returns as a refrain following dynamics of the global order or though the international attention moves to the Tibetan issue. In this paper we will show how the challenge for India in this case is two-fold: domestic politics and international relations. Perhaps the resolution of an aspect of the problem entails in itself the solution of the second.

2 The Century of Asia, Geopolitics and Economics

In the contemporary international economic profile, while facing the global economic crisis on the basis of the life jacket provided by the recent decades of economic boom, the strongest markets have proved to be Asian. In this context, both China and India have asserted their leading role to

such an extent that the expression 'the Century of Asia' has become itself almost a cliché.

However, this scenario still creates some confusion in the Western hemisphere where a 'Century of Asia' is perceived as alarming because it inherently assumes the contemporary setting of the Western, or rather American, Century. The threat of losing the carefully cultivated supremacy if only from an economic point of view has generated a sense of insecurity in the West that is at times filled with implausible scenarios. In the past the categorisation 'Asia' has suggested the erroneous idea of a platform common to all major Asian powers sharing strategic or at least political and economic guidelines. This expedient was trying to foreshadow an 'alterity' that if not an outright 'enemy', in some way confirmed the presence of a 'rival' of the third millennium. As a result, in Italy for example the unfortunate expression 'Cindia' (a combination of China and India) gained some popularity based on the idea that the two Asian powers were living in a cultural continuum, sharing the goal planning. However, nothing could be further from the truth. If it is impossible to include the two countries in an ethnical, cultural, political, strategic or economic developmental macro-category except for patterns broadly common to the emerging economies (BRIC) – which must be applied, however, in different ways – such considerations can be extended to the whole pan-Asian context. A striking example is represented by the guidelines for securing the future energy supply in Asia, including the bilateral discussions between India and the US aimed at achieving a deal on nuclear energy, the detached attitude of China and the failure of the Obama mission on the emission of greenhouse gas in Beijing at the end of 2009.

Conversely, the opposite idea of a rival-East split, intended to be consumed by intestine frictions, may have lulled in an ephemeral way those who like to depict apocalyptic war scenarios.

If it is true that the unprecedented economic growth of China and India has substantially raised these countries' status in the world economy, it is equally true that this growth has been accompanied by a rapid expansion of bilateral trade between the two largest developing countries (Wu and Zhou 2006, pp. 509-518). In 2011-2012, the bilateral trade between China and India has reportedly reached a total volume of US $ 75,594.44 million, an increase of 28.21% compared to 2010/2011[2] (See also WTO 2011 p. 12-44). As further economic reforms will support this growth, a proportional increase of the exchange between the two neighbouring systems is expected. Other parameters could implement this trend by adopting an economic policy aimed at the exploits and the exchange of each country's

2 Government of India, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Dept. of Commerce, updated 2012-10-10.

comparative advantage following the dynamics of overlapping, recipro-cal complement – already implemented as training process – between the strongest sectors, i.e. the industrial sector in China and the tertiary sector (services) in India (Saran, Guo 2005, pp. 135-142).

Recent studies in economics show that as the two countries have fol-lowed different lines of economic development leading to diverging rates of growth over time (except for the directives aimed at the supply of energy, which is one of the priorities of the third millennium) the productive sec-tors in which there is an effective overlap such as to create rivalry are few.

It is difficult in this scenario to assume that the two countries would be ready to undo what has been built so far. China's future challenge is to deal with the enormous social pressure caused by unemployment and underemployment, the solution of which would seem to lie in maintaining a relatively high rate of growth. India too aims at accelerating the somewhat sluggish pace of its economic development, for instance by improving its infrastructure. In either case, the challenges of the future will not likely be resolved through an armed conflict (Athwal 2008, p. 5). At the dawn of the third millennium, no nation is ready put its wealth at risk by venturing into a military conflict for reasons of mere cartographic matter, unless the stakes are not higher.

Illustrative in this sense is an episode dating back to October 29, 2008, when the then British foreign minister, David Miliband, declared that af-ter nearly a century of support for Tibetan autonomy on the part of Great Britain, the Government had decided to recognize Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China and even apologized for this not happening before (Booker 2010). While the news made the headlines in the newspa-pers around the world, creating a stir for the dramatic turnabout of Brit-ish politics, the Indian side perceived it with lightness and a sense of little responsibility on the part of who was once a colonial power, in matters of international relations and historical succession. To wipe the slate clean, the Shimla agreement was labelled as somehow anachronistic and so was the McMahon Line, with all the consequences entailed in the yet unre-solved question of the Northeastern border between India and China. It should be remembered that it was on the principles of the Shimla that the war of 1962 and the dangerous accident of 1987 took place. Few however noted that the declarations by Miliband in the same month of 2008 were preceded by the request of Gordon Brown, the British prime minister, to China to increase its contributions to the International Monetary Fund, in return for which the latter would have seen an increase of the votes in its favour in the United Nations (Barnett 2008, A31).

When I met His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama shortly after the attacks of September 11, he noted with regret that international attention would be shifted to the 'new' emergencies, moving the Tibetan issue to the back-

ground. The US-Western military escalation in Afghanistan and in the Middle East, the search for new allies in the international war on terrorism and the policy of no-inference of China in these processes would have definitely revealed the world's oblivion on the open wound of Tibet. The fact that this very question has a direct connection with the disputed northeastern border became clear when new Chinese territorial claims arrived soon after. Well before the episode of the Sumdorong Valley in 1986, the Chinese vice foreign minister Liu Shuqing declared that about 90,000 square kilometers of Chinese territory were under Indian occupation. In November 2006 the Chinese ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi, asserted China's territorial claim over the entire Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh in spite of an agreement between the two countries one year earlier.

Yet another point in our perspective is the fact that the several times deferred Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang district, which took place in 2009 on the border, caused great nervousness on the Chinese side. This area is of great strategic importance that spreads beyond the defensive Indian line at the Se La Pass. It shortly fell into Chinese hands during the conflict in 1962 but later returned to India administration, this is the first of the disputed territories. Historically and culturally a part of Tibet, the important monastery of Tawang was founded in 1681 at the behest of the fifth Dalai Lama and the surrounding valley is the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. The road connecting Tawang to the Tibetan fortress of Dirang in West Kameng was the last outpost of the ancient eastern Buddhist pilgrimage route to Lhasa. The closedown on the Western Front of the Aksai Chin adds strategic value to the territory beyond its intrinsic historical and cultural heritage. The frequent 'accidental' Chinese incursions on through the border were undoubtedly intended to reaffirm these territorial claims.

However, the extent of China's interest to the whole State are possibly dictated by a series of geo-political factors: Arunachal Pradesh represents a strategic passage connecting the Brahmaputra valley with Lhasa and the Chinese province of Yunnan, thereby allowing China to control the entire area. Beyond the State's potential in the areas of tourism and agriculture it is rich in mineral deposits and has large tracts of forest. Finally, control of this area would allow China to gain continuity on the eastern side of Bhutan while at the same time providing a further road of access to the markets of South-East Asia (Liu 1994).

The issue of hydroelectric resources seems particularly relevant because it can become a paradigm of the entire situation of Northeast. China and India both depend strongly on the flow of waters downhill from the Tibetan region as a resource for drinking water, agriculture, energy production and the needs for present and future industrial production. One of the most important challenges for the future of Arunachal Pradesh is the so called 'riparian issue'. Most rivers of the State have an enormous potential for being exploited for producing hydro-power to the tune of 49,126 megawatt

of electricity (Goswami 2011, p. 10). Arunachal Pradesh has signed memo-randums of understanding (MoUs) with private groups for the construction of around 103 dams in the State. These projects have sometimes caused anxiety among the local population about the indiscriminate use of the territory, the fear of seismic instability or flooding during the monsoon season. In fact, accidents in Chinese plants across the border are frequent, the repercussions of which were felt also in the villages on the Indian side. Moreover, almost all rivers that in the region originate and flow through Chinese territory before reaching India thus resulting in a certain depend-ence of the latter on the former: hence, the planning issue in Arunachal Pradesh follows the well-known vexed question of the deviation of the Yangtze-Brahmaputra on a minor scale. The threat of diversion of river water to compensate drought problems in the most remote areas of China entails the obvious risk of environmental disaster in North-east India. This is because international laws permit any country to use the run-off water of any river within its territory, but in the case the river is trans-boundary the Customary International Law requires that the interest of the riparian states have to be taken into account by ensuring equitable distribution of water, leaving a vague definition of how to assess 'a reasonable share'.

The riparian issue – since water is one of the most important natural resource, but also a fundamental right – is steadily becoming a geopoliti-cal weapon and an instrument of pressure by Chinese side on the central stage of the so-called Seven Sisters scenario. Vice versa the Indian plan-ning to build dams on Arunachal rivers, and possibly in the neighbouring territories, seems to be the key primarily to counter the Chinese claim. Is interesting to note that while the West seemed to bow to the Chinese power at the dawn of the global economic crisis, in June 2009, for the first time ever on a multi-lateral forum, China tried to block India's request for a $2.9 billion loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as it included $60 million for flood management, water supply, and a sanitation project in Arunachal Pradesh. According to ADB sources China was unhappy at India seeking funds for a project in what they termed as 'disputed territory'. The ADB however approved the loan on the grounds that there is no history of the ADB deferring a loan to India (Goswami 2011, p. 3).

3 Nationalism, Ethnicity, Violence, a Theoretical Approach

The ethnic variety of the population of the Seven Sisters is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the territory. Further to that, one should al-so consider the ability of many local communities to preserve their own cul-tural and linguistic identity. The Hindu socio-cultural background – sound-ly established in the peninsular part of the Subcontinent – here meets with the customs of the descendants of those who, over the centuries, migrated

from China, Tibet, Burma, Thailand and Southeast Asia. It is generally recognised that these people – whom linguistic anthropology taxonomies as Tibeto-Burma speakers and the Sanskrit literature call Kirata – formerly occupied the whole region of the Northeast. On the one hand, some communities settled around the valley of the Brahmaputra (e.g. Bodos, Garo, Kacharis, Tripuris, Hajongs, etc.). On the other, many communities migrated from the north in order to find an area suitable for new villages, and they settled into the valleys (e.g. Tani, Adi, Monpa, etc.) (Mibang and Behera 2007).

For historians and anthropologists the Ahom period (1228–1826) is particularly important because it was possible to establish an administrative system holding together several ethnic groups. Also, the patronage of Hindu religious institutions favoured the filtration of Brahminical (and particularly *śakta*) elements. Following the practice of *divide and impera*, some groups, potentially clashing with the authority, were fragmented and dispersed in different areas of the territory. According to the process that was theorised by D.D. Kosambi, such communities were reintegrated into the new matrix acting on the mutual recognition of their status and their functions within the society (Kosambi 1965). This presupposes a certain *continuum* and permeability between the concepts of tribe and caste that here emerge more perceptible here than elsewhere (Chattopadhyaya 2002).[3]

Within this multi-ethnic milieu, vernacular forms of Hinduism were assimilated thus becoming absorbed in the local variety of tribal traditions and ritual practices. The same applies to Buddhism, whose schools, historically present in the valleys, have interpreted in *dharmic* terms the local cultural environment and its enculturation. In this scenario, the long shadow casted by the forest or the highest peaks seems to veil the boundary between traditions. While religious traditions and rituals seem inextricably linked, specialist figures like the brahmin, the *pūjārī*, the lama, the oracle and the shaman do recognise each other for authority and charisma within their community. Very different realities so often live in constricted areas, sometimes in the same village, in a plurality of elements difficult to be discovered elsewhere. These special cultural clusters therefore seem to conglomerate – cohesive in some way to a sense of continuity with ancient traditions – around the focal points of the complex grid of precisely Hindu and Buddhist sacred geography.

This is confirmed by Bhagabati (2009, p. 4) who individuates three stages of social transformation, i.e. migration, [cultural] adaptation strategies, negotiation of space. Bhagabati notes that the mobility of the hill tribes was no doubt originally inspired by the struggle for living spaces. As histo-

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3   A clear example is in Assam the historic integration of different Deori/Chutiya groups.

ry – and the cosmogonical memory itself of the clans – shows, these groups were constantly fighting each other, conflicts of feud take place, so that the Ahom themselves in many cases waived to collect taxes but rather they paid the bribes of the so-called *posa* in order to maintain the stability of the territories (Singh 1995, p. 14). But migration and subsequent adaptation to new homelands – a process that could lead to variables on the names and the new identities – were possible under a social context essentially fluid and flexible to incorporate new immigrants.

This kind of micro-equilibrium would be threatened by the radicalisation of social boundaries that took place as consequence of colonialism as well as some aspects of post-colonial policies. This would cause the onset of many centrifugal forces in the actual processes of nation-building in India. These, however, are so numerous and complexes that I would not analyse them although I will look into their origins.

In his *Imagined Communities* (1991), Anderson informs us that the idea of the nation as a community socially constructed is imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of this group. In his conclusions, he shifts the focus on colonialism. Nationalism in Europe is said to be followed by the diffusion of a similar process in colonised countries. In Chapter 7, *The Last Wave*, it would come to the paradox to reconfigure the concept of national history in an attempt to shape the consciences in colonial context. The overflow of the so-called 'last wave' mould the idea of the nation in a conscious way, by virtue of the fact that the nation-State has become a criterion established at the international level. In Chapter 10 (*Census, Map and Museum*), Anderson describes the attempt of the European State-model of the 19th century to control its domain by counting the population, mapping the territory and hegemonising history. People were systematically classified, catalogued through the instrument of the Census, which creates a 'community dimension' that is substantially fictitious, because imagined, pre-established. Similarly, the attempt to objectify some specific natural geographical subdivisions, became functional in the mechanism to map the nation, that become the icon, the distinguished logo of national movements. The museum, or rather the national monument, which creates and maintains a tradition also becomes a symbol immediately recognisable and functional in this sense. The serialisation process was also the key element of the State's attempt, also in the overseas colonies, to establish a 'totalizing classificatory grid' (Jaffrelot 2003, p. 12).

On the one hand there is no doubt that all this happened in India too, in colonial times due to the British rule. The first great works of Census especially aimed at the classification of those minorities regarded as dangerous – not coincidentally after the Mutiny. The perfunctory creation of functional boundaries, the presumption of educating Indian subjects, the ideological inference on nation-building process can be as well quoted.

The limit of Anderson, as well as the study of Ernest Gellner (1983), is to

consider the nation and nationalism as a product of modernity, created *ad hoc* for economic-political reasons. In this process the tradition – a matter not to be underestimated in a country whose culture and religion convey valuable concepts for the society, in front of the West that seems increasingly weak in this regard – here would result a fictitious expedient useful to the cause. India has instead demonstrated its ability to self-keep its own traditions, as well as the talent to renovate them at the occurrence, without inference from the outside on its largely in past ages achieved rank of civilisation. This allows the country to be a place where tradition and modernity coexist balanced.

Nevertheless, the analysis of Anderson interprets well what was the colonial history of India. If we pass from the country's general view to the particular of the Northeast, the result does not change. The key role of the British administration was, once again, the disruption of previous social balance and the establishment of new boundaries. The most striking aspect was the introduction in 1873 of the Inner line that in addition to bisect the region, ideologically created a separation between tribal and non-tribal people. In synthesis, can be accepted that this was the beginning of discrimination, sanctioned through a formal separation between the cadastral rich areas – the Assamese plains, privileged, protected and exploited – and wild areas, that soon reached the status of 'excluded' in the Act of 1935. The former had to bear socio-economic and administrative measures on the cadastral mapping of the region, while in the impossibility to overtax the latter otherwise logistic or strategic advantage was taken exploiting the local population at the dawn of world conflicts. The biggest fault of this period was the raising of new boundaries, freezing a reality that since then had been fluid, by its nature. The colonial concept of tribe in turn was wrong in imagining a static and closed social structure, whereas since then the local communities maintained a code, while complex, of relative permeability and sharing alliances and cultural identities.

To this system that was gradually hardening through the demarcation of new borders, the British Raj added the weight of immigration. If the Bengali influence was present at the arrival of the British in the area, in the early 20th century there was the systematization of the transfer of masses of Bengali Hindus who formed the backbone of the colonial administration. In a second time will be added to these masses of peasants generally Muslims pour into the region in search of new lands. These two groups of migrants remained two discrete formations, episodic coalition and ethnic block formation out of political expediency notwithstanding (Bhagabati 2009, p. 7). Also interesting in an anthropological perspective, the formation of a common social platform of the ādivāsīs who were employed as tea workers: although ethnically different, they got-together united in the plantations of Assam. Finally, as a result of colonial policies, I can mention the masses of Nepali in search of occupation and a small but

significant percentage of Marwari and Sindhi and other groups from different parts of India. If these flows have inevitably created tensions with the Assamese and the North-eastern communities, the post-Independence policies have someway aggravated the situation. With the partition of East Pakistan first and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 followed an economic crisis for the states of the Northeast. The lines of communication with the rest of India by road, by rail, or through the waterways, or the inland navigation, were rudely interrupted. At the same time, any port access was lost. To date the subject is highly topical (Patak 2012, pp. 19-23): the region has faced a steady stream of irregular migrants in search of work from the border with Bangladesh. Something similar happened apropos of the Tibetan question. After granting asylum state to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, many Tibetan communities, also on the eastern side, have over time settled as refugees. In synthesis, the role played by the Indian Government in international politics, while legitimate and justified in a South-Asian regional context, in the first as well as in the second case produced the side-effect of social pressure of immigration. In both cases, this social pressure has been charged to the Northeast, and I think this is the perception of the problem from the Seven Sisters perspective.[4] But since the North-eastern frontier has suffered for decades a condition of administrative isolation from the rest of India, with particular reference to a chronic lack of development planning, the local groups are not willing to bear, or to cope alone with such a pressure.

In this contest it is experienced the overlap of both forms of migration that Robin Cohen suggested in his *Global Diasporas* (1997, p. 78), or those produced by empires, colonial policies or consequential ethnic boundaries, and those related to the features, necessities or the research itself of the occupation. Despite the protean nature of the communities in the Northeast, nowadays two opposing factions are taking shape primarily throughout the region: insiders and outsiders facing each other in competition for living space, resources, employments. As an example I would remember to have seen several times in Arunachal Pradesh writings on the walls of the houses in some villages: *Tibetans go home*. The phrase mainly strikes the stranger because it clashes in every way with an imaginary consolidated over the past decades: India welcomes the Tibetan refugees, the Tibetans are a friendly and peaceful people. Last but not least, the phrase is not written in Hindi, Assamese and Tibetan but in English: an international message. Here it is how, a slogan written on a wall is in turn index of a great perceived stress, but at the same time it suggests the emergency of an incipient and dangerous xenophobia. The anti-Muslim crusades that

have occurred in the country in response to pressure on the Bangladeshi border have the same nature.

If we look at the theories on the ethnicity, not those that deal with the primordialist paradigm, but those who deal with the process of formation of boundaries between groups, we will see that there is a clear parallel with the above theories on nationalism. Fredrik Barth focused the determining process of ethnicity as the predominance of relationships within the group – and in turn the relationship of the group with the outside world – compared to the importance of transmitted real cultural contents (Barth 1969, pp. 9-37). In this sense, the tribal communities of India have experienced colonial isolationism. Conversely, after Independence, they have been forced towards economic development with a syncopated rhythm from area to area, and often without freedom to make choices. Although in the Northeast have been taken a gradual policy, there is a widespread perception that the specificities of each cultural identity were neglected in the general process of nation-building. Consequently those identities have been the pretext to create the new platforms of ethnicity. In other words, the communities once more flexible, conglomerating clusters of versatile nature, now become ethno-political blocks. Here the revival originated socio-political programs: is interesting in this regard the Donyi-Poloism, a form of purged shamanism, theoretically elected as a philosophical system, an *ādidharma*, that if on one side sees the contribution of intellectuals and local intelligentsia (mainly Adi) has lost the connection with the contents and dynamics of authentic local tribalism (Mibang, Chaudhuri 2004, pp. 35-38, 53-62, 159-172). It's much more serious is the embedding of the onset of armed groups, terrorists, who use the exacerbation of ethnicity as a tool towards separatism.[5] It would appear that subsists more similarity between the processes of ethnicity and nationalism – that here fragmented, exacerbated, seems to take the violent connotations of what anthropologists defined 'African tribalism' – that between theories of nationalism and the nation itself (Jaffrelot 2003, pp. 2, 41-46). Here too, the sacred is a constant of human social life and the modern world is not an exception, its novelty lies only in the fact that the national form assumes an essentially secular feature. Anderson already showed that so far as sacred and secular may appear to be two antithetical orders, they intersect in what will become the key symbols of the nation: the monument, the [new] flag, etc. Yet in India, how not to think of dense debate between Gandhi and Rabindhranath Thakur, where the Indian Nobel-laureate warned the Mahatma about the dangers of nationalism and hoped the clearing of the symbols for a good of a higher nature?

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5 The casualties in these so called 'low-intensity' conflicts are more than 5000 since 2005, but since Independence seems to be ten times greater in number. See «Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in India's Northeast 2005-2012» in *South Asia Terrorism Portal*.

4 Conclusion

The Indian Government has been many times in a jam wavering on the policy to be held in Northeast. Despite the mission statement of PM Manmohan Singh to descending at the negotiating table with the separatist groups, it became soon clear that to give way to a single specific instance, in the absence of uniform guidelines, means trigger the replication of many other requests. The large number of these groups and the complexity of the internal relations amongst them, inflamed again the resurgence of terrorism just after the beginning of the consultations, by virtue of the negotiations between the Government and a single faction among many rivals. In the best of cases, even in a nonviolent context, the stress and discomfort of tribal communities and ethnic minorities – many of which have faraway origins, but today are considered autochthonous compared to new migrants – are due largely to problems of definition of their role in the nation. By themselves the *ādivāsī* communities in the first place, are trying to fill a historical vacuum crystallised increasingly in modern times, are implementing strategies to adapt to the contemporary, but in this effort they feel obviously alone in front of globalization's processes. Any attempt to standardisation conceivably will lead to a radicalisation of diversity, especially today that thanks to the power of media there is greater self-awareness but a larger possibility of manipulation of issues such as ethnicity. Then we come to the hypothesis of a possible solution in the reversal of the theory of Barth, or rather to privilege the cultural contents of the tradition of the groups as for the respect to their position in the social system, in order to break down boundaries and strenuous resistances. Working in this way it would be possible to switch from the rigid characterisation of 'ethnicity' to the positive value of 'cultural identity' of the specific ethnic minorities.

Until recently, the question of the origins of civilisation in India has proved to be of central importance. The scientific discoveries of the academy seemed to have a direct impact on policy, as the awareness of the origins of the subcontinent could be a paradigm of governance model for present and future. Today, scholars are realising that even before the theories on ethnicity and nationalism, the challenge for the future will be based on establishing the identity of the ethnic and tribal communities. I noted how the most conservative forces in the country are working hard to forcefully bring back the tribal theories to the Hindu dharma. On the other hand I had the impression that the Marxist structuring or at least more progressive positions on the issue exert at all costs to find an alien root for the tribal groups, as if it would be necessary to reinterpret the concept of a multicultural and multi-ethnic India. Here is clear that the truth lies somewhere in between: the investigation of origins – autochthonous, cross-border, or sunk into oblivion – is less important at present. Since it is pos-

sible to reconstruct it, history shows that tribal communities have always been able to interface with others, whether with Mughal rulers, or Hindu Raja, Buddhist schools, or other *jati*s. With them they always maintained an osmotic cultural relationship: exactly as the osmosis is bidirectional, reciprocal, bilateral. The key is here, the maintaining fluidity in the relationships through the promotion and respect for cultural identities. This can only be done by those who, in turn, could be described as the new *pañcaśīla* cultural identity: tribe, caste, religion, language, territory. In other words, respect of the ancestry's relationship of the groups with the territory, recovery of traditional values, protection of culture – as reconstruction of the history of the region, as defence of linguistic specificity and as guarantee of religious freedom – goals achievable only through the enhancement and the right to education of young people. Finally the development of the area is to be thought as sustainable by the societies involved and eco-compatible with one of the last pristine areas of the planet.

Only in this way the look that embraces the North-eastern India passes through the *śaktipīṭha* of Kamakhya, the Pambari Masjid, the Tawang Monastery, through all the villages of ādivāsīs who live in the valleys of the Himalayas and the thick of its forests and ends in Parashuram Khund, near the border with Burma, where it is said, no by coincidence, that rises the sun of India. If we abstract for a moment from the borders of the maps and we imagine how forward the cultural influence of India have naturally thrust herself, we will be going over the natural boundaries, confirming once again the emptiness of whose Edward Said called *Imagined Geographies* (1999, pp. 56-60, 74-78).

At this point it will be clear how the Chinese perspectives are absolutely aliens to such a context, the major riparian projects appear here only as a threat of environmental disaster, and the reasons behind the territorial claims are only a theoretical vacuum. At the same time it is interesting to note that China faces too in its territory centrifugal forces of various kinds: in addition to the issue of Tibet, there are pushes that emerges from a religious, civil, or ethnic matrix. But from the little filtered through a state of information's censorship, these centrifugal forces are regularly drowned with the isolation and repression. For this reason, China has basically been called the land of a thousand revolts. It is on this premise, a weakness that never in history has occurred, that China intends to take possession of an unstable territory that never bowed to foreign domination? Or only through the values of Indian democracy will be possible to work on a development, normalization and peace project for the future? The answer is obvious. So far as the implications of political and economic order are complex enough to assume a general slowdown in the development rate of the country, the necessary time spent here will benefit a framework that is a testing ground for other set of regional problems and at the same time the key to the India's future.

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