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FOLK THEOREM Indians, Not Enemies

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Thirty-two years ago, Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Gegong Apang gave an interview to TOI. This was in the context of a massacre in Gohpur and other areas in Assam where at least 300 Bodos were killed and around 15,000 driven out of home.

Then, Prafulla Mahanta of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was chief minister. The TOI headline of August 23, 1989, read, “AGP government must go: Arunachal CM.”

A quarter-century later, the same headlines are back. On August 5, gunmen stormed a market in Kokrajhar, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, heartland of the Bodo tribal movement for recognition, and killed 13 people.

Four days later, Kalikho Pul, an Arunachal politician who led a failed coup against the Congress regime, hanged himself. Simultaneously, Irom Sharmila, a global icon who starved herself for 16 years to rid the region of a sanguinary law called the [Armed Forces \(Special Powers\) Act](#) (Afspa), came out of prison.

Each of these, massacre, suicide and the struggle against Afspa, is testimony to [the failure of 'mainland' Indian politics to grapple with fundamentals](#) of societies at the nation's extremity. We run a shop, inherited from British colonialists in the area, playing by their rules, going nowhere.

1835-45

During 1835-45, the British were faced with a problem: the memsahib in London was addicted to tea from China, but the Chinese emperor insisted on

being paid in bullion, which was running out. Earlier, the British had paid in opium, but that was now banned.

This led to the Opium Wars: perhaps the only instance in history when an empire fought to export drugs. Meanwhile, the British looked for substitutes for Chinese tea. They found it.

July 3, 1839

On July 3, 1839, The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce reported, “...we refer to the discovery of Capt Jenkins a few years ago, the very plant that the Committee was attempting to import from China and to cultivate at enormous expense, was a native to our new provinces at Assam, and was growing wild in every direction.”

On the hills of the Assam Nagaland border, adventurous Scots discovered tea growing wild. They took samples and sent them for verification to the botanical authorities in Calcutta by the mid-1830s. By the 1840s, Scots were planting tea all along the eastern reaches of the Brahmaputra in Assam and shipping it overseas. Then, Mary Winchester went missing.

1840s to 1900

In the late 1860s, ‘Lushais’, the colonial name for modern Mizos, raided a tea garden called Alexanderpore near the modern Mizoram border. They killed Mary’s planter parents, kidnapped young Mary and wrecked another plantation nearby .

The British panicked. In 1872, an ‘expedition’ set off to rescue Mary and take revenge. Many Lushai were killed, their villages burned down and Mary was found. She’d been quite happy and totally indigenised by her Lushai foster parents.

This led to the first law of the north east: the Inner Line Permit. In 1873, the British enacted this to protect their business in the Brahmaputra valley from raiding hill tribals. It essentially said that as long as tribals kept to the hills, plains dwellers would not go up and intervene.

1900 to 1928

From 1900 to 1928, one more legislation was added on, ostensibly to protect hill tribes from exploitation; from 1928-47, another layer was added to insulate tribes from plains dwellers. These created so-called 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded' regions in Garo, Khasi, Naga, Karbi Anglong, Cachar and Lushai hill areas. Here, tribal jurisdiction was paramount; administrative rules of the plains did not apply

1935.

By 1935, when the Government of India Rules was passed, these distinctions were retained. The Congress party, at least initially, understood the terrible effects of isolation. In the Faizpur session of 1936, Congress argued, "Creation of Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas is yet another attempt to divide the people of India into different groups...."

1947 to 1958

By 1947, Congress forgot its earlier angst about the northeast's isolation. That left folks in the region wondering what exactly the Indian state stood for and what its priorities were. The 1935 rules were absorbed into our Constitution. It is a poisonous legacy. These rules separate us from the northeast, which we claim as our own. The outcome is fear and loathing in the region.

Forced isolation has had two effects: it has cut off the region from the mainstream and it has reinforced ethnic, tribal and language rivalries among people in the region. India's reaction to any local discontent has always been

violent: the Afspa was first imposed in Nagaland in 1958, later extended to Tripura, Manipur and other regions.

Sharmila has chosen the path of electoral democracy to further her campaign. It is a recognition that mainstream politics can do a world of good. India must reciprocate by scrapping Afspa and lifting colonial barriers to integration.