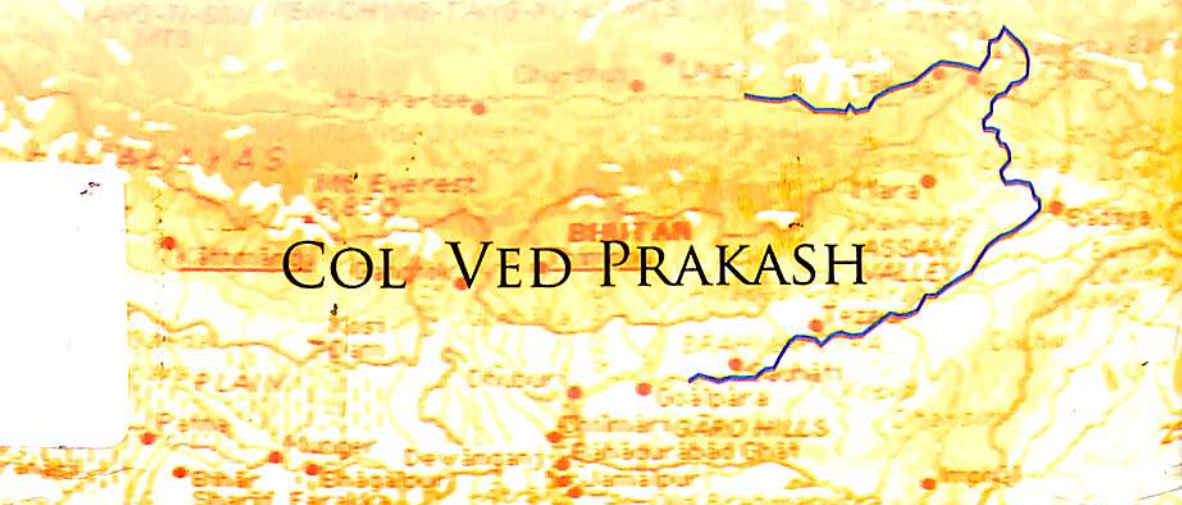


IN 3 VOLUMES

Terrorism in India's North-East
A GATHERING STORM

COL VED PRAKASH





Col. Ved Parkash was commissioned into the famed Sikh Regiment of the Infantry, leading fighting arm of the Indian Army in 1957. His first posting was to 3SIKH, when this batallion was actively engaged in fighting the Naga

insurgency then at its peak in the Naga Hills.

With 12 years of service he won a competitive vacancy to attend Defence Services Staff College Course in 1970, an acme of professional excellence for Army officers.

During his second tenure (1970s) in the North-East, he commanded 18 Assam Rifles Batallion in the Mizo Hills. Here are two interesting and significant coincidences: If for his first tenure, his unit was headquartered at Naga leader Phizo's village, Khonoma, in the second, his unit was located at Mizo leader Laldenga's village, Lungleh. Thus he not only fought the Naga and Mizo terrorism and insurgencies at their virulent worst but also studied their wider aspects at close quarters.

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**TERRORISM IN INDIA'S
NORTH-EAST
A Gathering Storm
(In 3 Volumes)
(Volume-3)**



Col. Ved Prakash



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Racial Tensions in Meghalaya Consequence : A Demand for Garoland

Essential Information : Meghalaya

| | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Date of Formation | 21 Jan 1972 |
| State within Assam | 2 April 1970 |
| Area | 22,429 sq km |
| Population | 23,18,822 |
| Capital | Shillong |
| Chief Language | Khasi Garo English Bengali |
| Major Religions | Assamese Christianity Hinduism |

Political Evolution and Early Disenchantment

After a long, sustained struggle, the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos achieved a 'State within Assam' on 2 April 1970 and subsequently graduated to full-fledged statehood on 21 January 1972. The state had hardly completed three decades of statehood when the Garos started demanding a separate Garoland, with obvious implications for the integrity of the State.

Here is the 1973 breakdown of the tribal population of Meghalaya :

| <i>Tribe</i> | <i>Population</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Khasi | 3,84,006 | 38 |
| Jaintia | 82,493 | 8 |
| Garo | 4,11,532 | 41 |
| Hajong | 23,938 | 2.39 |

A Historical Perspective

Wedged between Bangladesh and the residual Assam, the Meghalaya people had very little contact with the rest of the country till the 19th century when the area was annexed piece-meal with British India: Khasi States in 1829-33; adjoining Jaintia Raj in 1834; and Garo Hills, created a district in 1856 and made a part of the then Assam. The wave of Aryan migration and Muslim invasions did not have much impact in this area. The contacts with the plains people during the pre-British period were essentially for the purposes of petty trade, which they, mainly the Khasis, carried out with the adjoining area of Sylhet. The exports from the Khasi Hills on the eve of British take-over consisted of limestone (17,00,000 maunds), Coal (45,000 maunds), smelted iron (45,000 maunds)¹, besides oranges, betel-nuts, leaves, etc.² If Meghalaya is home to the rainiest place on earth, it has to be flush with nature's bounty in the shape of flora and fauna. It boasts of nearly 700 rare species of medicinal herbs and 300 orchids. And to know that of the 17,000 species of orchid the world is home to, India has over 1,200 of them; and one fourth of the latter figure are claimed by the geographically small State of Meghalaya. Again of over 1,400 butterfly species found in India, more than 500 are indigenous to Meghalaya, some with impressive names like Quaiser-e-Hind and Rajah.

Khasis and Jaintias are essentially the same people, and the Garos have little in common with them.

It is predominantly inhabited by the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia + tribal communities, in that order. Two main diasporas of Meghalaya are mentioned below:

1. *Garo Diaspora*: Two lakh of them inhabit Assam and a little less than one lakh are in Bangladesh, earlier East Pakistan.
2. *War Jaintia Diaspora*. The *War Jaintias* of Dawki border had moved into various districts of Meghalaya and even outside the State to Manipur, Mikir Hills, Cachar, Mizoram and East Pakistan. Sale of betel leaves in Bangladesh cultivated by these Meghalayans (*war Jaintias* and Myllat of East Khasi Hills) had boosted the economy of Bangladesh to such an extent that the "government there virtually gives them a free hand". Their number is placed between 10-20,000. It was about then that a study on Displaced people says: "There are tens of thousands" (an obviously exaggerated number) of Meghalayans (Khasi people of *war Jaintia*) who has already made part of Sylhet district of the present Bangladesh as their habitat even before Independence. They have their own villages, run by their own administration, away from the interference of Dhaka. They vote in election of both Bangladesh and India. What do we call them, then? Illegal aliens of Bangladesh, or Internally Displaced People (IDP) of

the Meghalaya? Their number in the North-East, beyond the confines of Meghalaya, is about 10,000, scattered in areas where *pan* leaf and betel-nuts can be cultivated.

Racial Tensions and Ethnic Militancy

Meghalaya may have been a 'peaceful' state on the surface but there are, of late, rumblings of racial tensions and incipient insurgency just below it. The atmosphere is vitiated not only by tribal-non-tribal tensions and Garo-Khasi distrust, but also by some nascent militant (and insurgent?) outfits encouraged and nurtured by outside insurgency movements like ULFA and NSCN.

The year 1977 saw the inception of inter-communal troubles in Meghalaya in the shape of violence against the outsiders. After the initial eruptions, the state was generally able to bring the situation under control, not letting it to assume serious dimensions. But the situation proved more volatile in the subsequent years. But there was major rioting in 1979 between tribals and *dkhars* (outsiders). But luckily, there were no fatalities.

But in 1992, at the end of the rioting, 31 lay dead in Shillong—30 of them outsiders and one tribal who fell to police bullets. Shillong, with a population of over 350,000, in East Khasi Hills district, has 60 per cent tribals, majority being Khasis. There are some Garos and Jaintias but they are not nearly as vocal as a certain section of Khasis, "who would like their community to dominate affairs in every sphere". Among the 40 per cent non-tribals are Central Government employees on temporary posting and settlers from outside the state, of which two largest groups speak Bengali and Nepali—the rest being Assamese, Biharis, Punjabis, and Marwaris in substantial numbers. The trouble started in August when activists of two militant "son of the soil" organisations—Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP)—forced non-tribal traders to close down on the pretext that they did not possess valid "trading licences" issued by Khasi Hills District Council (DC). It did not subside even if they knew that these traders had applied since long for these licences and the DC had been sitting over them. Just as the Government's effort to restore peace seemed to be succeeding, violence became widespread in October 1992 when the FKJGP announced a road blockade on the day of Durga Puja, sacred and special to the settlers, and young men from the latter took to the streets in defiance. What followed was rioting, fifth since 1979. The toll was heavy, for obvious reasons, for the outsiders as mentioned above.

A year and a half after this rioting, tension again gripped Shillong in April 1994. This time the issue was more serious: the right of the "outsiders" (people from other states) to live and vote freely in Meghalaya. In March 1994, Chief Electoral Officer announced that state's 10,47,000 voters would

be issued photo identity cards by 18 June as directed by CEC T.N. Seshan. But the KSU announced it would allow this only after the names of "foreigners" had been deleted from the electoral rolls with 1951 as the cut off year with respect to the migrants from Bangladesh. But KSU President Paul Lyngdoh clarified³ that the "foreigners" also meant the Indians who had settled after 1951 (it may be noted that in Assam, 1971 has been accepted as the cut off year in view of the influx from Bangladesh). The process of photographing voters in the state's 60 constituencies, scheduled to get under way on 2 April, was nearly a non-starter in East Khasi Hills, especially Shillong, with the KSU bringing life to a standstill on the identity card issue through *bandhs*, picketing, people's curfew, and drum-beating (throughout Shillong) on 25, 26, 27 April and 13 May. All this created an atmosphere of panic in the non-tribal community. Incidents of assault had added to the fear psychosis. There were riots when some youngsters from "outsiders" decided to hit back. The most serious so far—which would have resulted in bloodshed but for the downpour which sent the men scurrying indoors—was on 19 May at Loban after the tribal *dorbar* pronounced excommunication on a non-tribal karate exponent with a reputation for toughness. The people felt the *dorbar* had no jurisdiction on a non-tribal, and the offence, if any, should have been handled by the police. The rains saved the situation, though the authorities had sought 10 companies of Central Paramilitary forces.

The *dorbar's* action was clearly a provocation at a time when the area was already in the grip of tension over the issue of electoral rolls. They did not seem to be shy of lighting the fires. The FKJGP raked up the issue of trade licences, which had proved explosive in 1992, on 18 May 1994, the day before the Loban incident, when its activists forced the closure of a number of shops belonging to non-tribals in Lower Mawprem area of Shillong. KSU's Lyngdoh denied its involvement even though he defended the action. But in the past, such as in 1992, the KSU and FKJGP were reported to have worked together on such missions.

Some observers believe the KSU and FKJGP are not overly keen to avoid violence. The KSU had scrawled "we prefer violence to cowardice" on Shillong's walls in 1994. Neither were all the outsiders ready to take it lying down. They had their grievances. The Loban area of Shillong had almost exclusively been Bengali-inhabited till 1994 but was no more so. An educated settler laments (1994): "Since 1979 about one fourth of Shillong has been 'cleansed' of non-tribals. Only 15 percent of State Government jobs are open to us, and even here, we are tricked out of these.... Government contracts, too, are almost entirely out of our reach. 50 of the 60 Assembly seats are reserved for the tribes. There are now only two non-tribal MLAs, though our population would call for about a dozen.... For the first time this year, many of us found our names struck off the rolls for the District Council election

Now they want to disenfranchise us even in the Assembly and to throw us out lock, stock and barrel.”

The KSU-FKJGP ‘intransigence’ and non-tribal frustration is a highly inflammable mixture in itself. The proclivity of certain politicians to use these organisations to better their career interests further vitiates the climate. S.C. Marak, Chief Minister in 1994, had stated this openly, without identifying the individuals. Did he mean P.P. Lapang, the then PCC (1) President, who was Chief Minister during October 1992 riots and lost. Did he want Lapang discredited? He was believed to have taken a ‘softer line’ towards the rioters? B.B. Lyngdoh of the Hill Peoples Union, too would have liked to see Marak in trouble “because his bid to pull down the Government a few months ago had ended in failure”.⁴ Lik Mawlong, General Secretary of Meghalaya Federation of Regional Parties (MFRP), who fought the Congress in the 1993 Assembly Poll, was openly supportive to the KSU. He told a Fortnightly, “The KSU is a catalytic agent for furthering the cause of the people.”⁵

Politics is the Villain of the Piece

In a manner of speaking, it was a *de ja vu* for the observers on the scene. During the 1992 riots, it was an open secret in Shillong that certain people close to the Congress (I)’s P.R. Kyndiah, then Speaker of the Assembly (and later Governor of Mizoram, 1994-95) had stirred up trouble. Kyndiah had his reasons for being sore with Lapang, the then Chief Minister. The former felt tricked out of the Chief Ministership to which he thought he was entitled because of the crucial role he had played as speaker pulling down B.B. Lyngdoh’s Government.

The populist attitude of all such self-serving political parties seemed to help the KSU-FKJGP combine. But still, the going was not easy in 1994. Taking a tough line, Marak not only rejected the KSU demand for fixing 1951 as cut-off year, he even refused to discuss the issue with its leaders, advising them to meet the members of a Cabinet Sub-Committee set up for the purpose. The then Finance Minister, John Deng Pohrmen, was equally harsh: “They are immature youngsters who do not know the difference between a ‘foreigner’ and an ‘outsider’. They only want to imitate AASU.”

The change in job reservation policy was another issue the KSU was not having its way with, in early 1990s. Since the creation of Meghalaya in 1972, the Khasi and Jaintia communities have together enjoyed a reservation of 40 per cent, the Garos also 40 per cent, other tribes and OBCs 5 per cent, and the remaining 15 per cent are unreserved. The KSU wants this replaced by a combined 90 per cent reservation for Khasis (and Jaintias) and Garos together. The Garos saw through this demand—a ploy by the more educated and also more assertive Khasis to corner the larger share of jobs. This greatly angered them and the fall-out seemed to be the demand for a separate Garo

State espoused by an outfit called Garo National Council (GNC), which had been a part of a faction of the Hill People's Union (HPU) until 1993. There was litigation, too, by the Garos against the Meghalaya Public Service Commission for favouring the Khasi and Jaintia tribes in matters of employment. The Jaintias too felt aggrieved, on similar grounds: some feeling that the Khasis were cornering too many jobs. They feared their identity might be lost in the dominant Khasi milieu.

Garos Resent Khasi Domination

It was obvious that the earlier tribal-non-tribal divide was now narrowing down to an intra tribal divide, al be it on different issues. The Khasi domination was being resented by the other two ethnic groups of the State, Jaintia and Garo, all because of too aggressive (some thought, even clever) attitude of the KSU. Worse for the KSU was division within the Khasi society on the issue of electoral rolls. The Synjuk Ki Rangbah Shnong an association of Headmen, expressed support for making 1971 the cut-off year. It was a blow from an unexpected quarter. The headmen enjoy great prestige in Khasi society. Obviously, they resented the KSU's diktats as an attempt to usurp their traditional authority.

If KSU's such moves created divisions within the tribal groups, and even within the Khasi tribe, its demand for 90 per cent reservation of seats in the high schools and colleges of Shillong—the academic capital of the entire North-East—for Khasis, angered tribal students' unions from other states of the Region. Sensing this anger, the KSU agreed (1994) to settle for a first-preference system instead (This incidentally, was more than enough for Khasi students, since their number was for smaller than that of seats available in Shillong).

It was perhaps this isolation within Meghalaya, and beyond, which explained its lurch towards the militancy during the period, mid-1990s. One KSU slogan on a wall next to the State Assembly, then read: "Long live Khasi militants." The militants they had in mind belonged to HALC. The outfit is known to have received training and arms from NSCN(I-M). The official sources believe the HALC's aims are not secessionist, that it works for "rooting out evils from Khasi society and building up the Khasi nation"—whatever it might mean. It was obvious to the analysts that given KSU's veneration for the HALC the outfit was bound to play a major role in any future confrontation between the tribals and non-tribals. Even more interestingly, as we would see a little later, HALC was to play a role for the Khasis (in the 1998 Assembly Poll), within the tribal society—against the Garos and Jaintias—just as the NSCN(I-M) was accused of aiding Naga "village guards" in their war on Kukis in Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. The KSU had started warning the centre from 1994 against "treating Meghalaya as its colony"

Khasi Liberation Army Surfaces

Another little known outfit came to light in 1994 when action was initiated against a Khasi language paper, *Mawphor*, for publishing a lengthy 'hit list' of corrupt politicians, officials and businessmen drawn up by till then unknown 'extremist outfit', called the Khasi Liberation Army.

Political instability also seems to be generating social tensions and ethnic hiatus. February 1998 Assembly poll should be as good an indicator as any—without going into too many details, or more accurately, plots and sub-plots. S.C. Marak's Congress got 25 seats in 60-member Assembly; B.B. Lyngdoh's United Democratic Party (UDP) 20 seats; BJP, 3; Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSDP), which fought elections on the plank of working for the creation of a separate Khasi State, 3; People's Democratic Movement (PDM), 3; and Independents, 6. Marak was sworn in Chief Minister (he had held the post from 1993 to 1998 also) on 28 February, but resigned on 10 March when his candidate for speakership lost by a single vote. UDP's Lyngdoh formed the Ministry with the help of the regional parties on 12 March, as leader of the United Parliamentary Forum.

Political analysts were perturbed over the blatant divide among the parties along tribal lines. The Congress is seen as a party of Garos—Marak is a Garo; so was P.A. Sangma earlier—whereas the regional parties hold sway in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. In fact, Congress got wiped out in Jaintia Hills in this election. During the 26 years since 1972 birth of Meghalaya, it has been ruled by a Garo Chief Minister for 20 years. The Khasi's Lyngdoh belongs to this tribe—who regard themselves as more advanced than the Garos, who resent this. The Khasi-Garo ethnic divide has come into play in a big way this time, and this does not augur well for the state, already wracked by tribal-non-tribal tensions during the last decade. The new cleavage between Meghalaya's two major ethnic groups could only aggravate the situation, the analyst feared.

Given the political culture of Meghalaya, the Lyngdoh Ministry too faced rough weather after about five months. On 27 July 1998, he resigned in the morning, and was sworn-in again as the head of the JUDP and Congress Ministry—the two sworn enemies conjugating to form the Meghalaya Parliamentary Forum (MPF), which had a combined strength of 49. D.D. Lapang of Congress was Deputy Chief Minister. The top job was to be split; Lyngdoh was to hold office till 16 November 2000, and then hand it over to Lapang.

As for the longevity of the Ministry, it should be noted that although Meghalaya had five assemblies from 1972 to 1998, there were 12 Governments. Party loyalties were obviously not long lasting, it seemed. Ethnic factors complicated things even further. As will be seen, the ministers were accused

of colluding with the insurgents. The shape of things to come could be seen in the February poll itself. The Congress had formed a government in 1993 under Marak that lasted five years (till 1998), with just 24 MLAs, one less than its tally in 1998. But in 1998, it could not succeed in alluring even independents who had been ministers in the 1993-98 Ministry. This was largely because of the emergence of a "Third force" in Meghalaya politics. Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), a small Khasi insurgent group operating in the state. It also harped on the fact that Khasis (including Jaintias) though majority in the state had their Chief Minister for less than five years since 1972, primarily because they lacked unity. So the HNLC had warned wayward elements in the UPF of dire consequences should they cross over to the Congress. The threat had worked—at least for that time.⁶

Racial violence, on the upswing on the heels of Lyngdoh forming a coalition early August 1998 with the Congress led by Lapang had claimed 15 lives till the 23rd, all non-tribals. They were victims of over-zealous 'vigilante' groups formed, ironically, to curb violence. It was to check the thefts and burglaries that the Dorbar Shnongs decided to set up locality-wise vigilante groups for night patrol. The groups started checking the credentials of residents returning home at night or loitering about. But these groups primarily formed of Khasi youth reportedly began to target non-tribals with whom they had decade-long rivalry over land, trade and employment. Lyngdoh Government was unable—perhaps unwilling—to control the vigilante groups, resulting in the killing of so many non-tribals. In contrast, Marak (1993-98) had been able to control the racial violence Meghalaya had witnessed for 15 years before he took over.

Are the Foreigners usurping Jobs?

But it must be conceded that communal violence in one form or another is endemic to the North-East, resentful of the "Indians", Bangladeshis, Nepalis and Tibetans residing in the region "and usurping the jobs rightfully belonging to the local tribals". All insurgent groups in the Region have made a major issue about "infiltration" not only from Bangladesh but also from other parts of India.⁷

The job opportunities are limited and local outfits like the KSU fan the flames in a difficult situation. Even Chief Minister like Marak (1993-98), who had a credible record of maintaining peace and order, had the need to appease the KSU. It was for this reason that he reportedly wrote to Union Home Minister S.B. Chavan in 1995, requesting him to find ways and means to check the uncontrolled entry of Nepali immigrants to the state—reasoning that the Bangladeshis could be detected since they have to carry passports and visas, unlike the Nepalis who under the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty are free to enter India without any such documents. But Marak himself was not clear as to

how the Centre could do it in view of this treaty. By singling out the Nepalis, Marak had verily made them the target of wanton attack by both the student and insurgent organisations whose manifest aim, analysts believe, "is to expiate the ills afflicting the tribal societies by exterminating non-tribal businessmen or non-tribals *per se*". The KSU has been consistently demanding detection of all 'foreigners', be they of Bangladeshi or Nepal origin, and even outsiders, like the Bengalis, Biharis, Punjabis, and sweepers—the last having been brought here by the British. Ignoring the fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution, Marak even endorsed the totalitarian view of introducing a work permit system in the state in lieu of the equally obnoxious inner line permit (ILP) regulation, which is applicable in Arunachal, Mizoram and Nagaland but not in Meghalaya.

Marak's claim that the influx of Nepalis had increased after lifting of the Restricted Areas Permit (RAP) System by the Centre smacks of Centre-baiting. So he too joined other Chief Ministers of the predominantly tribal states, making influx of the 'foreigners' a potent issue to lash the Centre with. Ironically, the Chief Ministers including Marak, had held the view earlier that lifting of the RAP would facilitate development of tourism in these areas and the foreigner influx would not pose a serious threat.

But Marak is unable to prove how the lifting of RAP would increase the influx of Nepalis when they do not need visas to enter India in the first place. But worse, Marak had sought to club Indian citizens also with 'Nepali foreigners', on the issue of work permit.

In 1996, Khasi society seemed to have particularly been convulsed by xenophobia. An analyst wrote: "Khasis were determined to keep out the Bangladeshi migrants flooding the state. At the street level, this degenerated into attacks on even those Bengalis living there for generations and the KSU assumed inquisitorial powers: It banned mixed marriages for Khasi women. Durga Puja leads to communal tensions and the non-Khasi traders have to pay protection money to militants. Murder was not unknown when they can't meet exorbitant demands." The consequences are there for all to see: This led to a capital flight, forced migration, and was destroying the multi-cultural, -lingual, -religious state, so far living in harmony with its diversity. "There is even a talk of work permits for other Indians."

Was It Start of the Militancy?

Now for the militancy/insurgency situation in Meghalaya. The formation of the Meghalaya United Movement (MUM) in 1989 was indicative of a rudimentary militancy in Meghalaya. Its main objective was all-round development of the Khasi society, and subsequently, in due course, secession from India when the idea became acceptable to the society at large. The MUM had secured some small arms and an understanding with ULFA for facilitating

the passage of their volunteers to and from Bangladesh. The outfit did not make much headway, as very few volunteers joined its ranks.

In 1991, A'chik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) came into being with the main objective of creation of a separate Garoland comprising of Garo inhabited areas of Meghalaya, Assam and Bangladesh. It also wanted eradication of corruption and expulsion of foreign nationals. Its strength was estimated over 50. Its arms included AK-47, carbines, M-20 pistols, country-made revolvers, grenades and detonators. The outfit had working relations with the ULFA and NSCN. Its 3-year existence ended with its surrender on 25 October 1994.

There was in existence for a short while in early 1990s an outfit with a grand name of Meghalaya United Liberation Army (MULA).

In 1992, another insurgent group came into existence; namely, Hynniewtrep Voluntary Council (HVC). Its main objective was eradication of social evils afflicting the Khasi society, especially the youth. It also struck an understanding with the ULFA for passage to and from Bangladesh in the manner of the MUM. The HVC had carbines, revolvers, crude guns and .22 rifles. The Press reported that the SFs recovered/captured all its weapons, except some revolvers. The estimated strength of the Council's cadre was between 15 and 20.

The year 1992 also saw the birth of the Hynniewtrep A'chik Council (HALC) to foster secessionism among the youth. It framed a 21-point charter of demands. The HALC advocates an armed revolution for full separation from India. Its cadres possess carbines, revolvers, country-made weapons, and a few rifles. Barring the rifles, all other arms have been seized by the SFs. The HALC has working arrangements with the NSCN. The pamphlets issued by the HALC on the fifth death anniversary of Wickliffe, ex-Deputy Syiem of Nongstoin (21 October 1993) speak of secession from India. The theme was re-iterated through two booklets published on his sixth anniversary (21 October 1994). Yet again, its press release of 23-1-1995 called for non-cooperation on every Republic Day on 3-3-1995, through another press release, the HALC demanded "traditional governance for the people".

It is to be noted that the reports of the Intelligence Agencies have mentioned that secessionist outfits like the NSCN and ULFA, specially the former, help raise some minor groups for furthering their own ends. The latter get willingly used, without ever coming to know the real intention of the former, and the reasons for help extended to them. Outfits like HVC, HALC, etc., might belong to this category.

The above is the situation on the militancy front till mid-1990s. Towards the second half of the decade, two outfits—HNLC and ANVC—claimed the militancy stakes. It bears repetition that militant Naga leaders have been using

Shillong as a sanctuary since the 1950s. NSCN(I-M) have been playing big brother in the North-East, including Meghalaya. SS 2 Lt Mumba Mao of NSCN(I-M), who had been functioning as the area commander of Shillong was arrested in September 2000 from Jingkieng area of the City.⁸ NSCN(I-M) was instrumental in the formation of HALC in 1992. The outfit was rechristened subsequently as HNLC when the Garo youth in its ranks launched a separate movement, viz A'chik National Volunteers' Council (ANVC).

Towards the end of the 1990s, when the action squads of the HNLC suddenly stepped up their operations, Meghalaya once again found itself in the grip of violence. The Intelligence reports that HNLC is an umbrella organisation of various smaller groups that are active in Assam and Nagaland. Fighting for Khasiland, it relies on these small groups to raise funds through extortion and to acquire arms and ammunition. The *modus operandi* of the HNLC became known after the arrest of 5 members of the North-East Red Army (NERA), including its SS C-in-C Ching Thang Khiew, in Shillong on 27 August 2000. Founded in the latter half of 1999 and with its operational base at Nongpoh in Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya, the NERA has close links with HNLC and helps it in collecting money. It was involved in several cases of extortion, abduction and looting. NERA's members were reportedly behind the then recent kidnapping of the Shillong-based businessman, Rajesh Sethia.⁹

Intelligence sources said that the HNLC must have learnt the art of the playing big brother from the NSCN(I-M), to which it pays tribute. In turn, the banned NSCN(I-M) has extended consultancy services to the HNLC for nearly a decade, that is almost since its birth. It also helped the Khasi youth to 'fine tune' their skills in guerrilla warfare. Interrogation also revealed that the HNLC modelled its operational structure on that of the NSCN(I-M). It operates through three commands: Eastern, covering Jaintia Hills district; Central, Shillong, and surrounding areas; and Western, West Khasi Hills district. NSCN(I-M), HNLC and ANVC had given a boycott call for Independence Day celebrations. The latter two had also given separate calls for a 36-hour *bandh* on 14 August 2000 to frustrate Government plans for these celebrations. They had their reasons for the boycott call: ANVC, with its stronghold in the Garo Hills, said that the Garos continued to be deprived of their rights, both political and economic "for 53 years since Independence" and the HNLC's protest was against the colonial rule of New Delhi. On the night of 15 August, gun battles raged in Shillong between SF and HNLC militants, leaving a CRPF Havildar dead. The ultras of HNLC helped by the NSCN(I-M), carried out simultaneous attacks on police patrols between 9 PM and 1 AM at 11 places.

Both these outfits demand separate ethnic state of their own—Khasiland and Garoland. Besides these two, press reported the existence of another outfit

in the state, viz People's Liberation Front of Meghalaya (PLFM).¹⁰ Three other minor outfits are known to exist: (1) Hynniewtrep Liberation Army (HLA). (2) All Meghalaya Tribal Force (AMTF). (3) Khasi Liberation Army. But not much is known about them—but for their nomenclatures.

ULFA and NDFB Export Terrorism to Meghalaya

The militant outfits obtaining external help is always a matter of concern to the authorities. The ISI activities in the North-East, and its help to the militants is no secret any longer. F.A. Khonglam, Meghalaya Chief Minister, discussed the issue with the Union Home Minister at New Delhi in July 2002 and sought additional CRPF units for counter-insurgency purposes. ISI is already actively helping the Indian insurgents ensconced in the camps in Bangladesh; they mostly are from ULFA, NSCN and NDFB. Early 1991, Indian insurgents, particularly of ULFA and NDFB, coming under Army pressure in Assam, started shifting base to jungles in South Bhutan. By 1995, there were 30 camps in the area. From 2000 onwards, they were under pressure to leave Bhutan and therefore early 2002 they started eyeing the Garo Hills of western Meghalaya to build their camps. ULFA joined hands with ANVC which already had several hide-outs in the East Garo Hills district, adjoining Assam's Goalpara district. ULFA militants had started trickling out of Bhutan to Garo Hills through Barpeta district of Lower Assam, avoiding attention of the Indian Army in the area. It seems the Garo Hills will be a temporary shelter before the ULFA settles in Bangladesh to their south.

The ULFA cadres are believed to be taking the riverine route on the Brahmaputra to sneak into Bangladesh in small numbers. In mid-January 2002, 6 ULFA cadres were killed by SF at Angami, Golokganj PS, Dhubri district and inside Raimona RF in Kokrajhar district—both bordering Bangladesh. The 243 km Meghalaya-Bangladesh border continues to remain mostly porous, as only 120 km of this border is fenced, and it is a source of concern to Meghalaya, because of ULFA ultras using it as a transit to cross over to Bangladesh. Chief Minister Lapang urged the Centre in December 2003 “to introduce identity cards as well as work permits to check the influx of Bangladeshi migration which is threatening to change the demography of the State.”¹¹

The Deputy Commissioner of West Garo Hills district promulgated prohibitory orders within one km stretch of the international border to thwart the movement of the armed militants. The BSF had submitted a list of 79 militant camps in Bangladesh to the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) officers during a meeting at Shillong on 22 October 2003. The BSF at Bangladesh border has been having unfortunate (almost humiliating) experience at the hands of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). Its men were caught off guard when the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR)-backed infiltrators occupied the small village of Pyrdiwah in the East Khasi Hills district on 16 April 2001. The BSF again suffered extreme

humiliation when BDR personnel butchered as many as 16 of its men at Boraibari, mere two days later on the 18th.¹²

The state has witnessed periodic cases of extremist violence. The ANVC cadres abducted a doctor in December 2001. Khonglam-led NCP coalition government, taking a tough stand, refused to either negotiate with the ANVC, or to pay it a Rs. 20 lakh ransom. To mount pressure on the government, Meghalaya Medical Service Association held a 3-day strike in January 2002. But citing the 'safe rescue' of an abducted doctor from Jaintia Hills recently, the DGP was hopeful of a repeat in this case also. In early 2003, six persons were shot dead by suspected Karbi National Volunteers at Mukhroh village in Jaintia Hills district. Police ascribed the ghastly degradation to the extortion bid by the ultras.

Meghalaya may not be on the boil, but it certainly is not a 'peaceful' state either. An official put it this way: "Meghalaya has been afflicted by extremist violence, but it is no longer a major threat." But the Government should not underestimate the threat they still can face. The internal dissonance—tribal versus non-tribal, and ethnic conflict between the Khasi and Garo tribes, fuelled by their respective militants outfits—can be aggravated by the external factors. It should be remembered that the militants from all the four disturbed states—Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura—use the State, particularly its capital, Shillong, for rest and recreation and occasionally for mutual consultations and coordination of their anti-national activities. And as stated above, outfits like the NSCN(I-M) and ULFA have successfully fished in the troubled waters helping raising the small local outfits and using them to further their own ends. The State must remain ever alert and watch out these baneful external influences, besides striving for ethnic and racial peace and harmony within.

Politics indeed is interesting, at the very least. A former Minister in Khonglam Ministry was arrested on 27 June 2003 for his alleged links with the proscribed ANVC. He was charged under the Unlawful Activities Act for allegedly allowing his official vehicle to be used for carrying the militants. Police grilled two ANVC members to confirm if Marak had links with their outfit. A police officer said: "We have a dossier on him which gives his criminal background. He has been involved in criminal activities right from his childhood..., has committed robberies even before he became a legislator (PTI, 28-6-2003). A new twist was given to the case, involving the politician-militant nexus, when Marak released a letter reportedly written by Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga, who is himself playing an important mediatory role in New Delhi-NSCN(I-M) talks presently underway, to say that Marak was detailed for a 'peace mission' (*Hindustan Times*, 30-6-03).

HNLC, banned by India, is also carrying anti-India cyber war of its own. *Indian Express*, 4 October 2003 reported that "an obscure Internet newsgroup

of 171 members that has seen 33 posted messages in the last year has threatened the free flow of information across India's information superhighway, pitting the Indian Government against Yahoo, one of the world's most popular search engines. Last week, India decided to ban the newsgroup of the separatist HNLC, called Kynhun Lu Bri "Hanniewtrip (groups.yahoo.com/group/kynhun 1), because it carried reports India considers anti-national". When India asked US-based Yahoo to block the newsgroup, the company declined, saying it was not possible as the act (of blocking) may be illegal under US laws.

A border dispute with Assam has bedeviled Meghalaya's relations ever since its creation in 1972. For a long time, Meghalaya has been laying claim on large chunks of Assam territory. The Chief Ministers of the two States have been meeting periodically to solve the dispute, but without any result till date. Tarun Gogoi and F.A. Khonglam met on 18 June 2002, but concluded the discussions by deciding to maintain the *status quo* on the border. Khonglam said there were 12 disputed villages in different areas of the border between the two states. Gogoi told the press that they had agreed not to set up any police post in these areas on either side but keeping in mind the insurgency scenario, police of both the states should maintain closer liaison and coordination. Another meeting between the two Chief Ministers, this time Gogoi and Lapang, in May 2003 could also not go beyond agreeing to maintain the *status quo*, failing to fix a deadline to end the row once and for all.

Occasionally, the issue has become a football between the politicians. Meghalaya Power Minister Martle Mukhim resigned on 31 October 2001, blaming Chief Minister Mawlong of not keeping his promise of solving the border issue within six months of taking over as Chief Minister, "whereas he has been in power for a year and a half".¹³

Gender War

Now for revisiting the realities of matrilineal Khasi society. An acute observer of the scene says the electoral politics in Meghalaya has distorted the relations between the sexes. Ethnographers and feminists alike celebrate the matrilineal society of the Khasis. However, the greater visibility and mobilizing power required by modern politics has meant that the leading Khasi *netas*, are all men.¹⁴

Modernity seemed to have finally caught up with Meghalaya's Khasi tribals. With many educated girls marrying outsiders or non-tribals, the KSU demanded a law to check these dangerous-liaisons and introduction of an ILP to restrict entry of outsiders even as women activists decided to oppose any change tooth and nail. At the root of the problem is the Khasi tradition

of the youngest daughter inheriting the property of her parents. A Khasi student leader fulminates: "The prospect of acquiring property and wealth on marriage to a Khasi girl is very tempting. That is why these outsiders are always trying to hoodwink our girls." The KSU President Paul Lyngdoh, more forthrightly, calls them 'marriages of conveniences', and adds: "As per law, an outsider cannot buy land or get business licence here. So he marries a Khasi girl to get round these hurdles. They then use our girls as a cover to do business here. Many of them sell off our girls' property and vanish. Who will take care of these deserted women and their children? Go to Jaintia Hills and see the plight of these women abandoned by Biharis, Bangladeshis and Nepalis!" In 1995, KSU passed a resolution seeking forfeiture of a woman's right to her parents' property on her marriage to an outsider. Though the KSU has been pressurizing the Government to change the law, but no political party wants to alienate the women. CM Marak says tampering with personal laws will spell trouble "and more over how can we stop any one marrying some one of her choice?" (*Times of India*, 15-12-96). "But our fight will continue", says Paul Lyngdoh.

An organisation like Syngkhong Rympei Thymmi, SRT (=Association for Reformation of the Family Structure) has been demanding the present system be changed to patrilineal, since its inception in 1994. The KSU only joined the bandwagon subsequently. It was the logic of misuse of the custom which had brought SRT to the battle between genders. The present system believes in *'long jaid na ka kynthci* (It is the woman from whom family springs). This belief has destroyed the social fabric of our tribal community, says the leader of the SRT. After marriage, the groom who leaves to stay in his parents-in-law's house, is often referred to as *bhun ki briew* (=someone else's son). Women's organisation, *Synjuk ki Seng Samba Sbnob* (SKSSS) also joined the debate, though it has maintained a low profile and has always sought negotiated settlement of the issue. While this debate has been going on, Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) passed the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Bill 1997, adding fuel to the fire. The 1997 Bill proposes to make the existing custom a law and codify it. The KHADC argues: "We are trying to preserve the system and make the terms very specific so that tribal custom is not misused by unscrupulous people.... The Bill was framed after a lot of discussion, it is in fact, a consensus. It has been enacted to pacify those people who are asking for change in the custom so as to protect the tribal society from the abuse by non-tribals and outsiders." The major reason for opposing the matrilineal system is to stop the marriages between Khasis and non-Khasis. The main clauses of the Bill have in fact, placed elaborate restrictions over what agitated student leaders call "sham marriages". It is towards this end that the Bill has laid down stringent conditions on the issue

of marriage between a Khasi girl and a non-Khasi boy. The Bill was passed unanimously by the KHADC, and then forwarded to the Governor for approval. But such elaborate arrangement has not satisfied the men who have, in a memorandum, requested the Governor not to give his assent to the Bill. The main demand of the men's brigade is to enact a law which mandates that any Khasi girl marrying a non-Khasi will be deprived of all her rights and privileges. But KHADC, comprising of tribal chiefs, senior citizens and scholars, enjoys tremendous power. The issue has been hanging fire, and the Bill is still with the Governor, for over five years.

The whole trouble can be ascribed to the fact that the modern Khasi male is no longer willing to play a second fiddle. For the last 12 years (1990-2002), the SRT is waging a crusade to change the Khasi society. Says the SRT President, Keith Pariat: "The Khasi man is sinking morally and intellectually since he has no authority in the family. Khasi women are no longer interested in marrying the Khasi men. Inter ethnic marriages have increased. The survival of the Khasi society is at stake. We are trying to avoid just that." The need to change the system has been felt more acutely ever since outsiders—both from other parts of India and the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bangladesh—entered the State in large numbers and "took to marrying the Khasi women to take easier road to fortune". To their credit, most women feel that men should be given some property. Says Patricia Lyngdoh, Principal of a College and a social thinker: "I feel the basic structure of matrilineal system should remain but the society should take the changes into consideration and adopt the best of both traditions."

The Bill, still (2003) pending with the Governor, has generated furious debate over the years. The last word on it is still to be heard. But the churning is surely on in the barely half-a-million strong Khasi society. The matriarchal lineage system has given the Khasi women a special status which their counterparts in many advanced communities can only aspire to. Whether it will survive the present onslaught and thrive or find a place in the pages of history books only time will tell.

The last word on the issue has hopefully been heard. After 8 long years, the Governor approved the Bill into law in March 2005. The SRT had demanded that the Governor send back the Bill to the KHADC as it contained many controversial clauses. The Act as passed does address some of the concerns of the SRT but certainly not all. Among the Khasis, a family without a daughter is considered a "dying clan", so the Bill proposed that such a family could follow the *Rap ling* custom—adopt a female child. The SRT felt the son's status was ignored, so the amended Act now permits adoption of a male child too. The SRT, which wants Khasis to replace matrilineal system with the patrilineal, is still unhappy because their main demand—that children be allowed to take the name to their father—has been totally ignored. The debate goes on!

Foreigners and Outsiders

The Bangladesh Government has sought New Delhi's permission (*Exp.*, 4-5-03) to set up a visa office in Shillong which would give a major boost to trans-border trade. Meghalaya has several transit points to Bangladesh through which coal, timber, cement and oranges are exported.

The state has been very sensitive to the issue of the in-flow of migrants. During the 1979-80, the Bengalis were the "foreign" nationals targeted the most. So was the case during the 1987 agitation. "The State Government detected 12,000 Nepali foreigners of which over 10,000 were expelled in February-March 1987."

The FKJGP activists picked up (on 1-9-04) 31 Nepalis who had arrived at Shillong and were on their way to Jaintia Hills to work in the coal mines. They were later handed over to the police which said the FKJGP's act was illegal as the RAP system was done away within the State in May 1995 and the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty, 1950, allows Nepalese nationals to move freely in India and *vice versa*.

Chief Minister Lapang urged the Centre (4-9-04) again to introduce multi-purpose identity cards to check the influx of foreign nationals into the State. In a memorandum to Home Minister Shivraj Patil, Lapang pointed out that the Conference of Chief Ministers on internal security on 17-11-2001 had endorsed the issuance of work permits for the foreigners and decided that the citizens' identity card system should be introduced to check illegal migration (*Hindu*, 6-9-04).

Prohibitory orders were clamped in the districts of East Khasi Hills and Ri Bhoi on 13-9-04 ahead of 20-hour *bandh* on the 14th called by the KSU to protest the Government's failure to fulfil its demands like review of reservation policy, tackling foreigner's influx, and issue of uranium mining in certain areas.

Insurgency : Ceasefire with ANVC

The row over the issue of negotiators for talks between the Centre and the ANVC notwithstanding, "Senior leader P.A. Sangma continues to act as 'facilitator' for the peace dialogue (*HT*, 30-6-03). In May 2003, the Congress-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance Government embarrassed Sangma by denouncing his claim about having been authorised by Dy PM Advani to open talks with the ANVC. The MHA sources, while confirming that no negotiator had been appointed, admitted that Sangma did indeed get the go-ahead from Advani to contact the ANVC.

On 23 July 2004, the tripartite Peace Pact was signed, suspending the armed operations for six months, and the signatories were A.K. Rastogi, Secretary (Border Management), MHA; P.J. Bazely, Chief Secretary, Meghalaya; and W.K. Marak General Secretary, ANVC. Under the Pact, the

outfit deposited 70 weapons with the SF and its 250 cadres would be confined to two Army camps. A Joint Monitoring Group would be set up. The Government hoped that the cease-fire would effectively check the cross-border movement of the Cadres of ULFA and other insurgent outfits to Bangladesh.

Some of the insurgency-related issues/incidents are mentioned below:

1. The state banned a series of one-dayers planned by the ANVC, the Garo outfit that signed a cease-fire on 23-7-04. The State Home ministry was yorkeed by the Garo militants organising public events beyond the boundary of their designated camps: (1) Chakpot in South Garo Hills district. (2) Williamnagar in East Garo Hills district. The officials feared the militants could be using cricket to brainwash young boys with their ideology—a separate Garo Homeland. The ANVC's Publicity Secretary A.S.N. Sangma thought the Government was unduly suspicious (*HT*, 5-12-04).
2. The Intelligence reported that the ISI was active in the North-East, subverting the Indian nationals. One Lance Naik of the Assam Rifles was arrested (*Hindu*, 13-7-02) who was being paid Rs. 1,00,000 every month for passing on information to an ISI agent attached to the Pak embassy in Kathmandu. Some incriminating document were recovered from his house.
3. After 26-day of captivity, two abducted State officials were released by the ANVC on 26-4-03.
4. Slogan raised by some 'mischievous' elements: "Khasi by blood, Indian by accident."
5. Late night, 24-10-04, a Major and two ULFA cadres were killed in an encounter in West Garo Hills district.
6. The Kolkata police have uncovered links between the extremist outfits active in the North-East (like ULFA and ANVC) with the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, a Kashmiri militant outfit (*Hindu*, 3-1-04). This strengthens the suspicions about the Pak ISI being active in different parts of the country.

Is Meghalaya Disintegrating?

If Meghalaya was fruition of a sustained struggle by the Khasi Jaintia, and Garo people led by Capt Williamson Sangma (who became its first Chief Minister in January 1972) and other leaders, presently another Garo, P.A. Sangma, the NCP leader and former Speaker of the Lok Sabha, is mobilizing the Garos for creation of separate Garoland out of Meghalaya, aided by the Khasis under the KSU, who demand bifurcation of the State to create Khasiland for their own reasons. Earlier, the Khasis cited injustice being done

to them as the state has been ruled by Garo Chief Minister for long years (as earlier discussed) compared to the Khasi ones, now an innocuous, apolitical issue like education has incited passions for its bifurcation (Manjula Bhattacharyya, *Tribune*, 27-6-05 and 4-7-05).

It all started recently over the failure in the distribution of the mathematics paper in time by the Tura (Garo Hills) based Meghalaya Board of Secondary Education (MBOSE), for the students from Shillong in the Khasi-dominated areas. The enraged KSU demanded bifurcation of the MBOSE, with one secretary each at Tura and Shillong, with a full-fledged Chairman, and called a 3-day *bandh* 23-25 June, in support. The KSU activists torched some Government vehicles and properties. The resignation by the Sports Minister Paul Lyngdoh, a former KSU President and a Khasi in support of the demand, forced D.D. Lapang, the CM and Khasi himself, and heading the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance Ministry, to declare a secretary each for Tura and Shillong, amounting to effective bifurcation of MBOSE. But soon after Lapang announced this decision, the Garo Students Union (GSU) and Garo Citizens Forum (GCF) called a 2-day *bandh*, 24-25 June, in Garo Hills to protest the decision. This prompted the Congress-led MDA to convene a Cabinet meeting (that lasted for 6 hours on 25-6-05) which decided to expand the Expert Committee on Education headed by the Chief Secretary to review the CM's decision and submit a report within two months. The CM was forced to retreat for the time being because of a strong protest by Deputy CM Mukul Sangma, who represents the Garos, contributing 24 of the 60 Assembly seats.

The movement is fast taking the shape for separate states to be carved out of Meghalaya, for the Khasis and Garos. The GCF has already adopted a resolution demanding creation of Garoland. The NCP is mobilising support for an October Rally to officially make the demand for Garoland. P.A. Sangma had flown in from Delhi soon after the 25th theatre, to fish in the troubled waters by demanding that Tura be declared the winter capital of Meghalaya. In fact, reports suggest P.A. Sangma is in touch with Congress leader and Dy CM Sangma and both the Sangmas are moving in the same direction—creation of Garoland.

Ironically, the Garos and Khasis (Jaintias are with them) who waged a long struggle to carve out Meghalaya out of the then composite Assam, are presently fighting each other for the bifurcation of the same Meghalaya into Garoland and Khasiland!

Following the somewhat detailed discussion of inter- and intra-tribal dissonance, political skulduggery, and birth of militancy, an overview of the situation, in the form of a backgrounder, should be of interest.

MEGHALAYA BACKGROUNDER

Meghalaya emerged as an autonomous State on April 2, 1970, and was declared a State of the Indian Union on January 1, 1972. Prior to April 1970, Meghalaya was a part of the composite State of Assam. Following a decade-long peaceful constitutional agitation for a separate Hill State, the Indian Parliament passed the Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act, 1969, constituting the Autonomous State. The Parliament later passed the North Eastern Areas Reorganization Act, 1971, which conferred full Statehood on the autonomous State of Meghalaya.

Homeland to a number of tribes, Meghalaya (Abode of the Clouds) is also known as the 'Scotland of the East' for its scenic magnificence. The Garos dominate western Meghalaya; the Khasis, central Meghalaya; and the Jaintias, eastern Meghalaya. The 'Hynniewtrep' people, a collective name of the Khasi, Jaintia, Bhoi and War tribes belonging to the Proto Austroloid Monkhmer race, primarily dominate Eastern Meghalaya. The Garos or Achiks as they call themselves, belong to the Tibeto-Burman race and predominantly inhabit the Garo Hills.

The State has been plagued with the problem of insurgency since the latter part of the 1980s. Meghalaya has three terrorist outfits operating on its soil: the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC); the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC); and the People's Liberation Front of Meghalaya (PLF-M). The first two are currently more active than the last, which is relatively dormant. The HNLC is a product of a 1992 split in the Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC), the first militant tribal organization in Meghalaya, and aims at creating a sovereign State for the Khasis. The ANVC, formed in December 1995, aims to carve out a homeland called 'Achik Land' in the area of the Garo Hills under the provisions of the Indian Constitution. On November 16, 2000, the Union Government declared both the organizations as unlawful associations under the provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

Roots of Discord

The reasons of discord in Meghalaya are manifold. The divide among tribal residents of the State and the non-tribal settlers (mostly Bangladeshis) has been a prime factor for the growing discontent. Commencing with the divide that persisted through the nineteen seventies and eighties, events took a perilous direction in August 1992, when the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and the Federation of Khasis, Jaintia and Garo Peoples (FKJGP) started issuing threat orders to non-tribal traders, compelling them to shut down their businesses in Meghalaya for not possessing valid trading licences. A riot (widely considered the fifth major riot against the so-called outsiders)

followed, claiming 31 lives. In 1994, another round of trouble ensued over the Election Commission's orders for preparing photo-identity cards for all voters, which was resisted by the KSU. The KSU insisted that no photography for the cards would be permitted before the electoral rolls were revised with a 1951 cut-off date with regard to immigrants from Bangladesh.

In addition to the continuing divide between the locals and non-locals, issues of identity, growing corruption and perceived injustice in the Garo hills are considered to be reasons for the violence in Meghalaya. However, the Sharma Commission appointed by the State Government to investigate the various dimensions of the growing ethnic conflict in the State, observed in its report in 1995 that the primary cause of such disturbances has been economic, such as the increasing unemployment rate in the State.

Fatality Index

Between 1994 and 2002, 92 civilians, 68 security force personnel and 44 terrorist fatalities have been recorded in Meghalaya. The general trend had been an increasing civilian and security force casualty rate as compared to the terrorist fatalities. Signs of escalation in the overall death rate are evident in official data: a total of 20 deaths were reported in 1998, 22 in 1999, 36 in 2000, 40 in 2001, and 64 in 2002. Starting from 1997 to 2001, 225 terrorist related incidents took place in Meghalaya. According to Annual reports of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, in 1997 there were 14 terrorist related incidents, but the following years witnessed a vertical increase— 16 in 1998, 52 in 1999, 73 in 2000, 70 in 2001 and 84 in 2002.

Active Groups

The HALC was a radical organization and could be considered to be the first terrorist outfit in the State. In 1992, following a split in the HALC over inter-tribal antagonisms, the group was renamed and has functioned under the banner of Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) since May 1996. According to the HNLC's 19-point manifesto, the organization stands for the 'national existence and self-determination of our people without subordination under the yoke of foreign powers.' Its objectives include the transformation of Meghalaya into a 'Khasi State' and freedom from the domination of the Garo tribes. "To realize its objectives, the outfit calls for the 'unshackling of the motherland and people from the bonds of Indian colonialism, imperialism and chauvinism.' Further, it also aims at fighting 'outsiders', as the group sees Khasi youth as a deprived lot in their own land. The HNLC is active in the Khasi Hills of the State.

The HNLC is understood to have close links with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) faction. Its activities include, among others, fake currency circulation in the State, as well as extortion and

other forms of underground activities, primarily for monetary gains. It is believed that the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's external intelligence agency, has assisted the HNLC in the acquisition and circulation of fake currency.

The second splinter group of the HALC was named the A'chik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA), a Garo outfit. The ALMA could not continue the armed struggle and surrendered on October 25, 1994, at Tura. As the State Government dithered over the issue of rehabilitation of the surrendered cadres, in August 1995, a group of Garo militants along with some NSCN-IM cadres made a successful jailbreak attempt from the Shillong District Jail. Among the Garo cadres was Jerome Momin, who went on to form the A'chick National Volunteer Council (ANVC) in December 1995. The ANVC demands a homeland for the Achiks (Garos) comprising the Garo Hill District of Meghalaya, the Garo dominated Nongkhlaw area in the Khasi Hills, and the Garo-inhabited Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam. Following the jailbreak, the outfit is understood to have grown with the active assistance of the NSCN-IM. Over the years, the ANVC has come to establish a working relationship with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), especially after the latter wound up some of its camps in Bhutan and is in the process of relocating them in the Garo Hills. Though media reports suggest a worsening of ties between the ANVC and the NDFB, both groups continue to assist each other in several operations. The ANVC has also established an 'extortion empire' of sorts in the Garo Hills and parts of the West Khasi Hills. According to a list submitted by India to Bangladesh, the ANVC maintains three camps in that country.

The People's Liberation Front of Meghalaya (PLFM) is a relatively new group operating in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Reports suggest that the outfit had been re-christened as the Achik National Council (ANC) on August 2001. The PLFM is an offshoot of the A'chik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA). While most of ALMA terrorists surrendered in 1994, a few formed the ANVC in 1995. The PLFM consists of some of these "surrendered rebels" of the erstwhile ALMA who returned underground after their rehabilitation scheme failed. The primary objective of the PLFM is economic development as well as better educational opportunities for the Garo tribes in Meghalaya. Like the ANVC, one of its claimed objectives is the demand for a separate Garo State. The group is primarily active in Dainadubi and Williamnagar in East Garo Hills, and Dalu in West Garo Hills.

Peace Initiatives

After the terrorist groups refused to heed the State Government's repeated appeals for a negotiated settlement, the Church was seen as a potential mediator in the ongoing conflict. The Church leaders, under the

banner of Shinong Khasi Jaintia Church Leaders' Forum (SKJCL), had offered their services to the State Government to initiate talks with terrorist groups, especially the HNLC. However, there has been little response from the insurgents of this group, who have accused the political establishment of a 'lack of sincerity' towards solving contentious issues.

Peace efforts with the ANVC, on the other hand, have been more successful, as the outfit has been open to the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Government. In fact, it started a dialogue with the Mizoram Chief Minister, Zoramthanga, and the Intelligence Bureau Director, K.P. Singh, in Bangkok in January 2003. However, no further dialogue has taken place since. On September 5, 2003, Chief Minister D.D. Lapang handed over a letter to the President of the Garo Baptist Convention (GBC), Grover C.R. Marak, authorizing him to negotiate with the ANVC. The ANVC has, however, continued to maintain that talks would have to centre on the issue of the creation of a separate Garoland (Land of the Garo tribes).

Political instability in the State has also been a prime factor in the failure to resolve the insurgency problem. Successive Governments have their own approaches, with each new phase being abandoned once power changes hands. In December 2001, the then State Chief Minister, F. A. Khonglam, promised to set up a Cabinet sub-committee to help the Government bring ANVC and HNLC to the negotiating table. With Khonglam's departure from the seat of power, the proposal lapsed into political oblivion.

NOTES

1. One maund = 82.28 pounds.
2. The figures are from Mackenzie (1884).
3. Paul Lyngdoh's interview, *Frontline*, 17-6-94.
4. *The Frontline*, 17-6-94.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Lyngdoh resigned on 6 March 2000, and Ek Mawlong, the erstwhile Speaker, took over as Chief Minister on the 8th, heading a 30-member Coalition Ministry.⁴⁶
7. *HT*, 24-8-98 and *India Today*, 28-9-98.
8. *Frontline*, 13-10-2000.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Frontline*, 13-4-01.
11. *Exp.*, 14-12-03.
12. *HT*, 25-10-03.
13. *Exp.* of 1-11-02 and 4-5-03 and *The Hindu* of 19-6-02.
14. Ram Chandra Guha : *TOI*, 23-11-99.