Durable Disorder

Understanding the Politics of Northeast India

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

SECTION IV
*The Life and Times of
the United Liberation Front of Assam*

SECTION V
Policy as an Invitation to Violence

SECTION VI
Epilogue

Preface to the Paperback Edition

The first edition of *Durable Disorder* received a generous reception. A number of reviews made me think afresh about certain issues. I shall resist the temptation to address them all. However, I shall take up one theme: the problem of the insider/outsider and the politics of location. It has been bit of a surprise that this issue that I addressed only reluctantly in my book, *India Against Itself*[1], continues to engage readers of *Durable Disorder*. Interest in the politics of location is perhaps inevitable given the concerns of contemporary theory, especially those of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and feminism. Once 'the Enlightenment individual model of the subject as pure disembodied, evanescent, transcendent "mind",' is discarded, says feminist literary critic Kathleen M. Kirby, it becomes 'impossible to imagine the subject except in some yet-to-be-specified relation to real space. We can't overlook ... the difference that occupying different geographical or cultural spaces can forge in making what might have seemed like abstract, "objective", unlocated evaluations.'[2]

Nandana Datta's review of *India Against Itself* puts the politics of location at the centre of her engagement with my work. The book, she says, raises the 'vexed problem of insider/outsider, and recharges the idea of location. Who speaks? For whom? About what?' Can one 'really be inside and outside, participant and observer, at the same time?'[3] The politics of location is a major theme in her review of *Durable Disorder* as well.[4] However, while Datta argues that *India Against Itself* takes 'the classic panoptic viewpoint' with a claim to 'an edge in interpretation' and even objectivity that comes from 'the site of discursive production (Bard College, New York),'[5] others read the same book as an insider's account, evidently because the book, unlike most writings on the subject, is not embedded in a state security discourse.

Must physical location always determine an author's locus of enunciation? While physical space is important, as is the unequal distribution of epistemic power in the world, the question of perspectives and the choices we make as thinkers, are not insignificant. Considering the geography of hegemonies, the 'outside,' after all, can be an enabling space. Latin American literary and cultural critic Walter Mignolo's idea of border thinking lays out some possibilities. One can engage in border thinking 'from' Northeast India so to speak, from inside as well as outside Northeast India.[6]

Northeast India for some is a field of study; and many others produce knowledge about insurgencies and identity politics in the region that is embedded in the discourse of state security. There is a difference between those activities and the work of intellectuals and writers—whether inside or outside the region—for whom Northeast India is a place of historical and political struggle. For the latter, the region is also a location of theoretical thinking. Nandana Datta's own work exemplifies it. Northeast India, to partially paraphrase Mignolo, 'produces not only "cultures" to be studied by anthropologists and ethnohistorians,' and insurgencies and identity politics—about which national security managers and security experts produce knowledge in the service of power—'but also intellectuals who generate theories and reflect on their own culture and history.'[7] It is because readers recognize different loci of enunciation that *India Against Itself* is also read as, 'a Northeastern vision of itself, where the region was the focal point rather than a distant borderland to somebody else's idea of "India".'[8]

There is another dimension to the politics of location in the particular context of Northeast India. There are growing tensions in the world between an interconnected transnational world and 'national and ethnic sensibilities and ideologies.' While it may be possible to transcend the limits of state and non-state nationalisms through transnational alliances, transnational action carries the dangers of making abstract demands for justice, and insufficiently attending to local interests and needs.[9] Transnational advocacy networks have become important political actors.[10] But adapt as they do to the differential capacity of contemporary states to assert the prerogatives of national sovereignty, Northeast India is mostly an out-of-the-way place in the optic of such networks. Thus as recently as September 2005, a *New York Times* correspondent writing on a decades-old civil conflict from Manipur, reported that foreign journalists must have permits to 'even set foot in the state', and that the Indian government rarely issues them. Nor are research visas granted to foreign scholars to study Northeast India.

Defending the 'virtual prohibition' against foreign journalists, India's home minister told the reporter from the *New York Times*—not exactly a publication that lacks in prestige and influence—that the restrictions are there 'because you are so interested'.[11]

Had the geopolitics of transparency not placed Northeast India outside the optic of transnational advocacy networks, the interest of such networks might have created opportunities for transcending the limits of state nationalism. However, given this condition, thinking transnationally can be an enabling exercise in border thinking, and my efforts to engage in it are probably not unconnected to my biographical circumstances.[12] David Kettler, a scholar of Karl Mannheim, describes me as a 'contemporary utopian thinker' since I utilize utopia as a 'discovery process' for projecting possibilities beyond a given reality. He sees me as making use of utopia in thinking through the Northeast Indian predicament—'one of those bloody and intractable situations that mark our time and that make many of us profoundly uncomfortable about the very topic of utopia.'[13] It is in this spirit that I imagine transnational solutions, including the softening of national borders, and the formation of a cross-border region uniting Northeast India with its neighbours across international borders.

Historian Sudhir Chandra finds that my '"utopian" readiness to consider cross-border formations' frees my work 'from the fallacy of realism which often warps not only official and popular but also academic thinking on such fraught and emotive public issues.'[14] Sarmila Bose also finds my transnational policy ideas 'based on fundamental shifts in the concept of "sovereignty" in recent years and comparative practice in other regions of the world,' worth pursuing.[15] But the same ideas have drawn sharp criticism from a traditional Indian Left perspective that worries about a reinvigorated western imperialism, bent on subverting India's nation-building efforts. The politics of location is the unspoken sub-text of this Left nationalist critique of my work.

M.S. Prabhakara provides the political–intellectual context for his critique as follows:

far from being dead, colonialism is very much alive, not merely in the form of neo-colonialism but is re-vivifying itself in its classic form, with agendas of recolonisation active and even triumphant in many so-called 'post-colonial' states. India is very much on this agenda; northeastern India is even more so.

He finds in *Durable Disorder* a 'scorning and dismissive approach to anything approaching "nation building".' He reminds readers of the violent history

of nation-building in the West, and of colonialism and genocide that were central to the consolidation of the US, as a nation-state. That I do not refer to this grim story and that 'the rage is all against the admittedly flawed, and still muddled, Indian experiment' are a source of suspicion. Taking exception to my suggestion that the international discourse of the rights of indigenous peoples could bring new ideas for resolving the Naga conflict, Prabhakara asks somewhat conspiratorially, who is the master of this 'global discourse,' and 'who articulates it, their linkages with the agenda of recolonisation of which most of them ... are active auxiliaries.'[16] With the implication that violence in the pursuit of nation-building is inevitable, and justifiable in the name of the greater common good, Prabhakara seems to suggest that builders of 'new nations' have to follow the footsteps of their European predecessors. The looming imperialist threat, he appears to suggest, might make it incumbent upon anti-imperialists to take the side of nation builders, no matter what the human costs.

A traditional Left perspective also appears to make Stuart Corbridge uncomfortable about the transnational imaginings in *Durable Disorder*. He finds it odd that I praise

the Promethean visions of Jeffrey Sachs. After telling us that the peoples in the northeast have suffered terribly at the hands of a militaristic and developmental state—a state that sought to nationalize space—Baruah looks to road building and market-led economic growth as antidotes to the problems of a land-locked region. It is an odd punch-line to an important and otherwise thoughtful book.[17]

One cannot ignore Prabhakara's explicit, and Corbridge's implicit, warnings about the geopolitical machinations of the new imperialism. But border thinking 'from' Northeast India may not permit the luxury of registering one's anti-imperialist credentials if it must include a defence of the Indian national security manager's narrow imaginary of nation-building that, as metaphor, becomes little more than 'a handsome neoclassical building in which political prisoners scream in the basement.'[18]

Those 'thinking from' Northeast India must take seriously the daily humiliations and violations suffered by the region's common people as the result of decades of low-intensity warfare, and the means through which they forge ways to deal with them. Literature and the arts have become a site for sorting out moral and ethical dilemmas. There are no simple pro-insurgent or anti-insurgent voices in today's Northeast India, as the state security discourse would have it, but only complex dilemmas with no easy

choices. Here is how a contemporary Assamese novel deals with them. In Rita Choudhury's novel, *Ei Xomoi, Xei Xomoi* (These Times, Those Times), one gets a sense of the 'pleasures of agency' that are part of the story of the rebellions in the region. Such pleasures, to borrow the words of a political scientist writing on insurgency in another part of the world, come from 'the positive effect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride from the successful assertion of intention.'[19] Choudhury's novel has a scene where a young man from a poor rural Assamese household joins a rebel army. As a mark of traditional Assamese respect and hospitality, the daughter of the host family offers *Gamosas*—handwoven Assamese towels—on a *Bota*—a traditional Assamese bell metal tray—to the rebel leader, Aranya and his comrades. The mother kneels and lowers her head to the floor showing respect to her rebel guests, and says: 'you men are fighting for the country. We are poor people. We don't have much to offer. We have three sons. Here is our youngest one: Mukut. Make him part of the liberation army. Fight the war and rescue us.'[20]

That passage in the novel alludes to a period when the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was at the height of its influence and popularity. But today any discussion of ULFA generates ethical debates. Thus the novel's protagonist wonders: 'Aranya and his friends took the path of armed struggle and entered another life. Despite her wishes, Aditi [now a college professor] did not. Her life took another direction. What would have happened had she joined the rebels? Would she have turned into a terrorist from a revolutionary?' There is a conversation in the novel among a few young people, following a protest demonstration against rebel violence in which they participate. It revolves around the question of whether it is okay to protest the killing of innocent people by rebels, while maintaining silence on the torture and abuse of civilians by security forces. 'Aren't our protests one-sided?', asks one of them. 'The rebels are at war with India and not with the common people. They have no right to murder common people,' responds another protester. 'But the rebels too are "our folks",' says another, and 'they are hunted down and killed mercilessly; they are tortured and then murdered. To kill like that, is against humanity. We cannot but grieve when we watch young men from our own homes being killed like that.'[21]

The practices of counter-insurgency portrayed in *Ei Xomoi, Xei Xomoi* raise questions about the exercise of sovereignty in our times. As Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat put it, political theorists assume that the age of rights made 'the exercise of sovereignty in its arcane and violent

forms' a thing of the past. In this understanding, the spectacles of public torture and public executions of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, gave way to what Michel Foucault had termed 'concealed sovereign violence' within thick prison walls. The spectacular on-the-scene punishments, said Foucault, sought 'not so much to reestablish balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength.' Counterinsurgency operations in contemporary Assam include de facto public executions of suspected rebels by Indian soldiers in full view of villagers, sometimes even of family members. During the early part of 2007, while watching local news bulletins on television in Northeast India, I repeatedly encountered such images. As if the audience were made to watch the re-emergence of arcane and violent forms of sovereignty, where, as Foucault would have it, punishments are meted out as 'spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess.'[22] The experience helped me appreciate the agonised debates and dilemmas about state and rebel violence in contemporary Assamese fiction. They seem to point to ways by which society tries to deal with violence that it cannot control. The Northeast Indian city of Guwahati in early 2007, where I encountered those disturbing images on television, read newspaper reports of a reinvigorated counterinsurgency campaign by the Indian army in Upper Assam, and caught up with the latest Assamese fiction and poetry, was as good a location as any to think theoretically about the re-emergence of the arcane and violent forms of sovereignty in our times, not just in Northeast India, but in other parts of the world as well.

I have chosen to reflect on a single theme raised by a few readers. I have learnt from my critics on other matters as well. My ideas have gone beyond the positions that I take in this book. Readers may be interested in some of my more recent formulations in a forthcoming publication.[23]

Readers might have expected this edition to be updated with recent developments. However, it does not make much sense to update a collection of previously published articles, especially essays that were included because they evoke the mood of the times in which they were written. There are no changes in the book from the hardback edition, though I take the opportunity to correct mistakes. I am grateful to Rakhee Kalita—a critical and careful reader of my work—for her thoughts on what this preface could address, and for pointing out errors that had crept into the earlier edition. Apart from her, Ananya Vajpeyi and Zilkia Janer had commented on previous

drafts. I would like to acknowledge their contribution to giving the preface its present form.

March 2007
Guwahati/New York

Notes

[1] Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[2] Kathleen M. Kirby, 'Thinking Through the Boundary: The Politics of Location, Subjects and Space,' *Boundary 2* 20 (2) 1993, pp. 174–5.

[3] Nandana Datta, review of *India Against Itself* in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5 (3), August 2003, p. 459.

[4] Nandana Datta, review of *Durable Disorder* in *Seminar*, New Delhi, Issue No. 550 (Issue on Gateway to the East), June 2005, pp. 70–2.

[5] Datta, review of *India Against Itself*, p. 459.

[6] The ideas in this paragraph draw on the work of Walter D. Mignolo. On the concepts of locus of enunciation, epistemic power, border thinking and thinking from, see his *Local Histories/Global Designs*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 5–6, 114–16 and *The Idea of Latin America*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 43–4.

[7] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, p. 5.

[8] Sarmila Bose, 'The Northeast Exception' (review of *Durable Disorder*), *The Hindu*, Chennai, 22 November 2005.

[9] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, pp. 187–8.

[10] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998.

[11] Somini Sengupta and Hari Kumar, 'Unending Civil Conflict Makes Life Grim in Indian State,' *New York Times*, 2 September 2005.

[12] A number of reviewers of *Durable Disorder* have pointed this out. See M. Khogen Singh's review in *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 23 January 2005 and Pradip Phanjoubam's review in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40 (10), 5 March 2005.

[13] David Kettler, 'Utopia as Discovery Process,' *Canadian Journal of Sociology Online*, January–February, 2006, http://www.cjsonline.ca/soceye/utopia.html (date of access: 27 March 2007).

[14] Sudhir Chandra, 'Understanding the Problem of Northeast India,' *India Review*, 6 (1), January–March, 2007, p. 47.

[15] Bose, 'The Northeast Exception.'

[16] M.S. Prabhakara, 'States of the Nation,' (review of *Durable Disorder*), *Frontline*, Chennai, 22 (7), 8 April 2005, pp. 76–7.

Preface

Northeast India's troubled post-colonial history does not fit easily into a standard narrative of democracy in India. A number of armed conflicts smoulder in this frontier region: the outside world is aware of a few of them, but only people living in remote war zones—and paying a price with their blood and tears—know the others. Reports of alleged brutality by security forces and private militias, and of popular protests against such brutality, make their way into the Indian media from time to time. But they do not capture national attention long enough to provoke serious debates and soul-searching. The region seems distant from the hearts and minds of many Indians: its lush green landscape evokes the picture of another part of monsoon Asia, and the local people, in the eyes of many, look racially different. An undifferentiated picture of nameless 'insurgencies' and Indian soldiers engaged in the defence of 'the nation' dominate popular impressions of the region. This is hardly the climate for an informed and vigorous national debate on nearly four decades of failed policy.

It is difficult to reconcile the picture of dozens of low-intensity armed conflicts with the textbook idea that democracies are better able to peacefully resolve conflicts than non-democracies. While elections punctuate the trajectory of armed conflicts they do little more than confer an air of normalcy on both insurgencies and counter-insurgency operations. Yet the costs of letting armed conflicts fester have been high. As Vaclav Havel reminds us, societies pay an incalculable surcharge when following periods that history seems suspended the moment arrives for 'life and history to demand their due' (Havel 1989: 34–5). But on the scales used by India's security establishment such charges do not register.

Parts of India's human rights record in the Northeast would have put many other democracies to shame. Yet our debates appear to be stuck on a 'which came first: chicken or the egg' kind of a controversy on whether the security forces, or the insurgents bear the responsibility for the sorry state of human rights, or whether the Indian army, or insurgents are the worse violators, or on whether the region's fledgling human rights groups have a pro-insurgent bias. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act specially designed for the Northeast and that has remained in force for decades—despite popular protests—makes serious violations of human rights possible. The trouble that scholars have to go through to obtain permissions to visit many parts of the region—research visas being virtually impossible to obtain—challenges official claims that a stable peace is round the corner. The supposed imperatives of counter-insurgency provide a cover for a virtual loot of the public treasury and a corrosion of values in public life. Insurgent groups routinely perform crucial state functions such as tax collection ('extortion') and the provision of security to their ethnic constituents. These aspects of Northeast India's informal governance structure seem to have more in common with some weak and failing states of Africa than with the powerful Indian state that those who talk of a resurgent India imagine it to be.

The book has grown out of my sense of puzzlement about how democratic India tolerates the Northeast Indian exception. The region's troubles are usually framed as the 'insurgency problem.' But whatever the value of debates between academics and military generals on how best to fight insurgencies, counter-insurgency as an intellectual stance has produced neither path-breaking scholarship nor political positions that are defensible on ethical and moral grounds. Nor has it succeeded in the goal it has set for itself, that is, ending armed conflicts.

Durable Disorder is an invitation to think about the region's political troubles outside the hackneyed paradigm of 'insurgency'. It is an effort to think beyond the developmentalist mind-set that turns a blind eye to today's sufferings in the name of abstractions such as nation-building and development. I hope it is a step towards rescuing academic and policy discourse from the iron-grip of colonial ideas about castes and tribes; languages and dialects; and hills and plains—often dressed up these days as 'ethnic studies'. Many nineteenth and early twentieth century British scholar-administrators would have been astounded, and embarrassed by the appeal made more than a century later, to their often tentative ideas. *Durable*

Disorder is a call for a critical engagement with India's Northeast policy, keeping in mind Mrinal Miri's admonition that the idea of a nation having a 'policy' towards a part of itself is odd (Miri 2002). Are Northeast India's troubles a sign of cracks along a racial fault line between India and its Northeast?

Much of the material in this book was published earlier, mostly as articles in journals and magazines. The primary reason for reprinting them is practical: to make them available in India, especially those that were published in European and American journals to which very few people have access. However, I could not avoid the dilemmas that all writers who gather previously published articles into a book must confront. If the articles need a lot of revision, as Clifford Geertz once said, 'they probably ought not to be reprinted at all, but should be replaced with a wholly new article getting the damn thing right.' And 'writing changed views back into earlier works' is a problematical enterprise. It is not wholly cricket, said Geertz, and it 'obscures the development of ideas that one is supposedly trying to demonstrate in collecting the essays in the first place' (Geertz 1973: viii).

In revising these articles I chose a middle path. The first end note to each chapter indicates when and where the original version was published. I left the arguments of the original articles intact (except for a change in a key term in Chapter 6 that I explain in endnote 3 of the chapter). Readers will easily recognize how my ideas have changed over time. I eliminated the background material that Indian readers would have found unnecessary. Certain articles, however, needed updating. For instance, the argument about 'Generals as Governors' in Chapter 3 would have been unpersuasive without some reference to developments since 2001. While rewriting it, I took the opportunity to expand parts of the essay, especially a section on the history of ideas that had to be kept short in the original magazine essay.

It was difficult to decide whether to include Chapters 6 and 7 because they were written prior to my last book *India against Itself*. Readers of that book will find the argument familiar. But a couple of reasons weighed in favour of including them. The articles are central to the theme of *Durable Disorder*. Written in the early 1990s, the chapters evoke the mood of the times. That section of the book aims at showing what happened over time to the politics of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that once enjoyed significant public sympathy. There is also a practical consideration: those two articles are in considerable demand.

I have collected a lot of debt in writing this book, from the time when each chapter was conceived to preparing them for publication in their present form. The Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development in Guwahati, Assam, and Bard College in Annandale on Hudson, New York provided the material conditions and the intellectual space. Chapter 10 grew out of the task given to me at the OKD Institute of defining the intellectual mission of its Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS]. In addition, while at the institute, I wrote the introductory chapter and got the manuscript ready for publication. I am grateful to Mrinal Miri, Madan P. Bezbaruah, A.C. Bhagabati, Jayanta Madhab, Abu Naser Said Ahmed, and Bishnu Mohapatra for inviting me to the institute and for facilitating my work.

Setting up CENISEAS has given me the opportunity to interact with a new generation of talented young people working on the region. Among them are Sanjay Barbora, Anindita Dasgupta, and Boddhisattva Kar. My conversations with them and with CENISEAS Fellows Arup Jyoti Das, Bhupen Das, Uddipana Goswami, Sanjeeb Kakati, Abinash Lahkar, Mriganka Madhukaillya, Sukanya Sarma, Suranjan Sarma, Pritima Sarma, and Priyam Krishna Sinha have been a source of intellectual energy that speeded up the book. Ratna Bhuyan's assistance was invaluable in getting the manuscript ready for the publisher. Without Kalindra Dev Choudhury's competent handling of CENISEAS responsibilities and Jyoti Khataniar's conscientious work habits, I would not have been able to devote time to this book. I have been fortunate in being able to count on the support of family members—Renu Baruah, Ranjib and Deepti Baruah; Karuna and Surabhi Sarma; Papari Baruah; Prantor and Sashi Baruah—and of an old friend Pankaj Thakur.

While the book took its final shape in Guwahati, most of the chapters were first written while teaching at Bard College. Bard's innovative curriculum and the quality of its engagement with the world gave me the space to stay engaged with Northeast India. The support of Leon Botstein, Michèle Dominy, and that of my colleagues in the Political Studies and the Asian Studies programmes, have been crucial in this enterprise. Mario Bick, Diana Brown, and David Kettler have read almost every word I have written.

A number of chapters got written initially in response to invitations from various institutions. Among the individuals behind these invitations are: B.G. Karlsson of the University of Uppsala, Sweden (Chapter 1), Jürg Helbling and Danilo Geiger of the University of Zürich, Switzerland

(Chapter 2), Kanak Dixit of *Himal* magazine, Kathmandu, Nepal and Anindita Dasgupta (Chapter 3), David G. Timbermann of the Asia Foundation's project 'Separatism and Autonomy in Asia' (Chapter 8), Sandhya Goswami and Bolin Hazarika of the North East India Political Science Association (Chapter 9), and Jatin Hazarika and N.K. Das of the Assam Branch of the Indian Institute of Public Administration (Chapter 10). From their conception to their appearing as chapters of this book they have benefited from various sources such as the responses I have received at conferences and seminars where I had presented earlier versions. The suggestions of anonymous reviewers and the work of editors of publications where the chapters had come out as articles are reflected in this book.

My friendship with Jupiter Yambem had for many years nourished my interest in Northeast India. Jupiter grew up in Manipur—the most troubled of Northeast Indian states. He died on 11 September 2001 at the World Trade Center. Since then there are daily reminders of the dangers of a security-obsessed mindset, and of nationalism and patriotism, entrapping us into denying the humanity of those who do not resemble us. This book, I hope, will create some awareness that India might be faced with such a danger in its troubled relationship with the Northeast.

I am grateful to Neel Pawan Barua for permitting me to see allusions to Northeast India's durable disorder in his untitled 1997 painting and for letting me use it on the cover of this book.

In my journeys between the United States and India, Kalpana Raina and Sabyasachi Bhattacharyya, formerly of New York and presently of Mumbai, have been my soulmates. Our friendship has been a driving force in my engagement with India. Zilkia Janer left New York to be with me in Guwahati—a difficult, and even lonely, place for someone working on Latin American literature and for whom the natural language of intellectual discourse is Spanish. She has been the first reader and critic of a lot of my writings. Her companionship has made a difference to my life and in being able to write this book.

September 2004   SANJIB BARUAH

SECTION I

Introduction

1

Towards a Political Sociology of Durable Disorder[1]

The haunting *Madhavi* escapes the rustle of spring
Acrid with the smell of gunpowder.

Chandra Kanta Murasingh, 2003

These essays, originally written as journal articles, lectures and conference papers, seek to understand the causes, and the meaning and significance of a pattern of political violence in Northeast India that can no longer be seen as only temporary and aberrant. Deaths, injuries, and humiliations resulting from 'insurgencies' and 'counter-insurgency operations', as well as the hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure have become a part of the texture of everyday life in the region. They coexist, somewhat awkwardly, with elections and elected governments, a free press, an independent judiciary and investments in the name of development—in sum, the institutions and practices of a normal democracy and a developmentalist state.

For Indian democracy, maintaining a sustained capacity for counter-insurgency operations has meant the institutionalization of authoritarian practices that, though localized, is rather jarring. The book focuses on the formal and informal structures of governance and the democracy deficit—aspects of the region's political life that receives little systematic attention. Three of the chapters centre around the life and times of the United Liberation Front of Assam, and another is about the conflict between the Indian Government and the Nagas: one of the world's oldest continuing armed conflicts under suspended animation since 1997. The cultural politics that animate the militias of the region and their relationship to their

constituencies and to 'mainstream' social and political forces is a theme that runs through a number of the chapters. A few chapters were originally published in journals in different parts of the world; the volume is intended to make them easily available, especially to readers in India. Since the chapters often reflect the mood of the times in which they were written, I have decided not to revise them in any substantive way except to update some of the information.

'Northeast India' as a Category

Northeast India has been known this way since a radical redrawing of the region's political map in the 1960s. It was a hurried exercise in political engineering: an attempt to manage the independentist rebellions among the Nagas and the Mizos and to nip in the bud as well as pre-empt, radical political mobilization among other discontented ethnic groups. From today's vantage point this project of political engineering must be pronounced a failure. The story of what is commonly referred to as the reorganization of Assam and the advent of what I call a cosmetic federal regional order and the introduction of the term 'Northeast India' into official usage is recounted in Chapter 2, 'Nationalizing Space: Cosmetic Federalism and the Politics of Development'.

Eight of the ten chapters were written since the publication of my book *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* in 1999 (Baruah 1999).[2] That book's focus was Assam of the British colonial period and of the early post-colonial period—the 1950s and part of the 1960s—when it used to include five of the seven states of today's Northeast India, as well as the smaller Assam of the last three decades. In this volume, I explore the politics of militancy in Northeast India more widely, giving attention to areas both inside and outside the borders of what is called Assam today.

Partly in order not to fetishize a category of political engineering, I did not make 'Northeast India' the explicit focus of *India Against Itself*. However, since governments, political parties, and the media have come to view the area as a region it is useful to take it as a unit of analysis at least for certain purposes. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that an official region does not necessarily imply a regional consciousness corresponding to it.

The term Northeast India points to no more than the area's location on India's political map. Such generic locational place-names are attractive

to political engineers because they evoke no historical memory or collective consciousness. Indeed it is perhaps a reflection of the lack of emotional resonance of the term that in everyday conversations one hears the English word 'Northeast' and not the available translations of the word into the local languages. People tend to use the English term even when speaking or writing a regional language. Unlike place-names that evoke cultural or historical memory, the term Northeast India cannot easily become the emotional focus of a collective political project. In that sense the term might share a political rationale not unlike that of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and is unlike the historical regions of the subcontinent. Yet it is perhaps not impossible that the category might some day be successfully incorporated into a 'place-making strategy'[3] of an oppositional political project.

The Militias of Northeast India

The sheer number of militias in Northeast India is extraordinary. Indeed it might sometimes appear that any determined young man[4] of any of the numerous ethnic groups of the region can proclaim the birth of a new militia, raise funds to buy weapons or procure them by aligning with another militia and become an important political player. According to one count, Manipur tops the list of militias with 35, Assam is second with 34 and Tripura has 30, Nagaland has four and Meghalaya checks in with three militias (ICM 2002). However, the list lumps together militias with widely different levels of organizational strength and political influence and thus it cannot be read as a quantitative indicator of the challenge posed by militias in the different states.

Ethnic ties in Northeast India do not neatly coincide with state boundaries, especially given the nature of the boundaries between states shaped by the political logic of what, in Chapter 2, I describe as a cosmetic federal regional order. Thus while the above list suggests that there are no militias in Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, these states are not free from militancy with roots outside the state. Naga militias have significant influence among the Nagas that inhabit two districts of Arunachal Pradesh: Changlang and Tirap, though their inclusion in the category Naga is contested especially by Arunachali politicians. Ethnic groups based in Tripura and Manipur such as Reang, Brue, and Hmar have both a physical and political presence in Mizoram.

The number of militias in any state can change overnight and it is not proportional to the political challenge that militancy presents. The small number of militias in Nagaland, for instance, only reflects the fact that the political turf in the heartland of India's oldest insurgency is fully divided between two of the four militias that make the list.

Most, but not all insurgent groups can be described as ethnic militias. Indeed some of the names themselves loudly proclaim the names of the ethnic groups that they seek to defend, e.g. the Karbi National Volunteers, Tiwa National Revolutionary Force, Kuki National Front, Hmar Revolutionary Front or Zomi Revolutionary Volunteers. Even when they do not have such names it is quite clear that they are militias mobilized along ethnic lines. However, while the term ethnic militia may accurately describe the support base and even the agendas of many insurgent groups, the term can be misleading for militias that have a civic national project and seek to cultivate a multiethnic support base.

Often the names of militias point to agendas of liberating territories. Some of the place names used by militias can be found on a contemporary map as in the case with the United Liberation Front of Assam or National Socialist Council of Nagalim [Naga homeland], though the territories in question or the names may not coincide with the ones on a map. Sometimes the place names, that the names of militias indicate, are long lost in history, e.g. Kamatapur Liberation Army (of the Koch Rajbongshis), and the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (of the Khasis). At other times the names of homelands are new and have a modern ring to them, but are based on particular constructions of the past, e.g. the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force. Manipur's United National Liberation Front and People's Liberation Army do not refer to Manipur by name, but another militia, the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), refers to Manipur's historical name Kangleipak. There is, in addition, a large number of Islamicist militias mostly in Assam.

Even people living in the region may not have heard of all the ethnic groups in whose names these struggles are being waged. Well-informed Indians may have heard of a couple of militias or the names of one or two of the ethnic groups whose cause militias proclaim. But to say that outsiders may not have even heard of them is to entirely miss the point of ethno-national political mobilization. If they are about what Charles Taylor calls the politics of recognition (Taylor 1994), to say that no one has ever heard of the Karbis or Tiwas of Assam or the Hmars or Zomis of Manipur may at

least partly explain why their leaders feel the need to make their existence known.

The Northeast Indian Ethnoscape[5]

Considering the large number of ethnic groups that are politicized and militarized in Northeast India today, the region's ethnoscape requires some explanation. Everywhere in the world those areas that did not go through the process of standardization associated with the rise and consolidation of nation-states, e.g. the emergence of the print media, national languages, widespread literacy, and national educational systems, are perhaps significantly more diverse than areas that did. In the latter case, much of the traditional cultural and linguistic diversity has been destroyed as a result of the processes of standardization associated with nation-building and state-building. However, the notion of diversity being destroyed once for all appears theoretically more problematical today than it did a few years ago. Such notions are clearly rooted in biological metaphors of cultures and languages as forms of life and thus being susceptible to 'death'. The following summary of a debate on the 'emerging linguistics of endangered languages'— the political activism associated with the agenda of preserving endangered languages—illustrates some of the theoretical problems with which recent scholars are engaged:

In different ways these observers all argue that 'language death' is a misnomer for what is actually a 'language shift,' the sort of cumulative process of language change that results from the self-interested, rational decisions that individuals make in the course of their lives, which happen to include choices between the transmission of one language rather than other. These arguments, founded on the premise that speakers are autonomous, knowledgeable social agents, can in turn be rebutted by calling into question easy distinctions between self-interested 'choice' and institutional 'coercion,' especially in circumstances of rapid sociolinguistic change (Errington 2003: 725).

To say that Northeast India has not gone through those processes of standardization, that accompanied the consolidation of the nation-state in Europe, is not to suggest that such a trajectory would have been desirable. Nor is it meant to take attention away from the shifts and counter-shifts in language use and the language revitalization movements that are part of today's vibrant ethnoscape. In any case, the relatively weak impact of the processes of standardization does not make Northeast India very different

from other parts of India. In order to explain the region's remarkable ethnoscape of today, therefore, one would have to give closer attention to certain specificities of the region.

In Chapter 5 while discussing the Naga independentist movement, I trace Northeast India's ethnoscape to the particular ecology and the history of state formation. I draw attention to the dynamic between the hill peoples and the lowland states in pre-colonial times. From the perspective of the states in the lowlands, the hills where historically numerous cultural forms prevailed, are best seen as a non-state space to use James C. Scott's term (Scott 2000)—'illegible space' despite the existence of significant local political formations. Traditionally manpower in the region was in short supply and thus wars were not about territory, but about capturing slaves. The ethnoscape of the hills that confuses most outsiders has an affinity with the logic of slash and burn agriculture, the common mode of livelihood in these hills. The dispersed and mobile populations could not be captured for corvee labour and military service by the labour-starved states of the plains; nor could tax collectors monitor either the number of potential subjects or their holdings and income. Yet historically, the non-state space in the hills and the state space in the lowlands were not disarticulated. People continually moved from the hills to the plains and from the plains to the hills.

If wars produced movements in either direction, the attractions of commerce and what the lowlanders think of as civilization may have generated a flow of hill peoples downwards. The extortionist labour demands of the lowland states and, the vulnerability of wet-rice cultivation to crop failure, epidemics and famines produced flight to the hills where there were more subsistence alternatives. While in other parts of the world, such movements may have produced an ethnoscape of larger ethnonational formations, here what James C. Scott calls the 'lived essentialism' between the hill 'tribes' and the valley civilizations, that is their stereotypes about each other, remained a powerful organizer of peoples' lives and thoughts. The cultural distance between lowlanders and highlanders has been reproduced in the region's ethnoscape, though it is a continuum—no sharp line of demarcation separates them.

A Symbiosis between State and Society

A historical-institutionalist perspective that connects developments in the realm of the state with developments in society might provide some insight

into Northeast India's contemporary ethnoscape. In the case of the tradition of voluntarism that plays such an important role in American political life, albeit somewhat eroded in recent years, Theda Skocpol argues that it can be understood in terms of a 'mutual symbiosis of state and society' and not as a case of society developing apart from or instead of the state, as many American conservatives like to think (Skocpol 1999: 3).

Conservatives may imagine that popular voluntary associations and the welfare state are contradictory opposites, but historically they have operated in close symbiosis. Voluntary civic federations have both pressured for the creation of public social programs, and worked in partnership with government to administer and expand such programs after they were established (Skocpol 1996: 22).

Actually existing civil society, it is now widely recognized, does not just include associations that might conform to a liberal democratic vision of the world. But many liberal analysts seem reluctant to separate their vision of a good society from their definitions of civil society.[6] However, for my purposes actually existing civil society includes organizations that liberal democrats might despise, e.g. illiberal cultural and social organizations and closely-knit ethnic solidarity networks. If ethnic militias are part of the actually existing civil societies of Northeast India the phenomenon can be explained in terms of a mutual symbiosis between state and society and not as a phenomenon that is independent of the state. To a significant extent the ethnic militias of Northeast India are responses to, and artifacts of, official policy.

The process can be illustrated by the efforts of the descendants of tea workers in Assam today to claim the status of 'Scheduled Tribes'. They seek recognition of the ethno-linguistic categories of the official census—into which tea workers and their descendants living outside tea plantations are classified—as Scheduled Tribes.[7] The term 'tea tribes', as in the name of an organization such as the Assam Tea Tribes Students Association, underscores this aspiration. A section of them call themselves *Adivasi* or indigenous people emphasizing their roots in Jharkhand and other parts of India from where their forefathers had migrated more than a century ago. Adivasi activists point out that since their ethnic kin in their original habitats are recognized as Scheduled Tribes they should have the same status in Assam. There are now ethnic militias formed to defend Adivasi, i.e. indigenous people's rights, e.g. the Adivasi Cobra Force, Birsa Commando Force— named after an Adivasi hero—and Adivasi Suraksha Samiti (Adivasi Protection Committee).

India's protective discrimination regime creates the conditions for this political demand. 'Scheduled Tribe' status is seen as a passport to educational and public employment opportunities to which the descendants of tea workers have had limited access, and political mobilization is seen as the road to securing such status. Defending basic citizenship rights—even in a physical sense—in the face of the political mobilization by a rival ethnic community for an ethnic homeland has become an added rationale for this demand.

As I have described in Chapter 9, 'Citizens and Denizens', the practice of extending institutions intended to promote tribal self-governance and autonomy to particular scheduled tribes in specified territories—legitimizing the idea of ethnic homelands—has meant a de facto regime of two-tiered citizenship. This is in line with what is happening in the transnational arena in the realm of indigenous people's rights, though the ideas and categories that have shaped these institutions in Northeast India precede the transnationalization of the politics of indigenous people's rights.

Joseph Errington describes the coalescence of transnational activism in the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations as 'efforts to mobilize indigenousness as the basis of claims on behalf of communities whose members count as inheritors and stewards of particular locales and not just citizens living on segments of national territory. Aboriginality can be leveraged in this way into claims of ownership, trumping rights of access that might otherwise be claimed by and granted to encroaching "outsiders"' (Errington 2003: 724). Thus in four of the seven states of Northeast India—Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland—the lion's share of public employment, business and trade licenses, and even the right to contest for elected office are reserved for Scheduled Tribes legally considered indigenous to those states and the right of others to hold and exchange property rights in land is severely restricted. The vast majority of seats in three of these state legislatures—indeed all but one seat in the case of three legislatures—are reserved for candidates belonging to Scheduled Tribes.

For all practical purposes the model entails entitlement to jobs, business licenses and political positions for members of certain ethnic groups and subordinate status for others. Whatever its rationale, this model of two-tiered citizenship obviously imposes serious disadvantages on those that are not given the status of Scheduled Tribes within those territories. In a complex ethnoscape where there is talk of turning a territory into a homeland for specified ethnic groups and there are ethnic militias to back such demands,

political violence inevitably enters the picture. Political mobilization in support of homelands produces counter-mobilization by those who fear subordinate status in those homelands. This is the case with the Bodo demand for a homeland and the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council.

Ethnic assertion by Bodos and other Scheduled Tribes in Northeast India today has aspects that deserve celebration. For instance, recent years have seen a revival of Bodo language and culture. What a few years ago appeared to be an irreversible process of language loss now in retrospect seems to be only a temporary period of language subordination. The developments are nothing short of the overturning of Assamese and Bengali hegemony and the triumphant return of the language and culture of a subaltern group.[8] Yet given the two-tiered citizenship inherent in the ethnic homeland model, it is not surprising that the demand for a Bodo homeland has generated opposition by non-Bodo groups, many of them no less disadvantaged than the Bodos, and has strengthened demands for Scheduled Tribe status by some non-Bodo groups including Adivasis.

These conflicts underscore the dissonance between the ethnic homeland model and the actually existing political economy of the region. The origins of the Indian Constitution's Sixth Schedule—and implicit in it today is an ethnic homeland subtext—go back to British colonial efforts to create protected enclaves for 'aborigines' where they can be allowed to pursue their 'customary practices' including kinship and clan-based rules of land allocation. Extending a set of rules, originally meant for isolated aboriginal groups, to less and less isolated groups living along with other ethnic groups and that too in the profoundly transformed conditions of the twenty-first century can only produce a crisis of citizenship, leaving citizens with the choice of either seeking recognition as Scheduled Tribes in order to be able to enjoy ordinary citizenship rights in these ethnic homelands or accept de facto second class citizenship.

Seen through the prism of the global political economy, the migration of indentured labour to the tea plantations of Assam was part of the same nineteenth century migration that took Indian labour to plantations in various parts of the British Empire, such as Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, and South Africa. Whether a person landed in a tea plantation of Assam or in a plantation in Guyana or Mauritius was largely a function of which labour contractor he or she had signed up with. The Indian government today officially celebrates the Indian diaspora. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in New Delhi since January 2003 has begun honouring descendants of those

migrants to far-away shores, some who had even risen to become heads of governments of their countries. At the same time the descendants of those who had migrated to the plantations of Assam and remained within the borders of what is now India are reduced to defending their ordinary citizenship rights by organizing themselves into ethnic militias to claim tribal status. Many of them had become victims of violence committed by Bodo militants and were displaced from their homes. They remain in makeshift relief camps outside the view and care of international refugee advocacy organizations in order to save the Indian government from international embarrassment.

Whatever the transformed meaning of the term 'tribe' or 'indigenous people' in India today, efforts to claim tribal status by a community that had provided the muscle for the nineteenth century capitalist transformation of Assam, nearly a century-and-half after their forefathers had left their original habitat, is quite extraordinary. That people from this ethnic background could be physically displaced today as a result of another historically disadvantaged group's demand for an ethnic homeland, no matter how tragic the story of the latter's immiserization, is symptomatic of a crisis of citizenship that is a disturbing element in Northeast India's durable disorder.

If the demonstrated effectiveness of mobilization in support of ethnic homelands creates the conditions for the formation of rival ethnic militias, there are also examples of Indian intelligence and security agencies playing an active role in fomenting other ethnic militias. Since the activities of security agencies are not transparent it is difficult to find conclusive evidence of such complicity. However, newspapers of the region are rife with such speculations especially when ethnic militias favoured by security agencies attack rival ethnic militias that are known targets of counter-insurgency. In Chapter 8, I describe a private militia made up of former militants dependent on the government for their security, being used in vicious counter-insurgency operations against the United Liberation Front of Assam.

The saliency of ethnicity in the politics of Northeast India—the proliferation of ethnic agendas, ethnic militias, and of ethnic violence—therefore is not simply the passive reflection of Northeast India's peculiar ethnoscape, to a significant extent it is the result of a symbiotic relationship between state and society.

Beyond Militarism

Scholarly as well as policy-focused discussions of Northeast India today are often framed by the question of how to end insurgencies. However, counter-insurgency as an intellectual stance, with room left only for debating with military generals about differences on methods, has produced neither good scholarship nor ethically and morally defensible political positions. Rather than continuing to reinforce a false separation between 'insurgency' and the 'mainstream' of social and political life, I shall bring aspects of the ethnic militias, counter-insurgency operations, state-backed militias, developmentalist practices, and the deformed institutions of democratic governance together and suggest that for analytical purposes they can be seen as constituting a coherent whole that I will call durable disorder.[9]

A few apparent successes of counter-insurgency have permitted the assumption that each Northeast Indian insurgency could be eliminated some day by following the same old methods. But how valid is this premise? The Mizo insurgency, for example, is now a thing of the past. But there is enough happening in Mizoram and surrounding areas, where people share ethnic affinities with Mizos, that raise doubts about reading the Mizo Accord of 1986 exclusively as a success story. Mizoram's reputation vis-à-vis human rights today, in the words of a Mizo activist Vanramchuangi, 'has taken a severe beating among the world's rights activists because of the practice of mob rule in the state.' Among the examples of mob rule, he cites the role of supposed NGO activists in the forced eviction of Myanmarese refugees, the role of 'NGO vigilantes' in punishing alleged law-breakers including imposing fines and imprisoning them in steel cages. Vanramchuangi called for carrying out justice 'not by the public, but by legal means and through concerned authorities' (cited in *Telegraph* 2004a). In an important sense such practices are a legacy of the Mizo Accord and consistent with the logic of two-tiered citizenship inherent in the ethnic homeland model. The NGO vigilantism of Mizoram is often ethnically marked. The conditions for such vigilantism were to some extent inherent in the vision of an ethnic homeland that shaped the roadmap to end the Mizo insurgency a decade-and-a-half ago.

In the case of the United Liberation Front of Assam, the 'surrender' of many cadres, deaths of many in combat and the extra-judicial killing of many others, and the effects of the insurgency dividend on Assamese society have drastically cut back its size and influence. But how has it affected the

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Nationalizing Space

Cosmetic Federalism and the Politics of Development[1]

Arunachal Pradesh, a part of the eastern Himalayas with its breath-taking natural beauty and a sparse population, was until recently relatively insulated from processes associated with development. In no other part of the Himalayas, as Elizabeth M. Taylor (1996) points out, is there so much 'pristine forest and intact mega-biodiversity'. Many pre-industrial forms of production and exchange are still prevalent in Arunachal Pradesh (hereafter referred to as Arunachal). Many Arunachalis continue to practice 'semi-nomadic swidden horticulture, terraced wet agriculture, high montane pastoralism and traditional trade and barter'. The area is home to many endangered species including ten distinct species of pheasants, the great cats—tigers, leopards as well as clouded and snow leopards—and all three of the goat antelopes. It has 500 species of orchids, 52 species of rhododendron and 105 species of bamboo (Taylor 1996).

Arunachal is a part of one of the global 'hotspots' of biodiversity and its mountain eco-system is fragile. Indeed a case could be made for putting the area under a legal regime that would give priority to policies for protecting the interests of its indigenous peoples and to nature conservation. Even short of that, it is possible to outline a road to sustainable development that takes into account Arunachal's exceptional environmental wealth and its importance.

The late Indian environmentalist, Anil Agarwal once spoke of some of the ways in which Arunachal could have sustainable development 'even with a modern economic paradigm'. With relatively modest investments,

he argued, there exists in Arunachal the resource base for creating industries such as herbal products, high value bamboo products and eco-tourism that could reach external markets even with a limited transportation infra-structure, and at the same time significantly raise the per capita income of Arunachal's population of less than a million. On the other hand, the rapid building of roads, often seen as a prerequisite to development in order to connect Arunachal to national and international markets, carries enormous risks. If industry is slow to take off because of the lack of a local market, roads could become, in Agarwal's words, 'excellent corridors to siphon off the existing natural resource of the region, its forests'. Moreover, building roads on this mountain terrain is no minor engineering challenge: unless built very carefully, construction could be the cause of major landslides (Agarwal 1999).

Development Discourse Comes to Arunachal

However, neither the language in which Indian officials (including Arunachali politicians) now speak of Arunachal's future, nor the changes taking place on the ground, leave much room for optimism that Arunachal will be following anything other than a conventional developmentalist' trajectory—albeit with some concession to qualifiers such as 'sustainable' and, perhaps, a few nature conservation parks. Arunachal's former Chief Minister Mukut Mithi, for instance, described his main challenge as 'the overall development of the state, which has hardly any industrial infra-structure'. Mithi told journalists that the state's primary problem is communications and that his goal is to achieve 'a peaceful and prosperous Arunachal with equal opportunities and gainful employment for all' (cited in Chaudhuri 1999a). It may be difficult to quarrel with a democratically elected politician who proclaims such aspirations for his state, but the route by which Arunachali politicians have come to articulate such a vision of the future has a political history that deserves attention.

    This chapter will explore the ways in which the discourse of development has made its way to Arunachal. The goal of nationalizing a frontier space, I will argue, has been the major thrust of Indian policy vis-à-vis Arunachal and Northeast India as a whole. Subsequent sections of the essay will explore the way in which this national security driven process has led to creating a special regional dispensation of small and financially dependent states that in a forml sense are autonomous units of India's federal polity; in terms of

power vis-à-vis the central government, however, the form of federalism is little more than cosmetic. The logic of developmentalism is embedded in the institutions of the Indian state that have been put in place in pursuit of the goal of nationalizing space. Through demographic and other changes in the region the process has made India's everyday control over this frontier space more effective, but at significant social, environmental and political costs.

Former Chief Minister Mithi enthusiastically supported the construction of power generation projects, especially two mega hydroelectric projects on the Siang and Subansiri rivers, and several road-building projects including three Assam-Arunachal Pradesh inter-state roads. He also advocated the construction of a National Highway along the middle belt of Arunachal Pradesh with extensions covering large parts of the state (*Assam Tribune* 2000a).[3] It may be tempting to assume that the prime mover of these projects is the desire of Arunachalis,[4] expressed through their elected representatives. However, this way of imagining Arunachal's future has been built upon the groundwork of a complex political process. 'Underdevelopment' is not simply a self-evident ground reality about a place or a people. It is, as post-structuralists would argue, discursively constituted (see, for instance, Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; W. Sachs 1992). In the words of Sachs: 'Development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavor: it is a perception, which models reality; a myth, which comforts societies; and a fantasy, which unleashes passions' (W. Sachs 1992: 1). The privileging of discourse by post-structuralists is, of course open to criticism by those who emphasize the materiality of poverty and underdevelopment (see for instance, Kiely 1999; Little and Painter 1995). That debate lies beyond the scope of this article; this essay takes as its point of departure the post-structuralist insight that development discourse is not merely reflective, but is also constitutive of the condition of underdevelopment.

The discourse generated by developmentalist institutions constructs places and peoples as under-developed, creating a structure of knowledge around that object that makes the case for development seem self-evident (Ferguson 1990). In Arunachal, I would argue, development discourse is the product of the Indian state's push to nationalize the space of this frontier region. The developmentalist path that Arunachal has embarked upon is neither the result of a choice made by policy makers about what is best

for the well-being of the people of Arunachal, nor is it evidence of the inevitability of 'progress' and 'civilization'. Rather, it is the intended and unintended consequence of the Indian state's efforts to assert control over this frontier space and to make it a 'normal' part of India's national space.

The Changing Face of Northeast India

At the time of India's independence in 1947, the area that is now called Arunachal Pradesh was known as the North East Frontier Area, or NEFA. NEFA was a part of the province of Assam in the colonial era, but at the time of independence while it remained a part of Assam, it was separated from the control of the elected state government. The Governor of Assam headed the administration of NEFA operating as the Agent of the Indian President. Until the 1960s, when the process of dividing Assam into smaller states began, five of the seven states of Northeast India—-Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram—were part of the state of Assam.[5] The two other states that are now part of official Northeast India— Manipur and Tripura—were princely states under British colonial rule. They became 'Part C states' soon after independence and subsequently, Union Territories. In 1955, the States Reorganization Commission recommended not only that Assam's boundaries be maintained, but also that Manipur and Tripura be eventually merged with Assam. It was expected that NEFA would become fully a part of Assam.

Tribal areas make up the bulk of the territory of Northeast India. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution makes special provisions for the administration of what were then 'the Tribal Areas in Assam'. In the colonial period those tribal areas were mostly protected enclaves, where tribal peoples could supposedly pursue their 'customary practices' including kinship and clan-based rules of land allocation. They were called 'backward tracts', later replaced by the term 'excluded areas'—so called because they were excluded from the operation of laws applicable in the rest of British-controlled India.

The Sixth Schedule provides for autonomous districts and autonomous regions within those districts with elected councils with powers to regulate customary law, to administer justice in limited cases and to determine the occupation or use of land and the regulation of shifting cultivation. At the time of the inauguration of the Constitution in 1950 some tribal areas were to have elected councils immediately, but other tribal areas that were largely un-administered during colonial times, or where state institutions

were least present—mostly today's Arunachal and a part of Nagaland—were considered to be not quite ready for those institutions. The administration of these areas was to be temporarily carried out directly from Delhi with the Governor of Assam acting as the agent of the Indian President. In addition, the nineteenth century institution known as the Inner Line restricted the entry of outsiders (Indian citizens as well as foreigners) into what are now the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland.

When India gained independence in 1947, Naga leaders rejected the idea that their land could simply pass on to Indian and Burmese hands at the end of British colonial rule. The Naga movement thus began immediately after independence, and in the 1950s, the situation escalated into armed confrontation between rebels and India's armed forces (see Chapter 5). Efforts to constitute a distinct Naga administrative unit in response to the Naga rebellion began in 1957, although it was only in the early 1960s that the process of restructuring the region began in earnest. The state of Nagaland itself came into being in 1963, with India hoping to end the Naga war by creating stakeholders in the pan-Indian dispensation. With the formation of Nagaland, statehood in Northeast India became de-linked from the questions of either fiscal viability or of compatibility with the constitutional architecture of the pan-Indian polity. This could thus be seen as the first step in the cosmetic federal regional order that came into being over the next few years.

The War with China and the Question of National Security

In 1962, NEFA was at the centre of a border war between India and China. The Chinese army made deep incursions into Indian territory before withdrawing. After India's humiliating defeat, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of indulging Arunachal's isolation—a legacy of British colonial policy of an Inner Line in certain tribal areas beyond which the state did not extend its standard set of governmental institutions—was completely discredited. One opposition Indian politician even proposed that 100,000 farmers from Punjab be settled in NEFA in order to assimilate the area into India (R. Guha 2001: 295).

The war with China exposed India's vulnerabilities not only in NEFA but also in Assam as a whole. Not only was the Naga movement still active, there were stirrings of unrest in other parts of the region too, and some

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Generals as Governors[1]

'Isn't there a brigadier in Shillong?' This was how Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's Deputy Prime Minister responded in 1949 to reports that the 'native state' of Manipur might be reluctant to merge fully with the Indian Union (Rustomji 1973: 109). In September of that year, the governor of Assam, Sri Prakasa, accompanied by his advisor for Tribal Areas, Nari Rustomji, flew to Bombay to apprise Patel of the situation. When British rule of India ended in 1947, the fate of Manipur and other indirectly ruled 'native states' presented a significant constitutional problem. Indeed, the historical origins of the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan are traced to the decision of the Kashmiri Maharaja to accede to India.

Patel and other senior Indian officials might perhaps have pondered more on the potential difficulties that could arise from decisions by major 'native states' like Kashmir and Hyderabad on the post-colonial dispensation in the subcontinent. But the thought that tiny and remote Manipur on India's border with Burma, might hesitate about fully joining India had probably never crossed their minds. The meeting of Sri Prakasa, Rustomji and Patel was brief. As Rustomji recalls in his memoir, apart from asking whether there was a brigadier stationed in the region, Patel said little else. It was clear from his voice what he meant, wrote Rustomji, and the conversation did not go any further (Rustomji 1973: 109).

Within days the Maharaja of Manipur, on a visit to Shillong, found himself virtually imprisoned in his residence. The house was surrounded by soldiers and under the pressure of considerable misinformation, the Maharaja—isolated from his advisors, council of ministers and Manipuri public opinion—signed an agreement fully merging his state with India. When the ceremony to mark the transfer of power and the end of this

ancient kingdom took place in Imphal on 15 October 1949, a battalion of the Indian army was in place to guard against possible trouble (Rustomji 1973: 109).

The circumstances attending Manipur's merger with India haunts the politics of the state to this day. Like in the case of other 'native states,' Manipuri politics at that time did not present a single uniform position on the merger. Pan-Indian anti-colonial political ideas had entered Manipur. While there was support for the Maharaja, republican opposition to him was building up as well. There was thus support for the merger along with signs of opposition. However, in Manipuri public life today there is bitterness about the merger, especially about the circumstances under which the agreement was signed. A number of militias today regard the merger as illegal and unconstitutional. While Manipur has an elected chief minister and an elected state legislature—like other states in the Indian Union— there is also, what I would argue in this chapter, a de facto parallel structure of governance directly controlled from Delhi that manages counter-insurgency operations. Visitors to Manipur cannot but notice the strong military presence. Indian security forces occupy even historic monuments such as the Kangla Fort of the old Manipuri kings, and parts of the complex in Moirang that commemorates the planting of the Indian flag on Indian soil by soldiers of Subhash Bose's Indian National Army.

It is not hard to see why there is such a massive security presence in the state. Manipur tops the list of Northeast Indian states in the number of ethnic militias (ICM 2002). Apart from major groups such as Meities, Nagas, and Kukis, smaller ethnic groups such as Paites, Vaipheis, and Hmars also have their own militias. In recent years the official count of lives annually lost in insurgency-related incidents in Manipur has been in the hundreds. In addition the role of ethnic militias in inter-ethnic conflicts, such as that between Nagas and Kukis and, more recently between Kukis and Paites, have made those conflicts extremely violent.

Many of these conflicts appear intractable and some of them have their roots in the profound social transformation that these societies are undergoing. Yet unless one believes that a coercive state is a necessary instrument to manage change, it is hard to avoid the question: were the symbols and practices of the traditional Manipuri state—despite the significant erosion of its authority and power under British colonial rule— better-equipped to achieve social cohesion? Was Patel's readiness to use force just as the rest of India was setting off on a path of democratic rights and

liberties, an early acknowledgement that Indian democracy in the Northeast would necessarily have an authoritarian accent?

Manipur is not unique. Except for Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, five of the seven states of Northeast India today—Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura—have militias of varying levels of activity and intensity.[2] Some of them, such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Nagaland's National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), now divided into two factions, and the Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF), which consists of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Revolutionary Party of Kanglaipak (PREPAK), have independentist agendas. Other ethnically based groups are typically dressed up as national fronts defending this or that ethnic group.

As a response to those insurgencies there are many more brigadiers in Northeast India today than Sardar Patel could have imagined. Military formations much larger than brigades—corps headed by lieutenant generals and divisions headed by major generals—are now stationed in Northeast India. In Vairengte, a Mizoram village, there is even a Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School for training officers to fight militants. And the Indian Army is only one of the security forces deployed in the region. Other paramilitary units controlled by the central government, such as the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF), the Assam Rifles, various intelligence bureaus and the police forces of each state, are also involved in counter-insurgency operations. And, as I would argue in this chapter, overseeing these operations is a parallel political structure that works outside the rules and norms that govern India's democratic political institutions.

Political violence—murders, bombings, kidnappings, extortion by militants, and killing of militants by security forces in actual or staged encounters—has become a routine part of news from the Northeast. True, there is also news of elections, cease-fires and talks—or prospects of talks—with militias. But the two kinds of news and images co-exist with disturbing ease. No one finds the image of democratic elections being conducted under massive military presence anomalous. Nor does anyone expect talks with insurgents to bring about sustained peace. Indeed in some ways, insurgencies themselves have become incorporated into the democratic political process. Good political reporters of the Northeast know the precise role that insurgent

factions play in elections or the ties that these factions have with particular mainstream politicians.

For politicians, the use of the army to fight insurgencies has now become something of a habit. For instance in 1999, after attacks on Bengalis by tribal militants in Tripura, political parties belonging to the state's Left Front government observed a 12-hour *bandh* to put pressure on the central government to send in the army to deal with the situation. Chief Minister Manik Sarkar complained that even though 27 police station areas in the state had been declared disturbed, 'the Centre is silent over the state's demand for additional forces' (cited in Chaudhuri 1999b: 62). One would hardly guess from such statements that the law that these democratic politicians were relying on—the law that permits army deployment in 'disturbed' area— is a law that contravenes all conceivable human rights standards.

According to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), in an area that is proclaimed as 'disturbed', an officer of the armed forces has powers to: (a) fire upon or use other kinds of force even if it causes death; (b) to arrest without a warrant and with the use of 'necessary' force anyone who has committed certain offences or is suspected of having done so; and (c) to enter and search any premise in order to make such arrests. Army officers have legal immunity for their actions. There can be no prosecution, suit or any other legal proceeding against anyone acting under that law. Nor is the government's judgment on an area being 'disturbed' subject to judicial review (Government of India, 1972).

As Ravi Nair of the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre in New Delhi has pointed out, the AFSPA violates the Indian Constitution's right to life, the right against arbitrary arrest and detention, the rules of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code relating to arrests, searches, and seizures, and almost all relevant international human rights principles (SAHRDC 1995). There was a time when reports of human rights violations in the Northeast were taken seriously. But many Indians now regard human rights organizations as being at best naïve, or at worst, sympathizers of insurgents masquerading under the flag of human rights. The violation of human rights in the Northeast is seen as the necessary cost of keeping the nation safe from its enemies inside and outside.

Thus in 1991, when the United Nations Human Rights Committee asked the Attorney General of India to explain the constitutionality of the AFSPA in terms of Indian law and to justify it in terms of international human rights law, he defended it on the sole ground that it was necessary in

order to prevent the secession of the Northeastern states. The Indian government, he argued, had a duty to protect the states from internal disturbances and that there was no duty under international law to allow secession (cited in SAHRDC, 1995).

State within a State

In the insurgency-hardened Northeast, democratic India has developed a de facto parallel political system, somewhat autonomous of the formal demo-cratically elected governmental structure. This parallel system is an intri-cate, multi-tiered reticulate, with crucial decision-making, facilitating and operational nodes that span the region and connect New Delhi with the theatre of action.

The apex decision-making node is the Home Ministry in New Delhi housed in North Block on Raisina Hill. The operational node which implements the decisions consists of the Indian Army, and other military, police, and intelligence units controlled by the central and state governments and involves complex coordination. This apparatus also involves the limited participation of the political functionaries of the insurgency-affected states. Elected state governments, under India's weak federal structure, can always be constitutionally dismissed in certain situations of instability. But New Delhi has generally preferred to have them in place while conducting counter-insurgency operations. Since the insurgencies have some popular sympathy—albeit not stable or stubborn—the perception that the operations have the tacit support of elected state governments is useful for their legitimacy.

Consequently, the command structure may include some state-level politicians and senior civil servants. This is perceived to be the weakest link in the chain because of the fear that the presence of these 'locals' might potentially subvert the counter-insurgency operations. Consider the following news reports:

1. In December 2000, the central government asked the Manipur government to investigate links between at least five ministers and insurgent groups. The Home Ministry forwarded a report to the state authorities that included evidence of such a nexus between the ministers and insurgents. Manipur's then caretaker Chief Minister Radhabinod Koijam, just before the fall of his government dropped six ministers from his cabinet. Koijam was

4

Clash of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam

A Nineteenth Century Puzzle Revisited[1]

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the British colonial government in Assam tried to change the land titles of Assamese peasants from annual leases to decennial leases.[2] The colonial government's efforts at regularizing the land rights of peasants to their land were also the time when the foundation of the tea industry in Assam was laid. Assam today is one of the world's leading tea-producing regions—and tea occupies much of Assam's best agricultural lands. In 1868, the Land Revenue Regulation sought to make it compulsory for government *ryots*—i.e. owner cultivators—to take ten-year renewable leases on their land. Annual titles were to be given only in the *firingoti* or *chapori mahals* (land revenue belts on the flood plains demarcated for seasonal cultivation) or on land cultivated by tribal peasants on the northern edges of the valley. The goal was to get the Assamese peasantry 'accustomed' to the virtues of exclusively settled agriculture and to relieve officers from the 'useless labour' of writing hundreds and thousands of land titles every year (Government of Assam 1882: 6).

But the colonial authorities faced an unexpected hurdle. The Assamese peasants were not interested in long-term titles. They mostly abandoned their claim to their land after a single harvest. The process of converting annual land titles to decennial titles therefore was painfully slow. The process began in 1868; but by 1875–6 only 8,000 acres were under decennial titles, while 1.3 million acres of land remained under annual titles. The next year the area under decennial titles went up slightly to 10,000 acres, but land under annual title also went up (Government of Assam 1878: 19). The report

of 1889–90 noted that even after ten years the Assamese peasant was yet to 'appreciate the advantages of the periodic lease, and makes no effort to obtain it in place of the annual lease.' (Government of Assam 1890: 13). The situation did not change significantly for nearly three more decades.

Why did Assamese peasants resist long-term titles to land, despite what to us would seem to be its obvious advantages? This puzzle provides an important clue to understanding the impact of the colonial land settlement project on Assam and of the larger meaning of colonial rule in terms of the shifts in the global geography of resource use. These consequences are lost both in the early colonial discourse of civilization and primitivism and the latter-day discourse of economic development. While tea cultivation or commercial agriculture introduced by settlers from outside may have brought 'economic development' to the land called Assam, whether it benefited the people who had historically called Assam their home is more problematical. Indeed the loss of access to resources restricted their gathering activities, which lowered household consumption and shook the foundation of the pre-colonial socio-economic formations. The ostensible purpose of land settlement—probably the most important administrative enterprise of the colonial administration in Assam—was to record pre-existing land rights not only of peasants, but of others, including that of *Xatras* (Assamese Vaishnavite Hindu monasteries) and other religious establishments. But the project of protecting existing land rights was shaped by a whole host of ideas that the British brought with them. Among them were their ideas about 'civilization': a dense population and industry, for instance, were seen as markers of civilization and, settled agriculture belonged to a higher plane than shifting agriculture or hunting and gathering. These ideas shaped the land settlement project in practice, and were key to determining the winners and losers of the project.

The other side of recording land rights was the colonial state's assertion of claims to the vast majority of land in which it assumed, no private rights ever existed. That was the land on which the colonial state made the most far-reaching of decisions. Among them were lands declared wastelands enabling their allocation to tea plantations, or surplus land in which to settle peasant immigrants from more crowded parts of the subcontinent. Even though large amounts of land were also set aside as reserve forests or grazing lands; most of them were later either reclassified as ordinary cultivable land or, in practice, the state—both in colonial and post-colonial times—was ineffective in preserving them as forests or as grazing lands for long.

What were Assamese Peasants up to?

Early colonial officials believed that the reason the Assamese peasants were not interested in land titles beyond a single harvest was because they practised land fallowing on a large scale. But even then the lack of interest of Assamese peasants in acquiring long-term land titles still intrigued colonial officials. Why should a peasant give up his ownership rights to the land that he keeps fallow? The length of time that he left a land fallow also seemed inordinately long. Even more intriguing was the fact that when land left fallow was cultivated again; it was rarely reclaimed by its previous cultivators.

The Land Revenue Administration report for 1884–5 tried to solve the puzzle by making a distinction between two parts of an Assamese peasant's agricultural land: that which he cultivates every year and that which he cultivates occasionally. The Assamese peasant practised very little land fallow in the lands that he cultivates 'permanently' and he practises fallowing on 'an enormous scale' when it comes to his 'fluctuating cultivation,' where he 'leaves the land to go into jungle for years' (Government of Assam 1885: 28). Another official, however, expressed his doubts on whether fallowing practices had anything to do with the Assamese peasant's lack of interest in long-term land titles. After all, the cultivator rarely returns to the original land at the end of the so-called fallowing period. 'Fallowing in the ordinary sense of the term,' he wrote:

... is not ordinarily practised by the Assam cultivator; that is to say, the cultivator does not retain his holding, and, when the land ceases to yield abundantly, and without imposing on him the labour of eradicating the weeds which became prolific after the second or third year of cultivation, he throws up the land altogether and goes in search of fresh soil; in the majority of cases he never contemplates a return to what he has resigned, though others may doubtless take the land up again at some future day, the period after which such land is retaken being longer or shorter as there is or is not plenty of waste virgin so available in the neighbourhood.

In some areas such as Lakhimpur, he pointed out; land was not reclaimed for as long as twenty years, even though in other areas it was shorter. But in all these cases, he concluded, 'it is entirely misleading' to refer to land that is not cultivated for some period and to which a cultivator abandons his ownership claim as a 'period of fallow' or to say that in Lakhimpur the 'cultivator fallows on an enormous scale, as do most uncivilized (sic) tribes' (cited in Government of Assam 1885: 4).

Habits of Abundance? A Dissenting Colonial Memo

A dissenting administrative memo by Colonel Henry Hopkinson in 1872 was closer to figuring out why Assamese peasants were reluctant to accept long-term land titles. The key, he suggested, was the land abundance of Assam, which made possible for a peasant to find fresh soil with little difficulty. In such a situation long-term land titles were little more than an encumbrance: an unnecessary commitment to pay taxes on land even when it is not being cultivated.

In most parts of the world the first hurdle that a cultivator confronts is to find land. But in Assam the difficulty is 'reduced to the minimum.' Here, wrote Hopkinson, 'if land is not absolutely so free and common to all as air, still it has hardly any intrinsic value.' In such conditions, Hopkinson suggested, it is more appropriate to think of what an owner-cultivator pays the government in exchange for his land title as license fee and not as a tax or revenue on land. It is a license 'to extract a certain quantity of produce' out of a plot of land. It is a 'license to labour, so that our land tax is really a tax on labour and the labourer's stock and implements required in cultivation.' It is not surprising therefore that a peasant would be disinclined to accept a decennial land title because that amounted to a ten-year commitment of his and his family's labour and capital. He would not want to make such a commitment because he cannot be sure how long he will be able to put in the necessary labour to cultivate that land. He knows that he can always get land when he wants. But what he is not sure of is whether his family or his cattle will survive illnesses or, in cases where he has debts, whether he can pay them back. In such circumstances why would he 'entangle himself in a covenant which, while only confirming what he is already secure of, will add to his embarrassment if those conditions of his undertaking which are variable and uncertain turn out unfavourably'?

Hopkinson believed that the source of the confusion was the tendency of colonial administrators to think that what they saw in the rest of India is true of Assam as well. He made his point rather colourfully. 'Whether the Assamese of the Valley are Hindus in their manners, customs, and institutions,' he wrote, 'might furnish the subject of an agreeable essay.' Much could be said on both sides of the question. But even if they are, he said, he did 'not see why they should have accepted their agricultural polity from the Hindus also.' Referring to ideas popular at that time about Assamese Hindus being migrants from the Indian heartland he said, 'I have an idea

that an emigrant from Surrey would not take his agricultural polity with him to town' (Hopkinson 1872: 7–8).

Transition between Resource use Regimes

Hopkinson was right. Assam's land abundance indeed provides a clue to the puzzle. But no more than a clue. The Assamese peasant could find and cultivate other lands, but that was only partly a function of the physical fact of land abundance. Also relevant are the prevailing norms of land use. The fact that peasants did not have to pay for new land—either in rent or in price—or even register his use of that land with anyone is a function of local norms of land use. Obviously there was no land market; nor was there private property in our sense of the term. It was generally accepted that the peasant was entitled to that land. If he took the trouble of clearing another plot of jungle land no authority could stop him from doing so. While the colonial administrator concentrated on the agricultural use of these lands, far more important than clearing those lands for purposes of cultivation were their non-agricultural uses in ways that were central to Assam's rural economy. Among them were collecting materials like bamboo or wood used for constructing houses, boats, household implements, mats and baskets; raising silk worms—the foundation of the large indigenous silk industry—as well as collecting animal and vegetable products for household consumption and trade.

British colonial rule has been described as a 'crucial watershed' in the ecological history of India (Gadgil and Guha 1993: 5). Colonial rule enabled the global expansion of the resource base of industrial societies as land and natural resources earlier controlled by gatherer and peasant societies came under the control of new rules of property that created the legal foundation for the industrial mode of resource use (see Gadgil and Guha 1993: 39–53). The effect of the colonial land settlement policy was to incorporate Assam into this new global resource use regime. The major effect of the colonial land settlement project was to eliminate the access to these lands of the shifting cultivators and hunter-gatherers of the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills. The full effects of the denial of access, however, were experienced only gradually. The behaviour of the Assamese peasant—the initial rejection and subsequent acceptance of decennial leases—reflects the uncertainties of the transition between two regimes of resource use.

5

Confronting Constructionism
Ending the Naga War[1]

The Naga Conflict and a Faltering Peace Process

Since 1997, the Government of India and the leading political organization fighting for Naga independence—a faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by Thuingaleh Muivah and Isaak Chisi Swu [hereafter NSCN-IM]—have had a cease fire and there have been intermittent talks to end one of the world's least known longest-running and bloody armed conflicts that has cost thousands of lives.[2] The Naga conflict began with India's independence in 1947: Naga leaders rejected the idea that their land, which was under a special dispensation during British colonial rule, could simply pass on to Indian hands at the end of British colonial rule. In the 1950s it turned into an armed conflict. In 1963, the Government of India created the state of Nagaland as a full-fledged state of the Indian Union. The territory of the new state coincided with what was then the centrally administered Naga Hills Tuensang Area. As an administrative unit the Naga Hills Tuensang Area was formed in 1957, bringing together the Naga Hills district of Assam and the Tuensang district of North East Frontier Agency. Since the formation of Nagaland many Nagas have participated in the Indian political process while the independentists have remained opposed to it. But the line between the independentist and the integrationist factions in Naga politics have remained blurred, and the armed conflict has persisted with two interruptions prior to the current one: a failed peace process in the mid 1960s and an accord signed in 1975—between the Indian government and a few individual leaders—which was interpreted as a sell-out by many and as a result, it re-energized the rebellion.

The Nagas live on both sides of the hilly border region between India and Burma—in the northeast Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh—and in Burma's Sagaing Division and Kachin state. Their total population is estimated to be between three-and-a-half and four million people. There are no precise official figures, not only because there is no good census data on Burma, but also because the Indian census data do not correspond with the category 'Naga' and, as we shall see, whether or not some of these groups are to be considered Naga is a highly contested matter. The Indian census uses the names of particular tribes (communities)[3] and not the category Naga, which is an amalgamation of various tribes; the official names of only some tribes have the appelative Naga attached to them. For instance, Manipur has a large population that considers itself Naga. But the largest of the group, the Tangkhuls—the tribe to which rebel leader T. Muivah belongs—is simply referred to as Tangkhuls in Indian census. Among the Naga tribes of Manipur, only the Katcha Naga has the name 'Naga' appended to their official name. Yet the pan-Naga organization, Naga Hoho lists 16 tribes in Manipur as Naga. Since 'Naga' is not a linguistic category, the census data on language are not very helpful. Nagas speak as many as thirty different languages that linguists classify as falling into 'at least two, and possibly several, completely distinct branches of Tibeto-Burman' (Burling 2003: 172).

The expression Naga, wrote John Henry Hutton in his introduction to J.P. Mills' classic ethnographic account of the Lhota Nagas published in 1922, 'is useful as an arbitrary term to denote the tribes living in certain parts of the Assam hills, which may be roughly defined as bounded by the Hokong valley in the north-east, the plain of the Brahmaputra Valley to the north-west, of Cachar to the south-west and of the Chindwin to east. The south of the Manipur Valley roughly marks the point of contact between the "Naga" tribes and the very much more closely interrelated group of Kuki tribes—Thao, Lushei, Chin, etc.' (Hutton 1922: xv–xvi). The website of the NSCN-IM quotes the passage from Hutton to introduce the Naga people and their territories without the qualifications that Hutton had added to his formulation more than eighty years ago. Rather than calling the expression Naga a 'useful' but 'arbitrary' term, and saying that they lived 'in certain parts of the Assam hills' that Hutton ventured to describe only 'roughly', the NSCN-IM's website makes Hutton sound very precise about the Nagas and their lands. 'Mr Hutton defines the land of the Naga people thus', it says, and then it goes on to describe 'the area inhabited by the Naga

tribes' quoting Hutton. Indeed the quotation forms part of a paragraph that begins with a precise geographical description of the territory belonging to, what the NSCN-IM calls the Naga Nation:

Nagaland (Nagalim) has always been a sovereign nation occupying a compact area of 120,000 sq. km of the Patkai Range in between the longitude 93º E and 97º E and the latitude 23.5º N and 28.3º N. It lies at the tri-junction of China, India and Burma. Nagalim, without the knowledge and consent of the Naga people, was apportioned between India and Burma after their respective declaration of independence. The part, which India illegally claims is subdivided and placed under four different administrative units, viz., Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland states. The eastern part, which Burma unlawfully claims, is placed under two administrative units, viz., Kachin State and Sagaing Division (formerly known as the Naga Hills). Nagalim, however, transcends all these arbitrary demarcations of boundary (NSCN-IM 2002).

All Nagas may not fully share this view of Naga history and territoriality. Yet there is little doubt that in the eight decades since Hutton wrote his essay Nagas have developed a strong sense of themselves as a collectivity. Most students of ethnic and national conflicts are familiar with the tension between the constructivist understanding of identities among most contemporary theorists and the practice of nationalists or ethnic activists who engage in the construction of such identities (Suny 2001). While constructivism is the common sense of contemporary theorists of ethno-nationalism, when people talk about their own identities, they are unlikely to include a sense of the 'historical construction or provisionality' about them (Suny 2001: 6). Instead they assume that the identities of today have been fixed and bounded since time immemorial.

Confronting the constructivism that these days, theorists of nationalism typically emphasize and its practioners deny is at the core of what needs to be done to save the faltering Naga peace process today. Whether or not a large segment of the tribes of Manipur are Nagas has become a highly charged issue. Arguably, in matters of identity the only thing that should matter is how a group itself wishes to be known and there is little doubt that most of the communities in question consider themselves Nagas. But the question is not merely whether the Tangkhuls and fifteen other communities of Manipur that consider themselves Naga should be recognized as Naga, it is complicated by the territorial politics in which the Naga politics of recognition is embedded. The goal of creating a single political unit out of

all Naga-inhabited areas puts the Naga project of nationhood in collision course with a parallel Manipuri project.

Indeed the issue is so sensitive that until June 2001, the Indian government left the territorial scope of the 1997 ceasefire deliberately vague. Since the NSCN-IM is active in Manipur and other parts of the Northeast, apart from the state of Nagaland, it would have made sense for the ceasefire to apply to all those areas. But given the sub-text that could be read into the territorial scope of the ceasefire, it was not that simple. The government and the NSCN-IM took conflicting positions on whether the ceasefire held only in the state of Nagaland or in other parts of the Northeast, and the Indian government's public statements were contradictory. Eventually things came to a head when the NSCN-IM insisted on a clarification and in June 2001, a joint statement confirmed that the ceasefire was 'between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM as two entities without territorial limits'. The announcement led to a veritable political explosion in Manipur and significant expression of anger in the other affected states. Seeking guarantees from the Indian government that Manipur's territorial integrity would not be sacrificed in the altar of Naga peace has now become a major theme in Manipuri politics. In order to take the peace process further it is now essential to directly address that concern.

The politics of recognition is often an underlying theme in ethno-national conflicts. Identities, as Charles Taylor puts it, are 'partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others' (Taylor 1994: 25). Since recognition or misrecognition causes harm, groups seeking recognition, whether in the form of the demand for self-government or for cultural rights deserve our sympathy. But projects about recognition are also simultaneously projects that involve constructing identities. Thus in our era, the projects of nationhood frequently rely on censuses and other modern forms of enumeration and classification and a modern techno-logy of representation—the map—in order to connect territoriality and collective selfhood (see Winichakul 1994). The notion of territorially rooted collectivities living in their supposedly traditional national homelands relies on a very different spatial discourse than the one of overlapping frontiers and hierarchical polities that precedes it. In Northeast India, I would argue, the historical relations between hill peoples and the lowland states had an especially complex spatial, cultural, and political dynamic. As a result there is a serious collision between competing projects of identity assertion today (see Chapter 9). Only a constructivist understanding of identities can make

promoters and supporters of such projects aware of the dangers of these colliding projects. Even when the rhetoric of identity projects is civic and pluralistic, such projects can be on a disastrous road to ethnic violence and ethnic cleansing unless they confront their constructedness.

The Naga desire for a homeland that would bring together all Nagas into one political unit can come into being only at the expense of Manipur, as well as Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. But if the summer of 2001 is any guide, another phase of bloody ethnic conflict may not be far off and it is inconceivable that a solution to the Naga conflict on these lines can be found in the face of the opposition in the region. Key to a political settlement is the recognition on the part of all parties that there is an inherent crisis of territoriality in northeast India. Such recognition, of course, will have to occur within a framework of a process that the Nagas can see as reconciliation, among themselves, with their neighbours and with the Indian government.

Strange Multiplicity: Hill Peoples and Lowland States[4]

In order to understand the collision between the Naga and the Manipuri projects, it is necessary to consider the relatively recent history of a profound transformation of identities and of political ideas and structures in the region. The Naga hills, where a multiplicity of cultural forms had historically reigned supreme are best seen as, what James C. Scott terms, a non-state space—an 'illegible space' from the perspective of the states in the lowlands.[5] Scott's argument, developed in the context of Southeast Asia is eminently applicable to northeast India—a region that is an extension of Southeast Asia in terms of this dynamic of large groups of culturally diverse minority hill peoples living in uneasy coexistence with culturally different neighbours in the lowlands. The ethnic landscape of the hills, writes Scott, has always confused outsiders—states as well as ethnographers. The taxonomies about the hill peoples have been almost always wrong, groups identified as distinct were later found to be not 'uniform, coherent, or stable through time'. The ethnic landscape has had a 'bewildering and intercalated 'gradients' of cultural traits'. Whether it was linguistic practice, dress, rituals, diet or body decoration, neat boundary lines had been impossible to draw. Tri-lingualism, for example, is fairly common (Scott 2000: 21–2). Thus in the case of the Nagas, ethnographers and missionaries engaged in what Julian Jacobs and his colleagues describe as a struggle 'to make sense of the ethnographic

chaos they perceived around them: hundreds, if not thousands, of small villages seemed to be somewhat similar to each other but also very different, by no means always sharing the same customs, political system, art or even language' (Jacobs *et al.*, 1990: 23).

Such an unfamiliar and confusing ethnic landscape, Scott suggests, fits well with slash and burn agriculture—the common mode of livelihood in these hills—which means dispersed and mobile populations that could not be captured for corvee labour and military service by the labour-starved states of the plains; nor could tax-collectors monitor either the number of potential subjects or their holdings and income. It is from the perspective of the surveillance systems of states that the ethnic landscape of the hills appears so non-transparent. Of course, not all hill peoples had been shifting cultivators, just as the lowlanders were not all exclusively settled agriculturalists. The Angami Nagas, for instance, are well known for having transformed steep hills into rice fields through terracing and irrigation. Nevertheless, it is hardly surprising that sedentarization, fixing such population in space—'in settlements in which they can be easily monitored'—has been the state project par-excellence and why the state, in Scott's words, have always been the 'enemy of the people who move around' (Scott 2000: 2).

At the same time the non-state spaces in the hills and the state spaces in the lowlands had been anything but separate. Indeed the categories 'hill tribes' and 'valley peoples', says Scott, are 'leaky vessels'. People had continually moved from the hills to the plains and from the plains to the hills. Since manpower was always in short supply, wars in this region were not about territory, but about capturing slaves. If wars produced movements in either direction, the attractions of commerce and what the lowlanders call civilization may have generated a flow of hill peoples downwards. On the other hand, the extortionist labour demands of the lowland states and, the vulnerability of wet-rice cultivation to crop failure, epidemics, and famines produced flight to the hills where there were more subsistence alternatives. While in other parts of the world, such movements may have produced broader cultural formations, here the 'lived essentialism' between hill 'tribes' and valley civilizations—their stereotypes about each other—remained powerful organizer of peoples lives and thoughts. The cultural distance between lowlanders and highlanders were thus reproduced over time, even though this has always been a continuum rather than a sharp line of demarcation (Scott 2000: 3–4).

6

Society versus State in Assam[1]

By and large the Indian state can claim significant success in its 'nation-building' project—it has been able to incorporate subnationalist dissent of a number of peoples by using persuasive and coercive means at its disposal.[2] Subnational conflicts that appear stubborn at one time turn out to be surprisingly amenable to negotiated settlement. The assumption that nationalisms have a *telos* that inevitably leads to a demand for separation relies on a rather lazy naturalist theory of the nature and origins of nations, nationalities, and nation-states. What the Indian experience forces us to confront is the fate of nationalism and the nation-state as they spread worldwide as modal forms. In the Indian subcontinent these new forms that privilege 'formal boundedness over substantive interrelationships' (Handler 1985: 198) come face to face with a civilization that represents a particularly complex way of ordering diversity (Cohn 1987). In a subcontinent where the historical legacy of state formation is marked by intermittent tensions between the imperial state and regional kingdoms, nationalisms and the nation-state may have proven to be rather unfortunate modern transplants (Rudolph and Rudolph 1985).

I will use the term nationality, not ethnic group, to refer to the Assamese and the term subnationalism to refer to their politics of 'identity'.[3] The use of the term ethnicity to describe an inordinately wide range of phenomena has not helped our understanding of 'ethnic polities'. Nations and nationalities give rise to nationalisms. 'Ethnic polities' of groups with a connection to a real or imagined homeland is part of the history of the rise of the modern phenomenon of nationalism worldwide. This type, of 'ethnic polities' is radically different from the politics of identity that is not grounded in homelands—the latter is often easily incorporated within a larger ideology

of state nationalism. In the US, for instance, ethnic politics takes place within the ideological framework of a national political community—'one nation under God'. The paradigmatic form of this kind of ethnic politics is perhaps the ethnic parades—an organized celebration of 'multi-culturalism'—that would be the envy of anyone engaged in the project of 'nation-building' in India.

Since Assamese and other nationalisms in India coexist with a pan-Indian nationalism, I generally add the qualifier 'sub' to refer to the former, though occasionally, where the qualifier sounds awkward, I simply use the terms nation and nationalism. The term subnationalism designates, what M. Crawford Young aptly describes as identities that 'meet some of the criteria of politicization and mobilization' associated with nationalism, 'but are not firmly committed to separate statehood' (Young 1976: 72). Walker Connor, however, writes quite persuasively that the term subnation, like terms such as ethnic group, can sometimes only be a euphemism that obscures the essentially multinational nature of the vast majority of contemporary states. While the users of the term at least indicate an awareness that they are confronting some 'approximation of nationalism', writes Connor, 'in its clear presumption that nationalism is in the employ of the state and in its relegation of loyalty to the ethnonational group to a subordinate order of phenomena, subnationalism has no peer' (Connor 1994: 111). I agree with much of Connor's argument, but I do not accept his underlying positivist conception of nations. I use the term subnationalism not to refer to some stable essence that makes it distinct from nationalism, but to describe a situation at a particular historical moment.

This chapter attempts to understand the recurrent politics of sub-nationalism in Assam. The Assamese have been engaged in subnationalist politics intermittently in the past, but quite continuously since the 1980s. Assam is among India's economically more underdeveloped areas. However, it is not in per capita GNP that the state lags particularly behind, but in the lack of industrial capacity. With tea gardens occupying a major part of the state's total cultivable land, Assam is probably more of a primary commodity producing colonial economy that dependancy theorists had in mind in their critique of modernization theory, than most other parts of India. As South Asia's last major land frontier, the region—Assam as well as some other parts of Northeast India—has attracted exceptionally high immigration from other parts of South Asia, especially from the densely populated East Bengal. After the partition of India in 1947, not only did the flow of

economic migration from East Bengal continue, but added to this flow were a large number of political migrants—Hindu refugees leaving Pakistan. In 1979–85 protests against what was claimed to be illegal immigration and a de facto government policy of enfranchisement of these immigrants led to five years of political turmoil and major outbreaks of violence in the state. Earlier subnationalist political mobilization had focused on cultural policy demands such as the use of Assamese as the official language and as the language of education, and on economic demands for projects that were seen as means toward progress—bridges over the Brahmaputra, refineries and railway lines. Thus when the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in the late 1980s described India's relationship with Assam as colonial and demanded that multinational and Indian-owned tea companies do more for the development of the state, it intervened in a long debate within Assamese subnationalist intellectual life. In some ways, if Assamese subnationalism before ULFA was shaped by orthodox ideas on what it takes to achieve development and progress, the rise of ULFA marks the advent of critical ideas about development, not unlike, say the relationship between the dependancy and other critical paradigms of development and the old modernization paradigm.

Theoretical Considerations

The politics of subnationalism can be located in the theoretical space that is usually referred to as civil society. It is from its roots in civil society that subnationalist politics derives much of its power and its potential for generating political turmoil; for subnationalism, unlike some other forms of ethnic politics, is not politics within the rules of 'normal' politics, but it often challenges those rules. Well-meaning commentators who counsel moderation and compromise in resolving disputes arising from sub-nationalist mobilization often miss the rupture between civil society and the state that gives subnationalist politics its momentum. Subnationalisms arouse higher-order obligations that compete with the obligations of national citizenship whose unquestioned primacy is best construed as a given social life, but as a project of the modern state. That does not mean that subnationalist demands are necessarily engaged in a zero-sum conflict with the state. As we know, demands generated by subnationalist political mobilization in India have often been settled through negotiation. But such resolutions may obscure the continued capacity of subnationalisms to

maintain their autonomous visions and agendas and resist complete incorporation into the 'normal' political process. For long-term solutions to India's dilemma of subnationalist politics, therefore, one would have to look beyond the cliches of the ideologues of modernization and nation-building. It is not the absence of a politics of reason and civility on the part of citizens that sustains subnationalist conflicts. Where a modern state formation is a project rather than an accomplished fact, what may be at issue is a conflict between the will of the state and the dreams and aspirations that grow in the space of civil society.

Albert Hirschman's critique of development economics as a field that expects the Third World to act like wind-up toys pursuing interests and no passions (Hirschman 1981: 23–4) applies to much of social science theorizing about the 'Third World'. In the eagerness to see 'development' and 'progress', social science work on the 'Third World' has shown little interest in the collective imaginings that shape people's engagement with, and dreams of, modernity. The politics of sub-nationalism is premised on a poetics about a homeland and its people. If nations and nationalities are 'imagined communities', it is a poetics that transforms the geography of an area into a primal, 'home-like' or sacred space and transforms a people into a collectivity with imagined ties of shared origins and kinship.[4] In order to illustrate Gaston Bachelard's notion of the poetics of space, Edward Said notes:

The objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel: thus a house may be haunted, or homelike, or prison-like, or magical. So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us (Said 1979: 54–5).

The power of subnationalisms lies in such meanings.

The modern nation-state seeks a monopoly of the collective imagination of all its citizens. It would like the state-defined broad political community to be the sole repository of the poetics of a homeland and of the memories and dreams of a people—defined singularly, even if there may be gestures towards acknowledging diversity. However, the state in India—a legatee to a subcontinental empire and the product of an anti-colonial political project—must come to terms with competing collective imaginings. A dense social space weakly penetrated by the state allows the reproduction of

subnational 'imagined communities' that co-exist with the pan-Indian national 'imagined community'. Nationalities with a collective memory and a collective will combined with an autonomous organizational capacity are best thought of as civil societies. India's problem of subnationalism then, is the problem of developing political forms that are more in tune with her evolving forms of civil society. If the Eastern European revolution pitted states against civil societies, subnationalist politics in India sometimes pits particular segments of civil society against the Indian state.

The Indian state's fire-fighting approach to Sikh, Kashmiri, or Assamese, Manipuri or Naga dissent takes very little account of the collective memories and aspirations that shape subnationalist politics. Members of a 'imagined community' and subnationalist political entrepreneurs share the same social space—the intellectual, social, cultural and political world of the nationality. To borrow from Mao Zedong's description of guerilla warfare, subnationalist political activists are like fish in water. Principles of accountability can be found in the relationship between political entrepreneurs and the 'imagined community'. Policy responses to subnationalist dissent must take this relationship seriously. Firefighting tactics might lead to short-term peace that might steal the momentum from a particular group of leaders, but they are unlikely to achieve longer-term resolutions. In Assam, for instance, the unfulfilled promises of the Assam Accord of 1985 between Rajiv Gandhi and leaders of the Assam movement opened the political space for the rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam—a more militant and radical organization ready to avenge the perceived betrayal of the Assamese people by the central government.

The Poetics of Assamese Subnationalism

Assamese subnationalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century as an assertion of the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal. To some extent autonomy and distinctiveness is a continuing theme in post-colonial Assamese subnationalism, accentuated by heavy immigration into the area that has produced fears of minoritization among the Assamese and other indigenous peoples (see Baruah 1999, Chapters 3 and 6). The economic 'underdevelopment' of the state has been the other major theme in Assamese subnationalism. In order to reconstruct the poetics of contemporary Assamese subnationalism, I will now turn to a genre of

7

The Indian State and ULFA

Winning a Battle and Losing the War?[1]

The independentist militancy that rocked Assam in the late 1980s began to come under control by the 1990s. This was the result of two counter-insurgency campaigns by the Indian Army and a series of clever political moves widely credited to the Congress (I) Chief Minister of the period, late Hiteswar Saikia. A report in April 1993 by Human Rights Watch drew attention to human rights abuses in Assam during the army operations (Asia Watch 1993: 13). However, by that time Indian officials could claim that their strategy in Assam had 'worked'. Major groups of insurgents—members of the United Liberation Front of Assam [ULFA]—surrendered their weapons and renounced the path of armed struggle as well as the goal of an independent Assam. In many ways, political life and life on the streets returned to 'normal', and influential segments of public opinion in India sided with the government's position.

While human rights violation in India's troubled regions receive attention in scholarly and policy circles, the impact of the use of coercion on the legitimacy and longer-term viability of India's political and legal institutions are rarely examined in any systematic manner. Most discussions go little beyond charges made by human rights groups on one hand, and on the other, attempts by government and defenders of its anti-insurgency policies to frame the issue in terms of the challenge posted by independentist militants and the role of foreign governments in supporting such groups. An old intellectual tradition that systematically examined the effects of the use of coercion as an instrument of statecraft, however, would have had much more to say on the subject.

Vilfredo Pareto was a scholar in that old tradition and he wrote at length on the use of force and determination of its effects. 'A few dreamers reject the use of force in general, on whatever side', wrote Pareto, 'but their theories either have no influence at all or else serve merely to weaken resistance on the part of the people in power, so clearing the field for violence on the part of the governed'. Pareto also believed that 'all the advantages and all the drawbacks, direct and indirect' of the use of coercion can be systematically computed (Pareto 1942: 1527, 1512–13). Most of us today lack Pareto's faith in the 'logico-empirical method'. Nevertheless, in order to assess the results of the Indian government's strategy in Assam, one would have to consider, in the spirit of Pareto, possible long-term consequences as well as those that are immediately apparent. The use of coercion, of course is part of a strategy that has other components. In particular, I will refer to some of the de facto and *de jure* bargaining between factions among the militants and the government.

A Localized Regime Crisis

The political configuration of Assam at the height of ULFA's popularity was not a simple confrontation between the forces of political order and anti-system militants. What Assam faced was not only an independentist movement but also a localized regime crisis in the sense that the dynamics of independentist politics disrupted the functioning of political and legal institutions. While officials blamed 'extremists' for this state of affairs, to a significant extent it is the less than critical response of mainstream political forces to 'extremist' politics—indeed the very blurring of extremist and mainstream or moderate categories—that explains why the political, legal, and administrative institutions of the state ceased to function under the pressure of such developments.

'One of the central characteristics of a crisis democracy,' writes Juan Linz, 'is that even the parties that have created the system tend to deviate from the ideals of a loyal system party when they encounter hostility among extremists on either side of the spectrum'. Thus parties or political forces loyal to the democratic system may no longer feel committed to making 'the boundary between the system party, broadly defined, and anti-system parties as clear as possible both publicly and privately' (Linz 1978: 35–7). Such a blurring of lines is reflective of the capacity of anti-system forces in certain situations to successfully challenge the ideological hegemony that

underlies a governmental regime. A similar process is at work in a localized regime crisis such as that in Assam.

Only if one thinks of the political conjuncture as a localized regime crisis where the lines between pro-system and anti-system parties get blurred, would it make sense for the political situation in Assam to have become such that by November 1990 the Governor of Assam, in his report to New Delhi recommending dismissal of the state government, described the situation thus:

The holders of public offices have been rendered totally ineffective. The statutory authorities are in a state of panic incapable of discharging their functions. The holders of constitutional offices stand totally emasculated so much so that the State Cabinet cannot even discuss the situation. Members of the Council of Ministers cannot express themselves openly since they doubt the bonafides of each other in so far as their attitudes towards ULFA is concerned (Thakur 1991: 22).

The regime crisis can be understood (a) by locating subnationalist politics in the space that is thought of as a civil society that is autonomous from political society, and (b) by locating the particular episode of radical militancy in the ideological field of Assamese subnationalist politics and its particular historical moment. Subnationalist politics in India, unlike some tamer versions of 'ethnic politics' elsewhere, derive their ideological and political force from a capacity to demand higher-order obligations from their constituents. Organizations and individuals that play a key role in sub-nationalist protest in Assam often belong to the cultural realm; they see themselves as reluctant entrants to the political realm, and their concerns as different from, and of a higher order than those of politicians. In this view, the concerns of the Assamese nationality are of a higher order than the imperatives of the rules of electoral politics. The notion of a higher-order concern for the life of the nationality has the potential capacity of incor-porating all Assamese into subnationalist projects, irrespective of their lower-order engagements as it were—membership, even leadership positions in a political party or in the civil service, does not preclude such participation (see Chapter 6).

I am not suggesting that there is something inherent about nations and nationalities causing them to develop such organizational and political capacities and agendas. Ernest Gellner reminds us of the contingent nature of nations. 'Nationalism', he writes, 'is not the awakening and assertion of these mythical, supposedly natural, and given units. It is, on the contrary,

the crystallization of new units ... admittedly using as their raw material the cultural, historical, and other inheritances from the pre-nationalist past'. For all the nations and nationalities in the world that present themselves as having been around from time immemorial, but awakened by recent nationalists, there are many potential nations that are 'determined slumberers' (Gellner 1983: 48). Subnationalist politics of the kind elaborated here can only be understood by referring to the particular ideological, organizational, and political history of the 'imagined community' in question (Anderson 1983). Indeed, the historical construction of the Assamese nationality has been challenged in recent years by groups such as the Bodos, Karbis, and Misings, peoples who have been labeled as 'plains tribal' constituents of the composite Assamese nationality until recently, but who are increasingly seeking autonomous political futures, even outside the political framework of Assam.

ULFA and the Assamese Mainstream

In February 1992, the editor of the Assamese magazine *Aamee* (We), introducing the subject of negotiations between ULFA and the government of India, wrote: 'ULFA did not drop from the sky, nor is ULFA a wild animal. ULFA is our child. [The members of] ULFA are our brothers, they are our kins. [We must understand] why they have chosen the path of the jungle' (*Aamee* 1992). The magazine may have been especially sympathetic to ULFA but the notion that the members of ULFA are 'our boys'—even though they may have gone astray—can be found in numerous commentaries and conversations in Assam. Indeed, Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia in one of his television speeches spoke of ULFA's surrender as 'the return home of the boys'.

The primary reason for ULFA's influence and the fact that its rise culminated in a regime crisis is the organization's ability to stake out a place for itself in the space that constitutes the mainstream of Assamese public life. The attitude of the Assamese press toward ULFA illustrates this position. Even though many newspapers were critical of ULFA's avowed aim of independence or of its violent methods, they routinely published full texts of statements made by ULFA leaders and engaged the Front in their editorials and other articles. ULFA's position on various issues was, and to some extent continues to be part of the conversation in mainstream Assamese public life. Its popular appeal intrigued many journalists from the rest of the country. For instance, in the *Times of India* Praful Bidwai sought to explain

ULFA's influence by the fear that it inspired. 'Nearly everyone is afraid of ULFA, and in awe of it', he wrote when reporting on the Indian army raids on ULFA's training camps in 1990. People living close to the camps did not answer Bidwai's questions on whether they knew of the existence of the camps or whether they had been harassed.

The graves in ULFA's camps—of people killed for petty 'crimes'—that came to light as a result of the army raids, Bidwai believed, partly explained why people would be frightened. Yet fear alone, he realized, could hardly explain the Front's influence. The goodwill that it enjoyed among wide segments of Assamese society did not appear to him to be the product of fear. 'The truth, however chilling,' he wrote, 'is that ULFA is not a collection of rejects, lumpen and youth from the fringe of society'. Its presence 'looms larger than life in Assam. Many people attribute almost magical qualities to the group. They really believe that ULFA is in some fundamental sense invincible' and 'many Assamese find it hard to think ill of ULFA'. To Bidwai, so impenetrable was the magic of ULFA among the Assamese that he could only express his frustration and anger with ULFA's numerous silent and not-so-silent supporters. 'Touching as this faith is', he said, 'it is at times revolting. The vast majority of Assamese papers have refused to condemn ULFA's self-professed barbarity'. In the local press, the news of the discovery of the graves was overshadowed 'by highly colourful and improbable-sounding stories of Army atrocities'. He found 'a strange kind of inversion of logic and perception' in Assam that had 'to do with the siege mentality that the Assamese, especially of the middle classes have developed' (Bidwai 1990).

Another reporter from the pan-Indian press, Kalpana Sharma, expressed the same astonishment at ULFA's remarkably open style of operation. Writing in June 1990, she found ULFA's presence to be 'ubiquitous', for example, the role of a widely read Assamese newspaper, *Budhbar* (Wednesday), in spreading ULFA's message. The newspaper had a question and answer column designed to educate its readers about ULFA, and according to the editor, it received 150 to 200 questions each week. The editor would select about 15 of these, and the 'ULFA "boys" [would] come to his office and drop in their replies, which are duly published the following week' (Sharma 1990). While *Budhbar*, until a new editor took over in January 1994, was part of the press widely seen as sympathetic to ULFA, even less sympathetic newspapers reported in detail on ULFA's positions on issues and, in their editorials and articles, engaged with it in a dialogue.