

## Gogoi's Residence

Assam has a long history of border disputes with neighbouring states, many of which were carved out of what was once a much bigger province of Assam. There was something in the very process of vivisection, that left Assam and the states created from it, bogged down with border disputes. In the 1980s, Assam and Nagaland police fought pitched gunbattles that could have passed off as a border skirmish between armies of two small countries. Similar situations were being averted after the clashes at Merapani, but Assam continues to complain that Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram have all encroached on its territory. These states have their own set of claims and they allege that the media in Assam, which includes the national media corps based here, have been biased towards Assam while reporting the border disputes.

But now comes the unexpected, the ultimate of all claims. Meghalaya's revenue minister Professor RC Laloo (no relative of his Bihar namesake) has gone on record to say that the official residence of Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi at Khanapara is in a disputed area. Though many ugly incidents have been reported from Assam's outer borders in the years gone by, this is perhaps the first time that a government of a neighbouring state has claimed that the residence of the Assam chief minister is in a disputed area claimed by Meghalaya. Asked to comment about the proposed Boundary Commission proposed by Meghalaya and rejected by Assam, Prof Laloo said that the government has not received any official response from Assam government in this regard. Interestingly, the Assam state assembly had last year passed a resolution rejecting the notion of a boundary commission. Now while the Assam assembly has said in its resolution that there was no boundary commission, the Meghalaya assembly has passed a resolution, resolving to prevail upon the Centre to set up a boundary commission in order to solve the vexed inter-state boundary dispute.

The inter-state boundary dispute between Assam and Meghalaya has been dragging on for nearly four decades and there appears to be no immediate solution in sight. Both states have been making claims and counter-claims on several areas along the border. Last year during a meeting of the chief secretaries of the two states, both sides have resorted to look into the past records of the states which include Upper Tarabari, Gizang Reserve Forest, Hahim, Langphir, Borduar, Boklajpara, Nongwah-Matamur, Khanapara-Pillangkata, Deshdemoreah, Block I and Block II, Khandulipisar and Ratachera. Meghalaya says that the land under these 12 disputed areas was around 2,700 square kilometres. But there is a point behind the Meghalaya argument. Since both assemblies have passed resolutions that are contrary to each other, there is need for arbitration. So what better than a boundary commission. But since Assam has boundary disputes with three other states — Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh — it will only be in the fitness of things to seek a comprehensive solution to Assam's boundary disputes with all other states. So what is needed is a Northeast Boundary Commission, that will have a wide term of reference to look at the resolution of the boundary disputes that Assam has with all four of its neighbours — not just with Meghalaya. India must produce an advanced version of Cyril Radcliffe to sort out one of the most vexed problems of the Northeastern region.

## Didi In Northeast

Matamata Banerji is the march of contradiction on earth. So far, to her credit, she has managed these contradictions rather adroitly. That speaks of her improved tactical sense. After her stunning success in hering the Left Front from power in West Bengal, "Didi" has turned to the Northeast as her next zone of assault. The only problem

That secular India suffers from entrenched Christianophobia is well-established but not publicly acknowledged by the state and the society at large. Nothing reflects it more than the denial of reservations to the Dalits who converted into "Christianity" under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 which provides that no person other than those who profess the religion of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism will be considered as Scheduled Castes. India's Christianophobia has come to the fore after the UPA government promised 4.5 per cent quota for the backward Muslims, believed to be Dalits who converted into Islam, in the run up to the forthcoming UP Assembly elections while the same government has been ducking reservations to the Dalit Christians before the Supreme Court. Sadly, the Supreme Court itself took six years to consider the writ petition on the issue in January 2011.

Historically, the British ruled for 190 years from 1757 to 1947 but the British did not impose their religion which was the case for the previous rulers. No major group which had formal religions converted into Christianity. In North East India which has the largest concentration of Christian population in the country, those who were practicing formal religions did not convert into Christianity. The tribalists and Vaishnavism also did not convert. It was only the ethnic groups who had their local religions, termed as animism, who converted into Christianity. The Christian population throughout post independent India remained static. They constituted about 2.35 per cent of Indian population in 1951, 2.44 per cent in 1961, 2.59 per cent in 1971, 2.45 per cent in 1981, 2.32 per cent in 1991 and 2.3 per cent in 2001 census. Yet, India enacted a number of laws to prohibit conversion which were essentially meant for the Christian missionaries.

The self-proclaimed secular Congress Party was the first one to enact the Freedom of Religion Act in Orissa in 1967 followed by Madhya Pradesh in 1968 and in Arunachal Pradesh in 1978. The Bharatiya Janata Party followed suit and introduced the Freedom of Religion Act of Gujarat in 2003 and in Chhattisgarh in 2006. While the Congress opposed the Bill of Gujarat, it enacted the Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act in 2006. Under the Freedom of Religion Acts, conversion into Hinduism is certainly not an offence. The Hindu groups have been openly converting the tribals into Hinduism under the Ghar Wapasi movement while the churches were kept under strict vigil and many missionaries had to face prosecution.

Conversion into Christianity has not helped the Dalits. The Church itself practices caste system. Across India, cemeteries for the Dalit Christians are different from the upper castes, so is the sitting arrangements. The Dalit Christians are not selected



SUHLAS CHAKMA

Religion as a matter of faith is a private issue and must not be regulated by the State

## India's Christianophobia



File Photo

When a state promotes one religion and imposes restrictions on the other, it can no longer claim to be 'secular'.

in the hierarchy of the Church. While in mainland India, the Catholics were mainly blamed for the practice of caste system, in Northeast India, which has the Baptists, the complaint of domination by the Bishops from South India is often echoed.

Apart from the Freedom of Religion Acts, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 1976 has been used to monitor the missionaries. The Restricted Area Permit has been used to control the entry of the foreign missionaries in Northeast India. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010 specifically prohibits any conversion.

In post independent India, conversion has essentially been a direct consequence of expression of negation and the failure of the State to reduce destitution and discrimination.

The Tripuris who did not convert into Christianity during the British period started converting to Christianity mainly from the 1980s as an expression of negation

against the domination by Bengali Hindus. The same Tripuris who are known as Reangs/ Brus in neighbouring Mizoram and had converted into Christianity have been re-converting into Hinduism since 1990s as an expression of negation against domination by the Mizos Christians. The conversion into Christianity by the Dalits despite caste discrimination within the Church has also to do with expression of negation against the repressive caste system. Across mainland India, Adivasis live in absolute poverty and the Christian missionaries played a critical role to provide food, education, medical assistance, etc.

Since India launched its Tribal Sub Plan and Special Component Plan in 1971-72, the contours of conversion have changed. Many of the front organisations of the Hindu religious groups received grants made by the ministry of social justice, ministry of human resources development, ministry of tribal affairs, etc, for running

schools and hostels, etc, for the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. These Hindu religious organisations increasingly adopted the same methods as of the missionaries i.e. provide food, medicine, shelter, education, etc. In this context, the role of the Indian state irrespective of whichever party is in power has been partisan.

Religion as a matter of faith is a private issue and must not be regulated by the State. It is a well-known fact that there are a number of Dalits who identify themselves legally as Hindus to obtain the benefits of reservations but practice Christianity. The denial of reservations to the Dalit Christians has indeed kept a large chunk of India's discriminated population into backwardness.

India must address caste discrimination with renewed vigour. The Dalits to a large extent have been politically empowered but caste system remains alive and kicking. The government however has stopped public cam-