

CONTOURS

JAIDEEP SAIKIA

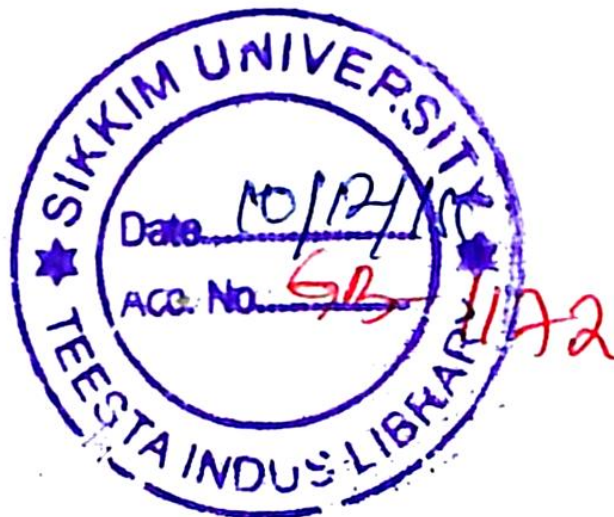
Jaideep Saikia
CONTOURS

To,

Dear Prof Senha,

Sincere regards,

Jaideep Saikia



A
Sagittarius
Print

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The *Wail of the Chinars* series which has been included in the collection came about as a result of a gracious fellowship by the National Foundation for India, New Delhi, awarded to me in 2000 so that I may study the security situation in Kashmir. And although *Contours* pertains primarily to strategic concerns in the North East of India, I thought it would not be entirely inappropriate to include six essays - even with a feeble attempt at comparison to the North East - on the situation in the Valley. I am particularly grateful to Lt Gen N C Vij, General Officer Commanding -in-Chief, Southern Command, who as the then Director General of Military Operations in the Army Head Quarters in New Delhi actively aided my tour of Kashmir.

In the Valley, I must thank among others, Lt Gen J R Mukherji (then Major General), K Ilango IPS and Ashok Prasad IPS. A word of gratefulness is also due to Nizamuddin Bhat for his kind help during my stay in Srinagar.

Contours does not - indeed cannot - make any claim to a readership. Indeed, it is only as a result of the constant prodding of a few rather committed readers of *Sitrep* (the newspaper column in which most of the essays appeared) that has emboldened me to look for a publisher. I am offering in this compilation a sizeable collection of the essays which appeared in the column *Sitrep* with minor changes. I am grateful to M/S Sagittarius Print for accepting to publish *Contours*.

In Assam, gratefulness are due to a number of people who aided the weekly penning of the essays. And although most of them would rather not be named, it was, I assure them all, the most stimulating of exercises, week after week, opening new channels of communication, debate and analysis. I am particularly grateful to he who - despite his preoccupations (and frequent disappearances!) - examined, corroborated and proffered information with the sensitivity of not only the analyst that he is but of a dear friend.

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I will be failing in my duty if I do not thank H K Deka IPS, Director General of Police, and G M Srivastava IPS, Addl DGP, Assam for their inspiration and patronage.

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And, of course, Maa and Dewta for understanding me.

Jaideep Saikia
Guwahati

Foreword

With all its unending diversity, its incomparable beauty and the varied genius of its people, India's North East has, to those who do not live there, and who know of it only through the country's 'national' media, become synonymous with conflict, with insurgencies, and with violence. This is a forgotten netherworld in the national consciousness, and for all the talk of 'integration with the mainstream', the mainstream itself has displayed an extraordinary capacity to rely on and reiterate this monochromatic and entirely inaccurate picture, on the infrequent occasions on which its fickle attention fixes briefly on events in the 'Seven Sisters'. In some sense, to New Delhi - the self-absorbed Centre of India - the North East is not really 'peopled' at all; it is a blur, an area of uncertainty and darkness from which racial and cultural stereotypes emerge fitfully, only to relapse quickly into a miasma of neglect. The personalities, the individuals and uniqueness that comprises this vibrant world remain largely unseen.

After my selection into the Indian Police Service, when I was asked to fill in my State preferences, I recall, I was among one of the very few officers from outside the region who opted for Assam. In the 25 continuous years that I served in the region, I have often congratulated myself on my original decision, and not for a single day did I find cause to regret it. Yet the North East is still regarded as a 'punishment posting' by most civil servants, and few people west of the Chicken's Neck can even imagine the languid rhythms of a life lived along the mighty Brahmaputra, or amidst the breathtaking beauty of the lower Himalayas that embrace the region in their protective shadow. Nor can they imagine the intensity, the variety or the scale of the cultural life of the people of the

region. Where in India, for instance, can a literary event - even with the enormous state patronage that is given to every minor talent in Delhi and other metropolii - attract the attendance of even a few thousand participants? And yet, the annual convention of the Sahitya Sabha in Assam attracts the spontaneous participation of the masses, not in the thousands, but in the hundreds of thousands, every year, and this is perhaps, one of the few places in the world where poets and authors are still seen as national heroes.

There is, of course, a great deal of violence and turmoil, and there is evidence of growing linkages between some insurgents groups and Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) which bodes ill for the future. Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura remain severely disturbed, and there are signs of destabilisation in all the other States of the region as well.

Insurgency related violence in Assam has shown rising trends in the recent past, even as increasing number of militants surrendered to the Government and abjured the path of violence. The year 2000 saw a total of over 800 persons killed in the conflict, as against 511 in 1999. There are as many as 34 insurgent groups in the State, though the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) remains the main player. Among other terrorist outfits, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) and Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) retain their sting, and the NDFB has been extremely active in the Bodo area of the State, while the UPDS dominates the Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar districts.

In Manipur, 237 persons lost their lives in 2000 as compared to 231 in 1999. Among the 35 insurgent groups in the State, as many as 18 are reported to be active. Prominent among these are the five outlawed Meitei terrorist outfits -

the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) and Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup (KYKL). The National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) also maintains a substantial presence in the Naga-inhabited districts of Manipur - Ukhrul, Senapati and Tamenglong.

Tripura also witnessed an upsurge in terrorist related violence. A total of 405 persons lost their lives in 2000, as compared to 303 in 1999. A deepening nexus between major political parties and terrorist groups has been evident in the State. Terrorist outfits in Tripura also strengthened their existing network with other groups in the region. These groups, aided by the ISI, exploit the 865 km-long porous border with Bangladesh to establish their hideouts beyond Indian territory. Reports indicate that Tripura has emerged as a corridor for pushing arms and ammunition from South east Asian countries such as Thailand and Singapore, and depositing them at Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, one of the major illegal arms centre in the region.

In Nagaland, despite a significant decline in the number of casualties - marginally below 100 for the first time since 1992 - there was no breakthrough in the long-standing problem of insurgency. The peace process, initiated in the year 1997, has dragged on. However, there was a decline in total casualties in the year 2000, bringing the total figure below 100 for the first time after 1992. A total of 13 civilians, 4 security forces and 82 terrorists lost their lives in 2000, in comparison to 26, 4 and 124 respectively in 1999. Apart from the two factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, namely the Isak-Muivah and the Khaplang faction, other terrorist outfits remained largely passive.

Arunachal Pradesh witnessed the spillover effect of

insurgencies from the neighbouring States, particularly Nagaland; Assam and Manipur. The Tirap and Changlang districts in the State are turning into a safe haven for insurgents from the neighbouring States. In 2000, three security personnel, seven civilians and 24 terrorists were killed, as against three civilians and three terrorists in 1999.

Meghalaya grapples with political uncertainties and problems posed by the two militant outfits, the Hyniewtrep National liberation Council (HNLC) and the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC). In the year 2000, a total of 13 civilians, 7 security force personnel and 15 terrorists lost their lives in insurgency related violence in the State, as against 5 civilians and 17 security force personnel killed in 1999. On November 16, 2000, the Central government banned these two outfits.

Mizoram largely remained free from terrorist violence, but the year 2000 did see four civilians, seven security force personnel and one terrorist killed in militancy-related violence. In 1999, two civilians and five security forces personnel lost their lives, with the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) among the main perpetrators of terrorism in this State.

But while there *is* violence, there are also vast areas of peace. More significantly, despite the failures of governance and the inability of successive regimes - both in these States and at the Centre - to evolve a consistent and credible response to terrorism, there is a powerful impulse towards peace among the common people, and a growing impatience with the unending cycles of strife that small groups have inflicted upon the larger population. Peace demonstrations have become common almost across the region, and these are often led by women - the 'mothers for peace' movement is among the strongest forces protesting acts of violence, equally, by the State and the terrorists. More and more people

are escaping the confines of the ideologies of hatred and exclusion that warped the past and inspired the many and fratricidal movements that have destroyed peace and undermined the possibilities of development for decades.

Development is, however, the bottleneck that bedevils everything, and the slow communications, the paucity of basic infrastructure, the stunted local industries, the sheer waste of youthful energies, and the inability of the system to develop and channelize these into constructive efforts is nothing less than tragic. In many ways, the North East has been frozen in a time warp, in part, as a result of the unfortunate, though well-intentioned, policy of isolation that was pursued by the Centre after Independence, with the objective of protecting tribal identities; and in part because the aggressive emphasis on ethnicity and tribal distinctions - to the exclusion of developmental issues - that became the dominant ideological force in the region. Change in this stagnant scenario was both necessary and inevitable - but the processes could have been far less painful than they have been, had there been some vision and integrity in the leadership. Unfortunately, this is a characteristic that the North East shares with the 'mainstream', there is a crisis of leadership and of values in the entire polity, and a comprehensive betrayal of the true interests of the people.

The collusion, the conspiracies and the political compromises that have obstructed development, and generate and continue to support terrorism and the politics of violence in the North East, are well known. What is less well known, however, is the institutional structures and the basic values of the people that are far more amenable to the reconstruction of a powerful democratic polity than, perhaps, any other part of India. The strength of the institutions of village and tribal governance, and the respect for grassroots

democracy that their procedures reflect, are something that the rest of India can only talk about and hope to emulate far in an uncertain future. The North East, moreover, does not live under the tyranny of a single, homogenizing and oppressive patriarchal morality, and is, in fact, characterized by a wide range of co-existing value systems. Of course, the people of the region themselves tend to perceive each other in terms of cultural stereotypes; but if this single psychological obstacle can be overcome - and, despite the proliferating ethnic and tribal wars it can be, through greater interaction and better communications - the North East can create a model of participatory and diverse democracy that would be the envy of the world.

Why then is this splendid, fertile and immensely variegated region perceived exclusively in terms of reductionist images of violence, or through a limited range of tribal artifacts or dances? Part, at least, of the problem has been the fact that no strong voices have emerged from the region to stir the national conscience. There are few books and little writing of worth to provoke a deeper and abiding interest in the intricacies of this unendingly complex world. In the contemporary marketing vernacular, the North East has failed to 'package' itself, to project images that could attract and provoke a deeper and abiding interest, to display the personalities, the variety and the cultural depth of its people.

Few books or writings on the North East have even attempted to do this, and any addition to the literature is welcome. Jaideep Saikia's present effort, *Contours*, however, is unique in both scope and character. Jaideep is, in substantial measure, a security analyst who focuses overwhelmingly on terrorism and low intensity conflicts, largely in North East, and particularly in Assam - though his interests have taken him far afield into Kashmir as well. But

he refuses to accept the label and fit his writings into the pigeonhole of rigid and impersonal political, strategic or operational analysis. Even where he focuses on narrow areas or issues of conflict, his brushstrokes invariably paint a wider picture, drawing out the personalities, the idiosyncracies, the peculiarities of the individuals and sub-cultures involved. Indeed, in this slim volume of writings, Jaideep has succeeded precisely in underlining, again and again, the very complexity and diversity that is the essence, not only of the region, but equally of the conflicts he so frequently documents; and to these, he has given what many writings on the North East fail to create - a human face. *Contours* is a book which should be read, at once, for its meticulous documentation and analysis of purely strategic issues, as for its compassion, its empathy, and its ability to communicate a full bodied picture of a people in conflict; a people who are, nevertheless, not overwhelmed by the strife that surrounds them, and who have not lost their humour, or their gentle, yet intense, zest for life.

New Delhi,
April 5, 2001

K.P.S.Gill

Kaziranga hoofbeats - I

(Recently the columnist spent a few days with the men who tend and guard the Kaziranga National Park. He presents some of his impressions in a two-part series)

It was about four in the afternoon when our boat reached Kathonibari camp. Gaonbura, the camp's feline inmate was there to welcome us. He had been alone the entire day and I could sense that he was glad to be among human beings once again. He was miaowing around happily, running between our legs, snapping at imaginary mice. "Gaonbura is trying to impress you", Range Officer Boro observed, "he knows you aren't from these parts. You don't smell like us."

The camp was all wood, thatch and bamboo. And Regon, the solitary forest guard, who gave a semblance of human habitation to the single room which constituted Kaziranga's Kathonibari anti-poaching camp. Comfortable hammocks hung in one corner of the room, a .315 rifle and a walkie talkie set in another and lording over it all, a misty-eyed Raveena Tandon.

Outside, the sun was leaving for Burapahar. All day long it had followed us from Kohora to Hualalpath, to Arimora. And notwithstanding the time of the year that we were in I wished the heat wasn't as severe. For after the rather bumpy jeep ride to Hualalpath we had to traverse the distance to Arimora on foot. And at the cracking pace which Boro had set.

Walking down a bridle-path guarded by tall elephant grass and the slight detour which Regon and I had made to Dimoruguri *beel* was an experience I will never forget. My sturdy expedition boots in whose provenance I had great faith betrayed me, and I would slip and fall after every few yards. Leeches clung onto every bare piece of flesh, and

sweat, grime and fatigue had overcome every bit of me. Still I had persisted on, clumsily following the *dandi* which an elephant herd had left earlier in the day. I had noticed Regon, rifle on his shoulder, a *khukri* in his hand, barefoot, cutting his way through the thicket. And I hadn't the heart to say "let's return". It was I after all who had requested the tour.

But the arduous trek didn't quite pay off. The Dimoruguri *beel* was silent, its murky waters quietly lapping the trail which the elephants had left. I was disappointed. An hour's trek through mud and grass and all I had to account for were pachyderm droppings and a few egrets. Still as Regon assured me, I was comforted by the fact that I was being watched. Yes, across the *beel* I could imagine the grassland teeming with wildlife watching my clumsy efforts at sighting with great fun.

At Arimora, while Boro attended to some official work, I undertook another trek - to the banks of the Brahmaputra. This time atop Rudra, Arimora's beat elephant. In the distance I could discern the islands Karne and Puspe, the great bend from where the Brahmaputra powers forth onto the plains and I could imagine why Robin Bannerji had called Arimora a heaven on earth. Faraway deer were grazing, a lone rhino stood majestically and from time to time I could hear the call of elephants. I surveyed the landscape and wondered at the vastness of the place, the enormity of the problem of poaching and the need to police it. Only a few months ago a poaching attempt was made. The poachers had come by boat, in the dead of night. But Boro had prior knowledge and an ambush was organised. The result, two poachers shot and a rich haul of arms and ammunition. But, for every effort and act of bravery there is the occasional lament from the forest guards. And with good reasons. They have neither proper clothes nor arms to battle the odds. They have to withstand months of solitary confinement in their jungle camps and, I was told, had to even purchase rations out of their own meagre salary. Can there be anything more absurd

that this ? But the forest people responsible for Kaziranga are doing an excellent job. In Director Bonal and Range Officer Boro alongwith the hundred odd forest guards who roam the National Park, Assam has an extremely well honed work force, the likes of which few other departments can seek to rival. They know that resources are meagre and that roads and bridges in the park have to be constructed and maintained, that the battle with the poacher could mean loss of life, that their pleas go unheard. But unlike anything else I have seen they have learnt to grin and bear it. And it is this attitude that is beginning to pay off. Recently, Boro received the Fred Packard valour award from an international organisation. A great honour for Boro and his men.

Boro has had his share of fanfare. At his Kohora office he showed me his collection, neatly filed away for as he says 'his grand children's eyes'. One India Today article christening him 'Kaziranga's Braveheart' brought him a flurry of fan mail. From Madras, Delhi, Calcutta. And a particularly sweet one announcing 'Boro, you are my hero'. But surprisingly, for one whose ascendancy has been anything but rosy, all this brouhaha has not gone to his head. In the few days I spent with him I saw him dispense cases with great ease and bonhomie, interact with the villagers and subordinates as if they were his kin and the general cheer and crowd which followed him everywhere. Boro is anything but the lone ranger.

A November chill was descending over the park and a faint smell of winter wafted towards us. A few golden rays were still lazing around in the trees, lingering over the canvas it created. A flight of pelicans flew past our camp. A few stragglers were still groping around for the last fish. A sambar barked nearby.

(The Assam Tribune)
November 23, 1997

Kaziranga Hoofbeats- II

The Kathonibari camp was readying for the night. A solitary lamp glowed in the kitchen and preparations got underway for the last meal of the day. Rabha, the stocky game watcher from camp Hanuman who was spending the night in Kathonibari, lit an earthen lamp by the *tulsi* plant and offered a few words of obeisance. The walkie talkie set chanced upon a crackle of incomprehensible cross-talk. Range officer Boro yawned audibly.

I, who did not belong, sat quietly on a fallen tree, by the Diffoloo, wondering at my fate as clumsy townie and 'honoured guest'. I thought of the remark Regon had made earlier in the day. Stumbling through dense *ikorani* and into a clearing dominated by what Prof Arup Datta calls 'instinctive hygiene', I had sat down heavily, exhausted after the five-mile march, the collective latrine of the rhinoceros beginning to stir a feeling of purgation in me too. Regon had seemed apologetic at my plight "*Januwaror logot thaki, amiu januwaror goti dhorisuge,*" he had said, trying his best to convince me that my fatigue was only natural, human, civilised. I had laughed, extending my hand for him to lift me, lift me off my atrophied frame and into his scheme of things. If his was the way of the beasts then it is about time we left ours and learnt to follow his instead.

The Diffoloo is a serious tributary. Grim in parts, its otherwise composed waters house a multitude of life. In the damp grit of its edges I had spotted at least eight different types of birds. Lap wing and sand piper, stone plover and fishing eagle. Brahmini ducks in pairs! Tent turtles - miniatures from a prehistoric age - sunning themselves on branches of fallen trees. Plop, plop, plop, they'd drop into the water as Tileswar, our trusty helmsman, guided our boat past them. And there were other forms of life too, not quite visible. Through my field glasses I could make out footprints and drags of

rhino, buffalo and monitor lizard. And there was, of course, the profusion of *sitol* fish which mocked us throughout the ride.

But the Diffoloo, I was told, can get angry. Every monsoon it inundates much of the Park, its fury, unsparing and merciless. Even the bridge at Hulalpath has to be lain before it every year, one of the many which the Diffoloo must devour before it can be composed. But what I had witnessed today was truth, beauty and goodness.

“Tiger, tiger, pangolin”, the walkie talkie set came in loud and clear. It was Kohora issuing patrolling instructions to Kathonibari. Poaching in the Park has decreased considerably since Boro took over. His methods are not quite conventional but they have borne results. A couple of days ago, driving back from Bokakhat after a meeting with Park Director Bonal, Boro had picked up a scurvy looking chap, who kept talking about some people who were planning to poach in the Park. He spoke so confidently about the ‘plan’, detailing out dates and places that I began to think of him as a no-gooder villager out to make a fast buck. But, in fact, he was one of Boro’s best ‘field operatives’, one of the many unemployed villagers he had recruited. And had come to rely on. I have no knowledge of what became of the ‘plan’ but I have no doubt that it would have been thwarted if it were ever to be undertaken.

An intelligence network is for Bonal and Boro one of the most essential ingredients in their anti-poaching drive. And they are presently in the process of strengthening the system. As Bonal told me, “it is external intelligence networking which must receive our attention. For that constitutes prior information and early warning. And, as has been seen in the past, normally results in success”. I couldn’t but marvel at the organisation which Bonal had created - cost effective, proficient and successful. And now beginning to catch the outside world’s admiring eye.

Tonight's patrol is to the Jalki *beel* across the Diffoloo. Regon and Tileswar, old hands at 'line duty' and tracking gave me, the newest recruit, a helping hand onto the boat. I stepped onto it uneasily. It wobbled under my awkward weight. This is going to be a long night, I thought. And, I'll be needing quite a few hands to help me along. I saved my breath and words of gratefulness for later.

There was a full moon in the sky. And as we paddled quietly into the night I couldn't help but reflect on the insignificance which the onward vista evoked in me. The dark waters danced lightly under us, the shimmering moon swayed, her tender hips sashayed as we ploughed through her silver robe. The approaching woods beckoned and I knew it was only a matter of time before it engulfed me: I surrendered.

(The Assam Tribune)
December 7, 1997

Bravehearts - I

(Recently the columnist spent a few days with the company commander and men of 6 Kumaon's 'D' Company - the strike force which successfully executed the Indian army operation code named Jangi II on the 18th of last month. His cinematographer friend Naveen and he accompanied the 'Delta force' on a few patrols and at one point were witness to a near encounter situation)

A streak of lightning lit up the sky above us. Rain clouds were beginning to gather. One by one the stars which had filled the May sky began to disappear. A clap of thunder announced the arrival of rain. Major Neeraj Sood, the company commander gave orders to saddle up.

We were at the outskirts of Langling, a tiny little Bodo village perched demurely in one corner of the *aronai* that made up Assam's Darrang district. We had just finished the last meal of the day - a plate of *khichidi* and *chutney* - taken rather early by metropolitan standards, but one which, I was assured, was almost an imperative for security forces on patrol in strife-torn Assam.

The going was getting tougher by the minute. The ground was becoming slushier and I had already claimed three awkward falls. I looked back to see how Naveen was doing. His six-foot frame lumbered close behind me. His laboured breathing permeated through the night and I began to wonder whether we would ever make the arduous journey. Slowly we made our way through the village and into the night. Far-away a dog was barking inconsolably.

*Jungle shoes on gravel
padded our uncertain hearts
Villages sleepy, uncomprehending
Voices lullabying generations.*

We had set out rather early that afternoon - first by way of a requisitioned truck and then on foot. We passed soporific villages, men and women who watched us file past, children - laughing, waving and when Major Neeraj unbuckled his back-pack and took out some toffees, undertook a part of the journey, happily sucking the toffees, clinging to us, wanting more. And I thought this was one bunch of kids who wouldn't need any cajoling to join the Indian army.

Some of the villagers were very forthcoming with information. For we were in the area of Michlabari, the site of a carnage a couple of months ago. The sun had retreated into the distance, the fields were calm, silently swaying to the prospect of much awaited rain. It would have taken me more than the sight of an army patrol to convince me that we were in insurgent country.

The ethnic composition of the area I noticed was a mixed one. Bodos, Santhals, Bengalis... the odd straight-faced mainstreamer in their midst. Surprisingly the tension was not palpable - perhaps I was not equipped to read the signs. But one thing was certain - the army's presence was a welcome one. Information solicited was provided and although I was able to sense a measure of initial hesitation, the populace was quick to repose their faith in the army.

Naveen and I were on a specific mission. To silently seek out the truth - or at least a reckonable part of it, to match our finds with the ones which visit us every morning by way of screaming newspaper headlines. We knew that it was only going to be sort of a peekaboo but we were still quietly relying on our instincts. And so, as we had planned, we would straggle behind in certain patches and speak to the villagers, in Assamese or in Bengali. I expected the knife and the vitriol. But instead almost everyone we met told us that they were tired of the unrest, that their lives are threatened by the militants, that the army's presence was encouraging.

We townies, of course, found it difficult to resolve what we found to be the popular perception. Don't the villagers believe in the struggle some of their brethren are occupied with? Why this confidence in the army? Had what we have been forever fed on false? At any rate, whatever be the geopolitics of the area, it did not take me long to realise that the people of the area had at least learnt one thing - the army's domination of an area prevented violence and gave them the respite they need to get on with their petty lives. These common folks, eking out a marginal existence, worried about the next crop or a sick cow - they could hardly fathom the atmospherics in Delhi, Dispur, Pokhran, or, for that matter, even in neighbouring Tangla. They simply want to live on peacefully. And the army's presence was making it a possibility.

But it was all still too good to be true. I knew from some earlier experiences that the army was not always welcome in the villages, that the perception of the man in uniform has not always been so rosy. There must be something more to this adventure, or, is it turning out to be a misadventure!

I looked at Rakesh Singh, the strapping lad from Pithorgarh in the UP. With just two years of service behind him he had picked up quite a bit of Assamese. During one of the halts I had gone up to him and asked about the family he had left behind in the Kumaon hills. He had taken out his wallet and had shown me his young wife's snap, an innocent looking village belle, staring wide-eyed into the camera lens - she could well have been from these parts. Rakesh Singh had already completed one year of duty in this area and had seen his comrades die. And when I asked him how long did he think it would be before he went home to his wife and aged mother, tears welled up in his eyes and he said, "*najanu*".

(The Assam Tribune)

June 7, 1998

Bravehearts - II

(For those who came in late the columnist and his cinematographer friend Naveen had 'signed-up' for patrol duty with the Indian Army's 6 Kumaon's 'D' company. Sorefooted, refractory they passed sleepy villages, met the sadness of man, felt bewildered with what they saw. The tears of the Assamese village folk, they soon realised, were no different from the ones which well up in the weather-beaten eyes of an uniformed sepoy, the desire for peace similar

With thoughts on the future they marched past disconsolate homes and into the night. A hostile shower did little to ease their paths, or their minds.)

I looked back to take in Langling one last time. A solitary lamp was still burning in one of the huts. From where I stood it looked like a beacon, an indomitable ray of hope in a murky expanse. Even the rain could not douse that clear, glowing image.

All is not lost then. There is hope yet. My people will see reason ... Satisfied with the severity of my optimism I ran back to catch up with the others.

Earlier that evening a deathly silence had greeted us as we approached Langling. It was as if a scourge had visited the village. The doors were bolted, the courtyards empty. Even the cows in the sheds were silent, suspiciously sniffing the intrusive air. Where was everybody? I looked at Major Neeraj. I could tell that he was as bewildered as the rest of us, the expression on his face changing contours from one of puzzlement to alertness. Fresh from the images of a bloody encounter where he narrowly escaped death - his company shot four dreaded NDFB militants - I could sense what was racing through his mind. *Journalist killed alongwith army men* - a cute little headline it would make next morning were an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) to be detonated when we had all gathered in the deserted courtyard.

Unfortunately no such luck at martyrdom arrived and we moved on, house to house, only to be greeted by the same deathly silence.

The villagers had in fact fled in a sense, on seeing us, and had gathered in one house. A curious drill, I thought. But, at any rate, the only rational defence for these simple folks. Stricken by the stories they had been fed on about the army, the villagers seek safety in their numbers - they congregate in a central place fortifying themselves with an outer cordon of the elderly. For Naveen and I it was a pitiable sight. Is this what has become of my people ? Scared in their own homes and of an uniform which had been created to protect them? I realised that the rottenness had taken deep roots and it would take quite a while before this illness was rid. But what exactly had they heard?

After a brief while, when the tension had lessened and Major Neeraj was beginning to get through to the villagers somewhat with his knowledge of pidgin Assamese - an admirable version of 'Me Jane, you Tarzan' - the Kumaonis decided that Langling wasn't an imperfect spot for the preparation of supper. The villagers composure had returned and soon they were helping the army men to get a fire going.

Naveen and I decided to take a closer look. We strayed. An old man was sitting quietly in a corner watching the entire scene. There was a faraway look on his face. A girl of about two was playing by his side and when I tried to give her one of Major Neeraj's toffees she ran to the old man and hid her face. I tried again. The child dug her face deeper into the old man's bosom. She began to whimper. I stepped back.

Naveen was having better luck with an old woman and her wards, a bunch of kids who had not only exhausted Naveen's store of toffees but had plucked up enough courage to sit on his lap. Soon they were all over him.

Naveen was having a time of his life, clicking away

with his camera, making faces, dissipating the tension. Good old Naveen, he could charm birds off a tree. How I envy him!

Fear of the unknown is an attribute which can trace its origin to our reptilian ancestors. Here in the hinterland that fear thrives on folk-lore. Like the evil spirit which has lurked in the bamboo grove for generations, but nobody has actually seen, the olive green uniform, too, has achieved a larger than life spectral form.

“Ey bur kapur pindhi aahile aami bhoy kiyo nekham”, one of the villagers said to me. *“Eehoti bule rastat soboke mari mari goi thaake?”*, a woman enquired. *“Aamaak baandhi loi jaabo nek?”*, another one asked.

But none of them had actually seen something with their own eyes which could lend credence to their fears. They had simply heard these to be true. Which is not to reject out of hand all that was heard. I had proof - in certain cases the army had itself provided me with the evidence - that cases of army high-handedness have occurred in the past. And I could imagine the scars which have been left by such uncivilised acts. A rotten apple unless sought out can destroy an entire barrel. That is the truth which the Indian army has to live with and make amends for.

I realised, of course, that individuals or parts do not make a whole but it does give the whole a bad name. I understood that it hadn't helped matters one bit that the army men do not look like the villagers, speak like the villagers. And then there is what is known as personal initiative, outlook and disposition. Naveen with his Southy looks had succeeded where my local ones failed to evoke, even among a bunch of three-year olds who had heard nothing but Assamese or Bodo all their lives. A lot is at stake then. And if a nation, a people has to be saved then there has to be effort from both sides. I remembered what the intrepid Brigade Major of our host brigade, Major G S Rawat, winner of the Sena medal for meritorious service in

the Valley, had said to me about their efforts with the local population. They had put on huge medical camps and had helped construct schools and playfields. The last medical camp at Udalguri, inaugurated by the Chief of Army Staff had been a great success. Major Rawat showed me photographs and statistics as proof. The reaching out process is, therefore, on. Perhaps it's time for the populace to make the next step.

But why is the army here ? Because the elected representatives of these villagers want them. Why do they want the army? So that they can reign in peace. Or, alternatively one can argue that had there been no militancy there would have been no army. But a counter argument would again be, had there been development there would have been no militancy. One can go on and on. But to a simple mind what matters is the here and now. If he were to sit back and debate the dynamics, he'd have to retrace his footsteps all the way back to Yandaboo and beyond. Watching these villagers I can say that they would rather have their peace back and leave the know-alls to sit in their air-conditioned rooms in New Delhi and Dispur to debate about what went wrong.

Major Neeraj and his men, Jim Corbett's loyal Kumaonis, are soldiers whose duty is "not to reason why". They will probably receive a medal at the end of the day for having done their duty well. The lucky ones would probably sport their decorations on their breast pockets. The rest will have theirs presented to their mothers and widows. But I can confidently say that the joy Major Neeraj found when he held a child in Langling and found in its face his own forgotten smile, that joy should be for him worth a dozen medals. Such decorations are awarded to hearts of the bravest kind.

The rain had subsided. The clouds were leaving. Even the dogs were quiet. We were coming upon another village, perhaps another Langling. But this time the villagers did not

desert their homes. They gave us directions to Bhergaon where the truck would be waiting.

We filed past the huts, less disconsolate now. I could hear voices talking of the to be and the morrow and a particularly clear voice of a child reciting a nursery rhyme of my childhood. '*Jun bai ye tora eti diya*', it went pleading with the moon to part with a star. Naveen looked at me and smiled. Wherever had he learnt that rhyme? I couldn't say. But we both knew that it would not be long before the heavens descended to answer their innocent calls.

[Columnist's note : We stayed on with the men of 'D' company for a few more days - visited many more villages and saw many other things. But after what we saw in Langling and thereabouts it is of little importance.]

★ Major Neeraj Sood was awarded the Shaurya Chakra in 1999 for gallantry.

(The Assam Tribune)
June 21, 1998

Warrior-diplomats !

Certain arrangements engender a critical viewpoint irrespective of the manner in which the configuration is sought to be constructed. The Indian army's Operation Rhino in Assam is no exception. And, therefore, to its primary role of containing insurgency has been added the task of image management - an art not every soldier is trained for.

While it will certainly be a matter of some debate on whether this added brief is telling on the army's preparedness for its primary task, more and more military commanders in the state - at times even at the level of company commander - are beginning to utilise PR skills as part of an initiative. And the desire to couch war moves in tolerable people friendly paddings is no longer merely a leaf out of a psychological warfare manual but a happy comprehension by the soldier that his actions are as governed by societal mores as others. Added to this is, of course, the realisation that a faithful adherence to such mores can be rewarding as well. Clearly, Operation Rhino has not only spawn what Admiral Bhagwat calls a scholar-warrior but also a diplomat-warrior. And with good reasons too. For earlier misdemeanours like the infamous Paikarkuchi rape incident have been seen to have told heavily on its primary task. And that perhaps, most critics would argue, is the reason for its speedy action at damage control. The alacrity with which a court of inquiry has been instituted recently in view of the Kokrajhar rape allegation and the timber felling controversy only reinforces that point of view.

Another point of view is that members of the army have suddenly found themselves in a civil set-up and as a result need to feel accepted - a not so undersirous element in an Operation Rhino like theatre. After all a visible army

will have fewer opportunities of straying. And, therefore, the past year has seen not only initiatives such as more public participation in affairs otherwise predominantly military - the last ULFA-NDFB-BLT surrender in Tamulpur had militants surrendering to freedom fighters of Assam - but also in matters which have hitherto been in the domain of the civil administration. The army - under the direct supervision of the GOC, 21 Mountain Division, Maj Gen B.K. Bopanna - provided life-saving water to the holy pond in the Kamakhya Temple after the *Soubhagya Kunda* dried up and reports suggest that similar civic moves have been organised in other towns of Assam as well. While it remains to be seen whether the military is slowly trying to usurp the civil administration's prerogative and is thereby proclaiming their own useful substitution, the new found attire is slowly finding a lot of takers among its members.

The present General Officer Commanding (GOC) of IV Corps, Lt Gen DB Shekatkar, a rational officer by most counts, is to a reckonable extent responsible for this new approach. The general, who has been recorded as saying that 'it is time the healing process began', recently initiated the halt-in-operations during the Rongali Bihu celebrations. Operation Rhino watchers agree that the announcement was yet another move in the diplomatic warfare board. Especially the GOC's statement that 'one has to be appreciative of the ULFA ... they are not merciless ...' has been seen to possess devices more than mere admission of a fact. Unconfirmed reports have also suggested that the offer for peace by former members of the ULFA was to a degree brokered by the redoubtable Brig Gaganjit Singh, the Brigadier Tactical of HQ IV Corps.

Even earlier during the cobbling of the rehabilitation package, the Army played a decisive role, and if reports are to be believed, pressured for an early deal when North Block was soft-pedaling on the package arrangement.

These and such other initiatives conclusively prove that the Army in Assam has much more on its agenda than can be fathomed by the presence of armed personnel in the highways. Even the Army road barriers (on NH 31, for instance) is today sporting popular slogans like *aahok ekeloge Asom Gorhu* (Come, let's together build Assam) - signs which clearly testify its desire to be projected as a people's army.

(The North East Daily)
April 28, 1999