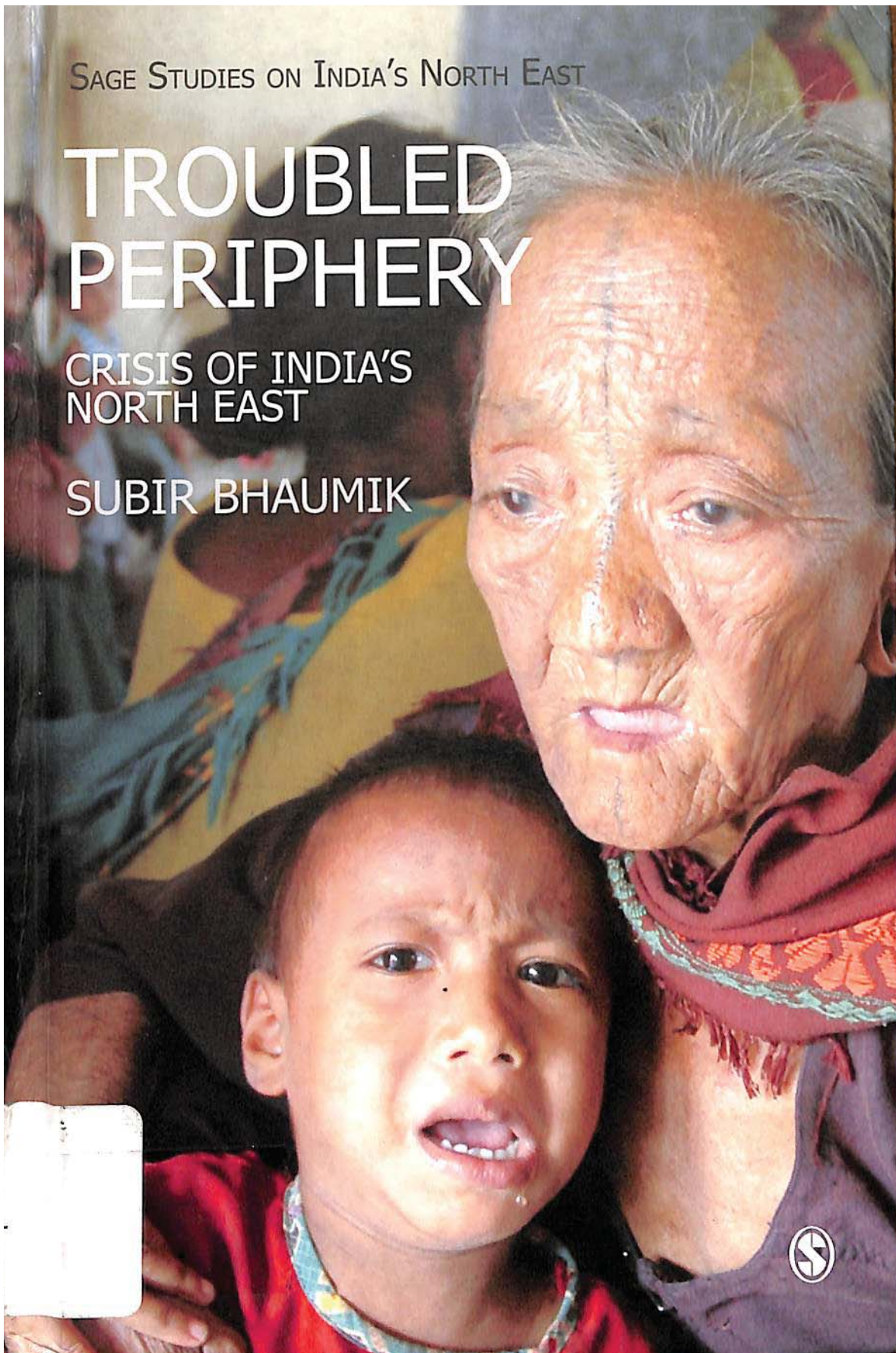


SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

# TROUBLED PERIPHERY

CRISIS OF INDIA'S  
NORTH EAST

SUBIR BHAUMIK



This book maps the evolution of India's North East into a constituent region of the republic and analyses the perpetual crisis in the region since Independence. It highlights how land, language and leadership issues have been the seed of contention in the North East and how factors like ethnicity, ideology and religion have shaped the conflicts. It also throws light on the major insurgencies, internal displacements, protest movements and the regional drug and weapons trade in the region. It examines 'the crisis of development' and the evolution of the polity before offering a policy framework to combat the crises.

The book includes a large body of original data, documentation and field interviews with major players as well as stakeholders. It is an important reference resource for students of politics and international relations, especially for those involved in South Asian studies and conflict studies. It is also an informative read for decision-makers, bureaucrats dealing with the North East and those involved in counter-insurgency operations in the area.

**Subir Bhaumik** is an eminent journalist and academic researcher. He has been with the BBC since 1994 and his previous journalistic assignments include *Reuters*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *PTI* and the *Time* magazine. His first book *Insurgent Crossfire* was well acclaimed. He has also written articles for many books and journals. He is a member of the independent think tank, Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata and the working president of the Guwahati-based Northeast Policy Alternatives. He has been Queen Elizabeth House Fellow at Oxford University (1989–90) and Eurasian-Nets Fellow at Frankfurt University (2009).



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# Troubled Periphery

Crisis of India's North East



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SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

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## List of Abbreviations

AAGSP	All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad
AASAA	All Adivasi Students Association of Assam
AAPSU	All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union
AASU	All Assam Students Union
ABSU	All Bodo Students Union
ACMA	Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam
AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AJYCP	Assam Jatiyotabadi Yuba Chatro Parishad
AMSU	All Manipur Students Union
AMUCO	All Manipur United Clubs Organization
APHLC	All Party Hill Leaders Conference
ASDC	Autonomous State Demands Committee
ATF	Assam Tiger Force
ATPLO	All Tripura Peoples Liberation Organization
ATTF	All-Tripura Tiger Force
AUDF	Assam United Democratic Front
BCP	Burmese Communist Party
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BLTF	Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force
BNLF	Bru National Liberation Front
BPAC	Bodo Peoples Action Committee
BPPF	Bodo Peoples Progressive Front



BSF	Border Security Force
BVF	Bodo Volunteer Force
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CIA	Central Intelligence 'Agency'
CII	Confederation of Indian Industry
CLAHRO	Civil Liberties and Human Rights Organization
CNF	Chin National Front
COFR	Committee on Fiscal Reform
CMIE	Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy
CPI	Communist Party of India
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DAN	Democratic Alliance of Nagaland
DGFI	Directorate General of Forces Intelligence
DHD	Dima Halan Daogah
DONER	Department of Development of North Eastern Region
FCI	Food Corporation of India
GMP	Gana Mukti Parishad
HSPDP	Hill States Peoples Demands Party
HUJAI	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IIFT	Indian Institute of Foreign Trade
ILAA	Islamic Liberation Army of Assam
IMDT	Illegal Migrants Act
INCB	International Narcotics Control Bureau
INPT	Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura
IPF	Idgah Protection Force
IPFT	Indigenous People's Front of Tripura
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISS	Islamic Sevak Sangh
IURPI	Islamic United Reformation Protest of India
KCP	Kangleipak Communist Party
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KLO	Kamtapur Liberation Organisation
KSU	Khasi Students Union
KYKL	Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup
LOC	Letters of Credit
MASS	Manab Adhikar Sangram Samity
MLA	Muslim Liberation Army

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MNF	Mizo National Front
MNFF	Mizo National Famine Front
MPA	Meghalaya Progressive Alliance
MPLF	Manipur Peoples Liberation Front
MSCA	Muslim Security Council of Assam
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
MSF	Muslim Security Force
MTF	Muslim Tiger Force
MULFA	Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam
MULTA	Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam
MVF	Muslim Volunteer Force
MZP	Mizo Zirlai Pawl
NCAER	National Council of Applied Economic Research
NCB	Narcotics Control Bureau
NDF	National Democratic Front
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NEEPCO	North Eastern Electric Power Corporation
NEFA	North-East Frontier Agency
NESO	North East Students Organizations
NLFT	National Liberation Front of Tripura
NNC	Naga National Council
NNO	Naga Nationalist Organization
NPMHR	Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
NSDP	Net State Domestic Product
NUPA	National Unity Party of Arakans
NVDA	National Volunteers Defense Army
PCG	Peoples Consultative Group
PCJSS	Parbattya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samity
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PREPAK	Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
PULF	People's United Liberation Front
R&AW	Research and Analysis Wing
RGM	Revolutionary Government of Manipur
RGN	Revolutionary Government of Nagaland
RMC	Revolutionary Muslim Commandos
RPF	The Revolutionary Peoples Front

RSS	Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SATP	The South Asia Terrorism Portal
SJSS	Sanmilito Jonoghostiye Sangram Samity
SMG	Sub-machine Gun
SOO	Suspension of Operations
SRC	State Reorganization Commission
SSB	Special Services Bureau
SSG	Special Services Group
TBCU	Tripura Baptist Christian Union
TNV	Tribal National Volunteers
TSF	Tribal Students Federation
TUJS	Tripura Upajati Juba Samity
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
ULMA	United Liberation Militia of Assam
UMF	United Minorities “Front”
UMLFA	United Muslim Liberation Front of Assam
UMNO	United Mizo National Organization
UNLF	United National Liberation Front
UPDS	United Peoples Democratic Solidarity
UPVA	United Peoples Volunteers Army
UWSA	United Wa State Army
VHP	Viswa Hindu Parishad
YMA	Young Mizo Association

## Preface

The North East has been seen as the problem child since the very inception of the Indian republic. It has also been South Asia's most enduring theatre of separatist guerrilla war, a region where armed action has usually been the first, rather than the last, option of political protest. But none of these guerrilla campaigns have led to secession – like East Pakistan breaking off to become Bangladesh in 1971 or East Timor shedding off Indonesian yoke in 1999. Nor have these conflicts been as intensely violent as the separatist movements in Indian Kashmir and Punjab. Sixty years after the British departed from South Asia, none of the separatist movements in the North East appear anywhere near their proclaimed goal of liberation from the Indian rule. Nor does the separatist violence in the region threaten to spin out of control.

That raises a key question that historian David Ludden once tried to raise while summing up the deliberation of a three-day seminar at Delhi's elite Jawaharlal Nehru University – whether the North East challenges the separation of the colonial from the national. Or whether it raises the possibility of reorganization of space by opening up India's boundaries. Opinion is divided. Historian Aditya Mukherji, in his keynote address at a Guwahati seminar (29–30 March 2009), challenged Ludden and his likes by insisting that the Indian nation evolved out of a national movement against imperialism and did not seek to impose, like in the West, the master narrative of the majority on the smaller minorities in the process of nation building. Mukherji

insisted that the Indian democracy is unique and not coercive and can accommodate the aspirations of almost any minority group. In the same seminar, Professor Javed Alam, chairman of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, carried the argument forward by saying that a new phase of democratic assertion involving smaller minorities and hitherto-marginalized groups in the new century is now opening up new vistas of Indian democracy.

‘But scholars from the North East contested these ‘mainland’ scholars by saying that their experience in the North East was different. They point to the endless festering conflicts, which have spread to new areas of the region, leading to sustained deployment of the Indian army and federal paramilitary forces on ‘internal security duties’, that, in turn, has militarized rather than democratized the social and political space in the North East.’ These troops are deployed often against well-armed and relatively well-trained insurgents adept at the use of the hill terrain and often willing to use modern urban terror tactics for the shock effect.

It must be said that the military deployment has aimed at neutralizing the strike power of the insurgents to force them to the table, rather than seeking their complete destruction. So the rebel groups have also not been forced to launch an all-out do-or-die secessionist campaign, as the Awami League was compelled to do in East Pakistan in 1971. The space for accommodation, resource transfer and power-sharing that the Indian state offered to recalcitrant groups has helped India control the insurgencies and often co-opt their leadership. Now some would call co-option a democratic exercise. That’s where the debate goes to a point of no resolution. What many see as a bonafide and well-meant state effort to win over the rebel leadership to join the mainstream is seen by many others, specially in the North East, as a malafide and devious co-option process, a buying of loyalties by use of force, monetary inducements and promise of office rather than securing it by voluntary and fair means.

Interestingly, the insurgencies have only multiplied in Northeast India. Whenever a rebel group has signed an accord with the Indian government in a particular state, the void has been quickly filled by other groups, reviving the familiar allegations of betrayal, neglect and alienation. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) in 2006 counted 109 rebel groups in northeast India—only the state of Arunachal Pradesh was found to be without one, though Naga rebel groups were

active in the state. Interestingly, only a few of these are officially banned. Of the 40 rebel groups in Manipur, only six were banned under India's Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. And of the 34 in the neighbouring state of Assam, only two were banned. A good number of these groups are described as 'inactive' but some such groups have been revived from time to time. Since post-colonial India has been ever willing to create new states or autonomous units to fulfil the aspirations of the battling ethnicities, the quest for an 'ethnic homeland' and insurgent radicalism as a means to achieve it has become the familiar political grammar of the region. So insurgencies never peter out in the North East, even though insurgents do.

Phizo faded away to make way for a Muivah in the Naga rebel space, but soon there was a Khaplang to challenge Muivah. If Dasarath Dev walked straight into the Indian parliament from the Communist tribal guerrilla bases in Tripura, elected in absentia, there was a Bijoy Hrangkhawl to take his place in the jungle, alleging Communist betrayal of the tribal cause. And when Hrangkhawl called it a day after ten years of blood-letting, there was a Ranjit Debbarma and a Biswamohan Debbarma, ready to take his place. Even in Mizoram, where no Mizo rebel leader took to the jungles after the 1986 accord, smaller ethnic groups like the Brus and the Hmars have taken to armed struggle in the last two decades, looking for their own acre of green grass.

Throughout the last six decades, the same drama has been repeated, state after state. As successive Indian governments tried to nationalize the political space in the North East by pushing ahead with mainstreaming efforts, the struggling ethnicities of the region continued to challenge the 'nation-building processes', stretching the limits of constitutional politics. But these ethnic groups also fought amongst themselves, often as viciously as they fought India, drawing daggers over scarce resources and conflicting visions of homelands. In such a situation, the crisis also provided opportunity to the Indian state to use the four principles of realpolitik statecraft propounded by the great Kautilya, the man who helped Chandragupta build India's first trans-regional empire just after Alexander's invasion. *Sham* (Reconciliation), *Dam* (Monetary Inducement), *Danda* (Force) and *Bhed* (Split)—the four principles of Kautilyan statecraft—have all been used in varying mix to control and contain the violent movements in the North East.

But unlike in many other post-colonial states like military-ruled Pakistan and Burma, the Indian government have not displayed an over-reliance on force. After the initial military operation in the North East had taken the sting out of a rebel movement, an 'Operation Bajrang' or an 'Operation Rhino' has been quickly followed up by offers of negotiations and liberal doses of federal largesse, all aimed at co-option. If nothing worked, intelligence agencies have quickly moved in to divide the rebel groups. But with draconian laws like the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act always available to security forces for handling a breakdown of public order, the architecture of militarization remained in place. Covert intelligence operations and extra judicial killings have only made the scenario more murky, bloody and devious, specially in Assam and Manipur.

So when the Naga National Council (NNC) split in 1968, the Indian security forces were quick to use the Revolutionary Government of Nagaland (RGN) against it. Then when the NNC leaders signed the 1975 Shillong Accord, they were used against the nascent National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). Now both factions of NSCN accuse each other of being used by 'Indian agencies'. In neighbouring Assam, the SULFA (Surrendered ULFA) was created, not as alternate political platform to the ULFA, but as a tactical counter-insurgency plank, as a force multiplier for the Indian security machine. Engineering desertion and using the surrendered militants against their former colleagues have remained a favourite tactic for authorities in the North East.

Between 2002–2005, the Tripura police and the military intelligence managed to win over some rebels who had not yet surrendered and used them for a series of attacks on rebel bases just inside Bangladesh across the border with Tripura. The 'Trojan Horse' model thus used proved to be a great success in the counter-insurgency operations than getting rebels to surrender first and then be used against their former colleagues.

But for an entire generation of post-colonial Indians, the little wars of the North East remained a distant thunder, a collection of conflicts not worth the bother. Until someone's brother was kidnapped by the rebels, while working in a tea estate or in an oil platform. Or until someone's relative got shot in an encounter with them, while leading a military patrol through the leech-infested jungles of the

region. Despite the 'prairie fires' spreading in the North East, the sole encounter of most Indians with this frontier region remained the tribal dancers atop colourful tableaux on Republic Day parades in Delhi. The national media reinforced the 'girl-guitar-gun' stereotype of the region's rebellious youth, while politicians and bureaucrats pandered to preconceived notions and formulate adhocist policies that would never work.

The border war with China, however, changed that. As the Chinese army appeared on the outskirts of Tezpur, the distant oilfields and tea gardens of Assam, so crucial to India's economy, seemed all but lost. Then came the two wars with Pakistan, and Bangladesh was born. In a historic move, the North East itself was reorganized into several new states, mostly carved out of Assam. While these momentous developments drew more attention towards the North East, the powerful anti-foreigner agitation in Assam forced the rest of the country to sit up and take notice of the crisis of identity in the region. What began as Assam's cry in the wilderness quickly became the concern of the whole country. Illegal migration from over-populated neighbouring countries came to be seen as a threat to national security. And since then, the North East has never again been the same. It just became more complex.

The anti-foreigner agitation unleashed both anti-Centre and anti-migrant forces. The ULFA grew out of the anti-foreigner movement against the 'Bangladeshi infiltrators', people of East Bengali origin who have been settling in Assam since the late nineteenth century. Slowly, the ULFA's anti-migrant stance gave way to determined separatism and it started blaming 'economic exploitation by Delhi' as being responsible for Assam's woes. But in the face of a fierce counter-insurgency offensive by the Indian army, it started targeting migrants again—this time not people of East Bengali origin but Hindi-speaking settlers from India's heartland 'cow belt' states.

In the first quarter century after independence, while the rest of the country remained oblivious to the tumult in the North East, the region and its people saw only one face of India. The young Naga, Mizo or Manipuri knew little about Mahatma Gandhi or Subhas Chandra Bose and failed to see 'the separation of the colonial from the national'. Indian independence did not matter for him or her. What these young men and women saw, year after year, was the Indian soldier, the man in the uniform, gun in hand, out to punish



the enemies of India. He saw the jackboots and grew suspicious when the occasional olive branch followed. When rats destroyed the crops in the Mizo hills, leaving the tribesmen to starve, the Mizo youth took the Naga's path of armed rebellion. Far-off Delhi seemed to have no interest in the region and, like in 1962 when Nehru left Assam to 'its fate', the North East could be abandoned in the time of a major crisis.

In my generation, the situation began to change slowly, though the conflicts did not end. More and more students from the North East started joining colleges and universities in 'mainland' India, many joining all-India services or corporate bodies after that. The media and the government started paying more attention to the North East, and even a separate federal ministry was created for developing the region. Now federal government employees get liberal leave travel allowances, including two-way airfare for visiting the North East, an effort to promote tourism in the picturesque region. As market economy struck deep roots across India, Tata salt and Maruti cars reached far-off Lunglei, Moreh and even Noklak. For a generation in the North East who grew up to hate India, the big nation-state was now proving its worth as a common market and a land of opportunity. Something that even excites the managers of the European Union.

Boys and girls from the North East won medals for India, many fought India's wars in places like Kargil, a very large number picked up Indian degrees and made a career in the heartland states or even abroad. The success of North Eastern girls in the country's hospitality industry provoked a *Times of India* columnist to warn sp-connoisseurs to go for 'a professional doctor rather than a Linda from the North East'. But a Shahrukh Khan was quick to critique the 'mainland bias' against the North Eastern Lindas in his great film 'Chak de India.'

More significantly, the civil society of heartland India began to take much more interest in the North East, closely interacting with like-minded groups in the region, to promote peace and human rights. Suddenly, a Nandita Haksar was donning the lawyer's robe to drag the Indian army to court for excesses against Naga villagers around Oinam, mobilizing hundreds of villagers to testify against errant troops. A Gobinda Mukhoty was helping the nascent Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) file a habeas corpus petition

seeking redressal for the military atrocities at Namthilok. Scores of human rights activists in Calcutta, Delhi or Chandigarh were fasting to protest the controversial death of a Thangjam Manorama or in support of the eternally fasting Irom Sharmila, the Meitei girl who says she will refuse food until the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act is revoked. Jaiprakash Narain and some other Gandhians had led the way by working for the Naga Peace Mission but now the concern for the North East was spreading to the grassroots in the mainland. The fledgling Indian human rights movement, a product of the Emergency, kept reminding the guardians of the Indian state of their obligations to a region they said was theirs.

How could the government deny the people of North East the democracy and the economic progress other Indians were enjoying? What moral right did Delhi have to impose draconian laws in the region and govern the North East through retired generals, police and intelligence officials? How could political problems be solved only by military means? Was India perpetrating internal colonization and promoting 'development of under-development'? These were questions that a whole new generation of Indian intellectuals, human rights activists, journalists and simple do-gooders continued to raise in courtroom battles, in the media space, even on the streets of Delhi, Calcutta or other Indian cities. Whereas their fathers had seen and judged India only by its soldiers, a Luithui Luingam or a Sebastian Hongray were soon to meet the footsoldiers of Indian democracy, men and women their own age with a vision of India quite different from the generation that had experienced Partition and had come to see all movements for self-determination as one great conspiracy to break up India.

In a matter of a few years, the Indian military commanders were furiously complaining that their troops were being forced to fight in the North East with one hand tied behind their back. Indeed, this was not a war against a foreign enemy. When fighting one's own 'misguided brothers and sisters', the rules of combat were expected to be different. Human rights violations continued to occur but resistance to them began to build up in the North East with support from elsewhere in the country, so much so that an Indian army chief, Shankar Roychoudhury, drafted human rights guidelines for his troops and declared that a 'brutalized army [is] no good as a fighting machine'.

Human rights and the media space became a new battle ground as both the troops and the rebels sought to win the hearts and minds of the population. It would, however, be wrong to over-emphasize the success of the human rights movement in the North East. Like the insurgents, the human rights movement has been torn by factional feuds at the national and the regional levels. But thanks to their efforts, more and more people in the Indian heartland came to hear of the brutalities at Namthilok and Oinam, Heirangothong and Mokukchung. Many young journalists of my generation also shook off the 'pro-establishment' bias of our predecessors and headed for remote locations to report without fear and favour. We crossed borders to meet rebel leaders, because if they were our misguided brothers, (as politicians and military leaders would often say) they had a right to be heard by our own people. One could argue that this only helped internalise the rebellions and paved the way for co-optation. But it also created the ambience for a rights regime in a far frontier region where there was none for the first three decades after 1947. Facing pressure from below, the authorities began to relent and the truth about the North East began to emerge.

The yearning for peace and opportunity began to spread to the grassroots. Peace-making in the region still remains a largely bureaucratic exercise involving shady spymasters and political wheeler-dealers, marked by a total lack of transparency. Insurgent leaders, when they finally decide to make peace with India, are often as secretive as the spymasters because the final settlements invariably amount to such a huge climbdown from their initial positions that the rebel chieftains do not want to be seen as being party to sellouts and surrenders. Nevertheless, the consensus for peace is beginning to spread. Peace without honour may not hold, but both the nation-state and the rebels are beginning to feel the pressure from below to make peace. And increasingly the push for peace is led not by big political figures like a Jayprakash Narain or a Michael Scott but by commoners—intensely committed men and women like brave ladies of the Naga Mothers Association who trekked hundred of kilometres to reach the rebel bases in Burma for kickstarting the peace process in Nagaland.

In the last few years, the North East and the heartland have come to know each other better. Many myths and misconceptions continue to persist, but as India's democracy, regardless of its many aberrations,

matures and the space for diversity and dissent increases, the unfortunate stereotypes associated with the North East are beginning to peter off slowly. The concept of one national mainstream is coming to be seen as an anathema in spite of the huge security hangover caused by terror strikes like the November 2008 assault on Bombay. Even Shahrukh Khan did not miss the pointlessness of mainstreaming in his banter sequence on the Manipur girls' 'failure' to learn Punjabi in 'Chak De India'. The existence of one big stream, presumably the 'Ganga Maiya' (Mother Ganges), is perhaps not good enough for India to grow around it. We need the Brahmaputras as much as we need the Godavaris and the Cauveris to evolve into a civilization state that is our destiny. The country cannot evolve on the misplaced notion of a national mainstream conceived around 'Hindu, Hindi and Hindustan'. The saffrons may win some elections because the seculars are a disorganized, squabbling, discredited and leaderless lot, but even the Hindutva forces must stretch both ways to accommodate a new vision of India or else they will fail to tackle the crisis of the North East and other trouble spots like Kashmir and will fall apart.

India remains a cauldron of many nationalities, races, religions, languages and sub-cultures. The multiplicity of identity was a fact of our pre-colonial existence and will determine our post-colonial lives. In the North East, language, ethnicity and religion will provide the roots of identity, sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually supporting. So a larger national identity should have more to do with civilization and multi-culturalism, tolerance and diversity, than with the base and the primordial. For the North East, the real threat is the growing criminalization of the movements for self-determination and the conflicting perceptions of ethnicity-driven homelands that pit tribes and races against each other. 'Freedom fighters' are being replaced by 'warlords'. They in turn may become drug lords because of the region's uncomfortable proximity to Burma, where even former communists have turned to peddling drugs and weapons. Money from organized extortion may have given the insurgents in north-east India a secure financial base to pursue their separatist agenda, but it has also corrupted the movements. And groups who have violently pursued the agenda of ethnic homelands and attempted ethnic cleansing have threatened to turn the region into a Bosnia or a Lebanon, increasing the levels of militarization and adding to the democracy-deficit that North East has always suffered from.

Despite these gloomy forebodings, some, like the visionary B.G. Verghese, see great opportunities for the region in the changing geo-politics of Asia. India's 'Look East' thrust in foreign policy may help the North East by way of better transport linkages with the neighbourhood and greater market access for products made in the region. But the government's Vision 2020 document admits that the region needs huge improvement in infrastructure to become sufficiently attractive for big-time investors, domestic or foreign. Petroleum products made in the Numaligarh Refinery in Assam are now being exported to Bangladesh by less expensive river transport, but Assam's crude output has sharply dwindled in recent years and at least a part of Numaligarh's future requirement may have to be imported via Haldia port in West Bengal.

Environmentalists and indigenous leaders have also opposed the huge Indian investments in the region's hydel power resources, saying that it may prove to be dangerous in a sensitive geo-seismic region. As India tries to open out the North East to possible big-time investments, particularly in hydel power, a new kind of conflict, emanating from contradicting perceptions of resources-sharing may replace the old style insurgencies. It all depends on how the leaders of the locality, province and nation shape up to the challenges of the future and make the most of the opportunities.

This book is an attempt to understand the crisis of India's North East. I have drawn primarily on my own experience and primary documentation gained during nearly three decades of journalism in the region and in countries around it. I not only managed rare access to both the undergrounds and officialdom, but also had the benefit of covering the most important events at very close quarters. The book may benefit from the rare insights I gained. During these eventful decades, when many profound changes unfolded in the North East, I had the benefit of witnessing them first hand, which then helped me look beyond the immediate. I wish to thank countless friends and sources in the region for their help, including many who wish to remain anonymous. A special word of gratitude for my friend, Ashis Biswas, who went through the script to weed out errors. Jaideep Saikia, my younger brother, contested many of my observations from his own experience as a former security advisor with the Assam and the Indian government, until I could hold my own. That exercise proved rather useful.

My friend, the late B.B. Nandi, also shared many great secrets about the Indian intelligence operations in and around the region and gave me some rare insights developed over a long and superb career in domestic and foreign intelligence. Armchair academics may not always appreciate the value of the likes of Saikia and Nandi—or for that matter, E.N. Rammohan, former DG, Border Security Force who also shared many unknown facets of the complex world of domestic and border policing—but I know for sure that they are much closer to the reality, which is what I want to bring home to readers. But some academics, who also have great experience as activists, like Ranabir Samadhar of the Calcutta Research Group, have always been an inspiration. As have been some of my great teachers—I owe to Jayantanuja Bandopadhyay my grounding in international relations, to B.K. Roy Barman my sense of North East and to Anthony Smith my understanding of ethnicity which proved so useful in understanding the North East. I am indebted to my countless friends in the North East—both in the underground and in the government and civil society movements—whose knowledge and perspective helped enrich my understanding of a complex region. For want of space, they all cannot be named.

I must also thank Sugata Ghosh and Rekha Natarajan at SAGE for agreeing to do my book. It is neither the usual format of an academic work nor the pseudo-fiction that ‘trade publishers’ generally like on North East. And therefore this could well fall between two stools, but I am grateful to SAGE for taking the risk.

## 1 India's North East: Frontier to Region

India's North East is a region rooted more in the accident of geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition. It is a directional category right out of colonial geographical usage—like the Middle East or the Far East. A young Assamese scholar describes it as a 'politically convenient shorthand to gloss over complicated historical formations and dense loci of social unrest'.<sup>1</sup> The region has, over the centuries, seen an extraordinary mixing of different races, cultures, languages and religions, leading to a diversity rarely seen elsewhere in India. With an area of about 2.6 lakh square kilometre and a population of a little over 39 million, the seven states of North East and Sikkim (which is now part of the North East Council) is a conglomeration of around 475 ethnic groups and sub-groups, speaking over 400 languages/dialects.

The region accounts for just less than 8 per cent of the country's total geographical area and little less than 4 per cent of India's total population. It is hugely diverse within itself, an India in miniature. Of the 635 communities in India listed as tribal, more than 200 are found in the North East. Of the 325 languages listed by the 'People of India' project, 175 belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group are spoken in the North East. While bigger communities like the Assamese and the Bengalis number several million each, the tribes that render the North East so diverse rarely number more than one or two million and many, like the Mates of Manipur, are less than 10,000 people in all.

## 2 Troubled Periphery

In recent decades, groups of tribes emerged into generic identities like the Nagas and the Mizos. As they challenged their incorporation into India and launched vigorous separatist campaigns, they began to evolve into nationalities. The presence of a common enemy—India—often generated a degree of cohesiveness and a sense of shared destiny within these generic identities. For instance, the Naga's self-perception of a national identity was manifested in the emergence of the Naga National Council (NNC) as the spearhead of the separatist movement and Nagas continue to describe their guerrillas as 'national workers'.

The fact that most of the prominent Naga tribes continue to use names given to them by outsiders also contributed to the formation of generic identities. For example, the traditional names of the Angamis are Tengima or Tenyimia, the Kalyo Kengnyu are actually Khiamniungams, and the Kacha Nagas were variously called Kabui and Rongmai until they merged with the Zemei and Lingmai tribes to form a new tribal identity—the Zeliangrong.<sup>2</sup> These constructed identities often provided a platform around which tribal identities could group and grow into generic ones.

But the absence of a common language and the long history of tribal warfare in the Naga Hills served to reinforce tribal identities that weakened the emerging 'national' identity of the Nagas. Thus, China-trained Naga rebel leader Thuingaleng Muivah labelled all Angamis as 'reactionary traitors' and described all Tangkhuls (his own tribe) as 'revolutionary patriots' when he lashed out at the 'betrayal' of the Angami-dominated NNC for signing the Shillong Accord with India in 1975.<sup>3</sup> Muivah later formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) to continue the fight for Naga independence against India and there were hardly any Angami Naga in the NSCN.

Twenty-two years later, Muivah himself started negotiations with India in 1997. After more than a decade of painstakingly slow negotiations, there are clear indications now that the NSCN is prepared to accept a 'special federal relationship with India'. In effect, he has given up the cause of Naga independence. Muivah, however, insists that India should agree to create a larger Naga state to include all Naga-inhabited areas in the North East. As a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur, 'Greater Nagaland' is more important for his



political future than 'sovereign Nagaland'. But the Burmese Nagas, who provided sanctuary to the Indian Naga rebels for 40 years, are clearly beyond the scope of these negotiations with India and are quietly forgotten. Which is why India, despite its ceasefire with the NSCN's Khaplang faction, has only started negotiations with the Muivah faction. Khaplang is a Hemi Naga from Burma—so how can India possibly negotiate with him! A ceasefire is the maximum India could offer to his faction.

The Naga rebel movement has unwittingly accepted 'Indian boundaries' to determine their territoriality—and Muivah's rivalry with Khaplang has also influenced the decision. But despite all these fissures that limit the evolution of a Naga nationality, the NSCN or any other rebel groups are unlikely to give up the label 'national' even if they were to settle for a special status within the Indian constitution. Former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari, by accepting the 'unique history of the Nagas', has strengthened their case.

The Mizo National Front (MNF), which was to the Mizos what the NNC was for the Nagas, continues to retain the marker 'national' nearly two decades after it gave up armed struggle and signed an agreement to return to the Indian constitutional system as a legitimate political party recognized by the Election Commission. Indeed, the MNF's journey has been unique. Started as a relief front to support Mizo farmers devastated by the rat famine, it later became a political party and contested elections in undivided Assam. Then it went underground to fight against India for 20 years before it returned to constitutional politics in 1986.

Mizoram also illustrates the inherent weakness of 'constructed' generic identities. The assertiveness of a major tribe and sense of marginalization among smaller ones often weaken an evolving generic identity, a 'Naga' or a 'Mizo' construct. The Hmars, the Lais, the Maras and even the Reangs in the MNF fought the Indian army shoulder-to-shoulder with the Lushais, the major tribe of the Mizo Hills. After 1986, all these tribes demanded their own acre of green grass. The Hmars and the Reangs wanted autonomous councils and took up arms to achieve their objective. On the other hand, the Lai, Mara and Chakma autonomous tribal district councils now complain of neglect by a Lushai-dominated government that, they say, has 'hijacked' the Mizo identity. Retribalization has followed—Hmars,

#### 4 Troubled Periphery

Reangs (or Brus as they are called in Mizoram), Lais, Maras and Chakmas have all chosen to assert their distinct tribal identities and are demanding a separate Union Territory in southern Mizoram. The tensions within the generic identities have often led to mayhem and violence in North East. India's federal government has often played on the tribal-ethnic faultlines to control the turbulent region.

### THE NORTH EAST: A BRITISH CONSTRUCT

India's North East is a British imperial construct subsequently accepted by the post-colonial nation-state. It emerged in British colonial discourse as a frontier region, initially connoting the long swathe of mountains, jungles and riverine, tropical marshy flatlands located between the eastern limits of British-ruled Bengal and the western borders of the Kingdom of Ava (Burma). As the British consolidated their position in Bengal, they came into contact with the principalities and tribes further east. For purposes of expansion, commercial gain and border management, the British decided to explore the area immediately after the historic Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which ended the First Anglo-Burmese War. A senior official, R.B. Pemberton, was asked to write a report on the races and tribes of Bengal's eastern frontier.

In 1835, Pemberton wrote a general survey of the area, titled *The Eastern Frontier of Bengal*. In 1866, Alexander Mackenzie took charge of political correspondence in the government of British Bengal. On the request of the lieutenant-governor, Sir William Grey, Mackenzie wrote a comprehensive account of the relations between the British government and the hill tribes on the eastern frontier of Bengal. When he completed his report in 1871, Mackenzie called it *Memorandum on the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal*. A revised and updated version of this report was published in 1882 as the *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal*. It had taken more than 30 years for the 'East' to become 'North East' in British administrative discourse. To Mackenzie, however, it must not have been entirely clear why the 'East' had become 'North East', though he tried to delineate its geographical extent:

The North East Frontier is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense, it embraces the whole of the hill ranges North East and south of Assam valley as well the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges. It will be convenient to proceed in regular order, first traversing from west to east the sub-Himalayan ranges north of Brahmaputra, then turning westward along the course of the ranges that found the Assam valley in the south, and finally, exploring the highlands interposed between Cachar and Chittagong and the hills that separate the maritime district of Chittagong from the Empire of Ava.<sup>4</sup>

As the British became firmly entrenched in Assam and their commercial interests expanded, they began to feel the need for a stable frontier. The hill tribes, particularly the Nagas and the Lushais (now known as Mizos), mounted several attacks on the tea plantations during which some British officials were kidnapped and killed. Further expansion of commercial interests and opening of trade routes to lands beyond Bengal and Assam necessitated control over the frontier region. J.C. Arbuthnott, the British commissioner of the hill districts, strongly advocated extension of control over areas 'where prevalence of head-hunting and atrocious barbarities on the immediate frontier retard pacification and exercise a prejudicial effect on the progress of civilization amongst our own subjects'.<sup>5</sup> Mackenzie also made it clear that 'there can be no rest for the English in India till they stand forth as governors and advisers of each tribe or people in the land'. Historical evidence now suggests that the British overplayed the threat of tribal raids to justify their incursions into the hill country east of undivided Bengal,<sup>6</sup> a bit of a nineteenth-century Blair-type 'sexing up of dossiers'.

The British were also desperate to check Burmese expansion. The First Anglo-Burmese War led to the expulsion of the Burmese armies from Assam and Manipur. The British promptly annexed Lower Assam to the empire. The occupation of the Brahmaputra, the Surma and the Barak Valleys opened the way for further British expansion into the region. Upper Assam was briefly restored to Ahom rule but the arrangement failed and the whole province was made part of the British Empire in 1838. The Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 restored the kingdom of Manipur to its Maharaja, and the Burmese

were eased out of that province. The Ahoms, who had ruled Assam for six centuries after subjugating the Dimasa and Koch kingdoms and had fought back the Bengal sultans and the Mughals, were finally conquered.

The British, however, did not stop after taking over Assam. The Mutock kingdom around Sadiya (now on the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border) was taken over immediately after the conquest of Upper Assam. The kingdom of Cachar was taken over in stages until it was completely incorporated into Assam in 1850. The Khasi Hills were annexed in 1833 and two years later, the Jaintia Raja was dispossessed of his domains. The Garo Hills, nominally part of Assam's Goalpara district, were taken over in 1869 and made into a district with its headquarters at Tura. The Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills now make up the present state of Meghalaya after having been a part of Assam until 1972. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the British sent military expeditions into the Naga and Lushai hills and both areas were subjugated after fierce fighting. They became separate districts of Assam and remained such until Nagaland emerged as a state of the Indian Union in 1963 and Mizoram became first a Union Territory in 1972 and then a full state in 1987.

The Daflas, the Abors, the Akas, the Mishmis and other tribes occupying what is now Arunachal Pradesh all attracted British reprisals, some for obstructing trade, others for cultivating poppy and some for disturbing the Great Trigonometrical Survey in 1876–77. A series of expeditions were conducted into the Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur frontier divisions to bring these turbulent tribal areas under control. Apart from exploring trade routes, these expeditions were also aimed at securing a clear and stable frontier with China. But while these hill regions west of Burma and south of Tibet were steadily being brought into the empire, the British realized the futility of administering them directly.

In 1873, the Inner Line Regulations were promulgated, marking the extent of the revenue administration beyond which the tribal people were left to manage their own affairs subject to good behaviour. No British subject or foreigner was permitted to cross the Inner Line without permission and rules were laid down for trade and acquisition of lands beyond.

The Inner Line was given the difficult task of providing a territorial frame to capital ... it was also a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress ... the communities staying beyond the Line were seen as belonging to a different time regime – where slavery, headhunting and nomadism could be allowed to exist. The Inner Line was expected to enact a sharp split between what were understood as the contending worlds of capital and pre-capital, of the modern and the primitive.<sup>7</sup>

Although the British started large commercial ventures in Assam in tea, oil and coal and invested heavily in the province's infrastructure, they remained satisfied with token acceptance of suzerainty from the tribes living beyond the Inner Line and did little to develop their economies. The kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura were also left alone, as long as they paid tributes. A British political resident was stationed in both the princely states to ensure suzerainty and monitor any political activity considered detrimental to British interests. British money and development targeted only areas that yielded large returns on investment. The Assam plains were seen as the only part of the North East where investment would bring forth adequate returns.

The foothills of the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys marked the limits of regular administration—the hills beyond and the tribespeople living there were largely left alone. 'The Inner Line became a frontier within a frontier adding to the seclusion of the hills and enhancing the cultural and political distance between them and the plains.'<sup>8</sup> Assam, however, continued to grow as a province, both in size and population, and its demographic diversity increased. Under the British, its boundaries were extended steadily to include most areas of what is now India's North East. Initially, Assam's administration was placed under the lieutenant-governor of Bengal and the Assamese were forced to accept Bengali as the official language of their province. In 1874, however, a year after the promulgation of the Inner Line Regulations for the hill areas, Assam was reconstituted as a province. The Bengali-dominated Sylhet and Cachar districts, the Garo and the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills and the district of Goalpara were all brought within Assam. Between 1895 and 1898, the north and south Lushai Hills and a portion of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were detached from Bengal and added to Assam. With

a population of nearly 5 million and a territory close to 60,000 square miles, Assam emerged as one of the largest provinces in British India.

Greater Assam, first under the British and then in the first 25 years after Indian independence, remained a heterogeneous entity—and a troubled one. The Assamese and the Bengalis were involved in a fierce competition to control the province, both sidestepping the aspirations of the numerous tribespeople whose homelands were incorporated into Assam (and thus into the British Indian empire) for the first time in their history. The British found it administratively useful to group together the totally diverse areas on Bengal's North Eastern frontier into Assam. Later, this exercise was followed by an attempt to integrate the frontier marches on the North East of Bengal with the hill regions of upper Burma in what came to be known as the Crown Colony proposal. This was not because the vast multitude of tribespeople in this long border stretch had anything in common except their Mongoloid racial features, but because the British saw in their antipathy to the plains people of India and Burma an opportunity to forge together a political entity that would tolerate the limited presence of British power even after it was forced to retreat from India after the Second World War.

So, the British were only too keen to exacerbate the hills–plains divide. The Government of India Act of 1919 (Montagu-Chelmsford reforms) provided powers to the governor-general to declare any tract a 'Backward Area' and bar the application of normal provincial legislation there. Within a decade, the Garo Hills, the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Mikir Hills, the North Cachar Hills, the Naga and the Lushai hills districts and the three frontier tracts of Balipara, Lakhimpur and Sadiya were all designated as Backward Areas. The Simon Commission recommended designating these Backward Areas as Excluded Areas and the 1935 Government of India Act reorganized the Backward Areas of Assam into the Excluded Areas of the North East Frontier Tract (now Arunachal Pradesh), Naga Hills District (now Nagaland), Lushai Hills District (now Mizoram) and North Cachar Hills District, while the Garo Hills, the Mikir Hills and the Khasi-Jaintia Hills (later to become Meghalaya) were reconstituted as 'Partially Excluded Areas'. As princely states, Tripura and Manipur remained beyond the scope of this reorganization.

In 1929, the Simon Commission justified the creation of Excluded Areas in this way:

The stage of development reached by the inhabitants of these areas prevents the possibility of applying to them methods of representation adopted elsewhere. They do not ask for self-determination, but for security of land tenure and freedom in the pursuit of their ancestral customs. Their contentment does not depend so much on rapid political advance as on experienced and sympathetic handling and on protection from economic subjugation by their neighbours.<sup>9</sup>

The Simon Commission was boycotted by the Congress and the major Indian parties but when it arrived in Shillong, capital of Greater Assam, as many as 27 representations were made to it by the Bodos and other plains tribals, the Naga Club of Kohima, the Khasi National Durbar and even the Assam government.

Dr J.H. Hutton's representation on behalf of the Assam government was indicative of British thinking on how to administer the North Eastern frontier region. It also gave enough indication of the conscious attempt the British were to make subsequently to split up the huge province of Assam between its rich plains and remote hills. Hutton opposed joining the 'backward hills' with the 'advanced plains' because the 'irreconcilable culture of the two could only produce an unnatural union'. His key recommendation was:

[...] the gradual creation of self-governing communities, semi-independent in nature, secured by treaties on the lines of the Shan States in Burma, for whose external relations alone the Governor of the province would be ultimately responsible. Given self-determination to that extent, it would always be open to a functioning hill state to apply for amalgamation if so desired and satisfy the other party of the advantage of its incorporation.<sup>10</sup>

Hutton's influence (and that of N.E. Parry, the deputy commissioner of the Lushai Hills District) on the final report of the Simon Commission was evident in its recommendations for the North Eastern frontier. On 12 August 1930, the Simon Commission suggested that 'it might be desirable to combine the administration of the backward tracts of Assam with that of the Arakans, Chittagong and Pakkoko Hill Tracts, the Chin Hills and the area inhabited by the Rangpang

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Nagas on both sides of the Patkai range'.<sup>11</sup> The British were clearly contemplating a new political-administrative entity that would club together the hill regions of India's North Eastern frontier and Burma's northern and western hill regions.

A definitive proposal along these lines was drawn up by Sir Robert Reid, governor of Assam, between 1939 and 1942. In his *Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam*, Reid observed:

The inhabitants of the Excluded Areas would not now be ready to join in any constitution in which they would be in danger of coming under the political domination of the Indians. The Excluded Areas are less politically minded and I have no doubt as to their dislike to be attached to India under a Parliamentary system. Throughout the hills, the Indian of the plains is despised for his effeminacy but feared for his cunning. The people of the hills of Assam are as eager to work out their own salvation free from Indian domination as are the people of Burma and for the same reason.

Colonial administrators like Reid, Hutton and Parry, who were keen on the separation of the plains and the hills of Greater Assam, were reviving the idea of a North Eastern province of British Indian Dominions—a province that would bring the vast region from the southern tip of the Lushai (or Lakher) Hills to the Balipara Tract on the border with Tibet under one administration, encompassing the Chin Hills, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Naga Hills and the Shan states of Burma. Reid was also prepared to sever Sylhet and Cachar from Assam as he considered the union 'unnatural'. Reginald Coupland, Beit Professor at Oxford, also fostered the idea of a greater union of tribes and smaller nationalities on the India–Burma frontier that could emerge into a 'Crown Colony' once the British were forced to leave India. In his book, *British Obligation: The Future of India*, Coupland argued the case for a Crown Colony that would ensure British strategic presence, as in Singapore or Aden or the Persian Gulf, in the post-colonial subcontinent.<sup>12</sup> The only difference was that while Singapore, Aden or the Persian Gulf lay on key sea routes, the proposed Crown Colony on the India–Burma frontier would be an inland entity with possible sea access only through the Arakans.



However, London abandoned the idea of a union of tribespeople on the India–Burma frontier in 1943 in view of what it described as ‘immense difficulties’ involved in the exercise. Reid’s successor, Sir Andrew Clow, opposed the breaking up of Assam, which, without the hill areas, would become ‘a long narrow finger stretching up the Brahmaputra Valley’. He saw the Assam valleys as a ‘viable commercial proposition’ and preferred a future in which the Tribal Areas and the Excluded Areas were retained in Assam to provide for a stable administration of a difficult frontier. As the Second World War was drawing to a close, a meeting was held on 10 March 1945 at the Department of External Affairs in London. It was attended, among others, by Olaf Caroe, secretary of external affairs, J.P. Mills, adviser to the governor of Assam, and Jack Mcguire of the Scheduled Areas Department. The Burmese government was opposed to the suggested amalgamation of its hill areas with northeast India and therefore proposed merely ‘an agency on the Burmese side and one on the Indian side under separate forms of administration eventually being contemplated as federating with Burma or India’.<sup>13</sup> It was generally agreed that ‘the boundaries would be drawn with regard to ethnography rather than geographically’ so that individual tribes would not be split up between two administrations.

For similar reasons, the Crown Colony idea was given a silent burial in the humdrum of the transfer of power in the Indian subcontinent. By then, however, the tribespeople had seen a world war on their home turf. They saw in the imminent withdrawal of the imperial power an opportunity to regain the freedom they had enjoyed before the advent of the British. But if British manoeuvres had slowly turned this diverse hill area from a listless frontier into an administrative region held together to promote imperial interests, then the partition of the subcontinent and the break-up of British Bengal completed the process of turning it into a distinct geographical entity precariously detached from the Indian heartland. Cyril Radcliffe’s pen left Assam, its sprawling hill regions and the princely kingdoms of Tripura and Manipur clinging to the Indian heartland by a 21-km-wide corridor below Bhutan and Tibet.

Despite being incorporated into Assam, every distinct area on Bengal’s North Eastern frontier had historically relied on one or two border districts of eastern Bengal or Burma as their conduit to the

world. Assam and its southern belly consist of the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills and the Bengali region of Cachar, and the trans-border reference point was Sylhet and Mymensingh. For Tripura, it was Comilla and for the Mizo Hills it was Chittagong and the Chin Hills of Burma. For the Nagas and the tribespeople of what is now Arunachal Pradesh, Burma's Kachin Hills, the Naga-dominated western Sagaing division and the southern reaches of Tibet were natural reference points as immediate neighbours. The geographical links that were sustained by proximity and trade were suddenly severed, forcing the inhabitants to look for alternatives. With Comilla in a different country, Tripura needed the Assam–Agartala road to stay in touch with India. With Chittagong gone, Mizoram needs the Silchar–Aizawl highway. Moreover, everyone in the North East—and the Indian heartland—need the Siliguri Corridor to make sense of what Hutton and Parry described as an ‘unnatural union’.

The Radcliffe Award forced all these frontier people to turn towards each other for the first time in history. The Bengal they knew was gone, having become a different country. Bengal's western half, always closer to the Indian heartland than its eastern half, was now the region's tenuous link to the rest of India. The North East slowly evolved as a territorial-administrative region, as Greater Assam petered out as the familiar unit of public imagination. As Delhi sought to consolidate its grip on 2,25,000 sq. km of hills and plains east of the Siliguri Corridor and manage the conflicting agendas of the great multitude of ethnic groups living in this area surrounded by China, Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Burma and Bhutan, a directional category was found to be more useful—much like ‘South Asia’ has been found to be more preferable to ‘Indian subcontinent’ after the Partition. Just as physical distance exacerbated the cultural divide between the two Pakistan and ultimately led to their violent divorce, the broad racial differences between India and its North East and the tenuous geographical link contributed to a certain alienation, a feeling of ‘otherness’ that subsequently gave rise to a political culture of violent separatism.

As the British left, the Constituent Assembly set up an advisory committee to make recommendations for the development of the tribal areas of northeast India. A sub-committee headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, later chief minister of Assam, was set up with four other

tribal leaders: Rupnath Brahma (a Bodo), Reverend J.J.M. Nichols-Roy (a Khasi), Aliba Imti (a Naga) and A.V. Thakkar (a Gandhian social worker active in the North East). The committee found that the assimilation of the North Eastern tribals into the Indian mainstream was 'minimal', and that they were very sensitive to any interference with their lands and forests, their customary laws and way of life. The sub-committee recommended formation of autonomous regional and district councils that could provide adequate safeguards to the tribals in preserving their lands and customs, language and culture. Opinions in the Constituent Assembly were divided, but persuasion by communist leader Jaipal Singh and decisive intervention by the Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar carried the day. Ambedkar argued that while tribals elsewhere in India had become Hindus and assimilated with the mainstream culture, in northeast India they had remained outside the Indian influence. Indeed, Ambedkar went so far as to compare their condition with the 'Red Indians' in the US.

Under Ambedkar's influence, it was decided that the district and regional councils would be provided with sufficient autonomy and their administration would be vested in the governor rather than in the state legislative assembly. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution was created, vested with the provisions for the creation of the autonomous regional and the district councils. The autonomy provisions were fairly extensive, covering powers to draft laws for local administration, land, management of forests and customary laws, education and health administration at the grassroots. In 1952, five district councils were created in Assam, one each for the Garo Hills, the united Khasi-Jaintia Hills (now in Meghalaya), the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram), the United Mikir (Karbi) Hills and the North Cachar Hills (still in Assam). The Naga Hills, where the Naga National Council had already demanded separation from India, was not given the benefit of autonomy under the Sixth Schedule for reasons never properly explained. As a result, armed separatism gained ground in the Naga Hills. The intensity of the rebellion there and the rout of the Indian army in the brief border war with China in 1962 finally prompted India to concede a full separate state to the Nagas in 1963.

And that was the first nail in the coffin of Greater Assam. Up until then, with the exception of Tripura and Manipur, the two erstwhile

princely states administered as Union Territories since their merger with the Indian Union, the rest of India east of the Siliguri Corridor was Assam. Only the tribal areas of the frontier tracts bordering Tibet were administered separately from Assam as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). In fact, the North East frontier (as opposed to the region that it is today) began to emerge in 1875–76, when the Inner Line of the Lakhimpur and Darrang districts of Assam were brought under Regulation II of 1873. In 1880, the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation was passed by the British; it started the process by which the administration of the frontier tracts of Sadiya, Lakhimpur and Balipara was slowly handed over to the governor of Assam as distinct from the government of Assam. The Indian constitution put the president of India in charge of the administration of these frontier tracts (different from its hill districts) and representation for NEFA was provided by an Act in 1950. The administration of these tracts continued to be carried out by political officers and their assistants.

In 1969, the Panchayat Raj Regulations already in effect elsewhere in India were extended to NEFA, leading to the creation of Gaon Panchayats, Anchal Samitis and Zilla Parishads under the supervision of the Pradesh Council. The Pradesh Council was the precursor of the state legislative assembly and consisted of Zilla Parishad members and those nominated by the chief commissioner of NEFA. NEFA became a Union Territory in 1973 with its name changed to Arunachal Pradesh. It finally became a full state in 1987, along with Mizoram.

### **GREATER ASSAM OR 'NORTH EAST'**

The Indian National Congress, which ruled the country until its first defeat in the national parliamentary elections in 1977, had favoured the creation of linguistic states even before independence. So, it supported the annulment of the Partition of Bengal in 1905. In its Nagpur session in 1920, the Congress made it clear that the 'time has come for the redistribution of the provinces on a linguistic basis'. This was reiterated by the Congress in its many subsequent annual sessions and was also reflected in its election manifesto of 1945–46.

In 1948, the Linguistic Provinces Commission of the Constituent Assembly argued that for purposes of state reorganization, 'apart from the homogeneity of language, stress should also be given to history, geography, economy and cultural mores'. The State Reorganization Commission (SRC) was set up in December 1953 to 'dispassionately and objectively' consider the question of reorganizing the states of the Union. Though it recommended formation of states giving 'greatest importance to language and culture', the SRC said in a note:

In considering reorganization of States, however, there are other important factors which have also to be borne in mind. The first essential consideration is the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India. Financial, economic and administrative considerations are almost equally important not only from the point of view of each state but for the whole nation. (emphasis mine)

Clearly, the SRC was unwilling to recommend the use of the linguistic principle in the North East because it was uncertain about how the stability of a sensitive frontier region would be affected by such a move. The Assam government, in its representation to the SRC, advocated the preservation of the *status quo*. It would not be opposed, it said, to the merger of Cooch Behar, Manipur and Tripura. Needless to say, all political parties in these areas opposed moves for a possible merger with Assam. Proposals were put forward for a Kamtapur state that would encompass the Goalpara district of Assam, the Garo Hills, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. (These proposals were recently revived by some tribal groups in the northern districts of West Bengal like the Kamtapur Peoples Party and the underground Kamtapur Liberation Organisation.) A proposal for a Purbachal state with the Bengali-majority Cachar district at its core was also placed before the SRC. Leaders of the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo Hills led by Captain \*Williamson Sangma also raised the demand for a hill state because they felt the autonomy provisions of the Sixth Schedule did not adequately protect tribal interests.

In its final recommendations, the SRC argued for a 'large and relatively resourceful state on the border rather than small and less resilient units'—in other words, for Tripura's merger with Assam so that the entire border with Pakistan could be brought under one

administrative unit. Stiff resistance in Tripura to any merger with Assam ultimately foiled this initiative. The state had enjoyed several centuries of sovereign princely rule and all political parties and ethnic groups, tribals and Bengalis alike, were opposed to a merger with either Assam or West Bengal. Finally, Tripura and Manipur became Part C states of India, NEFA was retained as a Frontier Agency and the rest of what is India's North East today remained in Assam.

The growing intensity of the armed separatist movement in the Naga Hills, the peaceful but determined mass movement for a hill state below the Brahmaputra Valley and finally, the outbreak of armed rebellion in the Lushai Hills district (renamed Mizo Hills district) led to the ultimate break-up of Assam within 15 years of the linguistic reorganization of India, which had left Assam untouched. The core of Assam was the Brahmaputra Valley. With the Surma Valley lost to East Pakistan, Assam was more Assamese than ever before. But the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley remained in Assam and the ethnic rivalry between the Bengalis and the Assamese continued to disturb peace and stability in the state. The Assamese elite were also seen as insensitive to the aspirations of tribal and hill people.

The worsening of relations with China that led to the border war of 1962 forced leaders in Delhi to turn their attention to the security and stability of India's North Eastern frontier. The Chinese army had advanced to Tezpur before suddenly retreating to their version of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). In far-off Delhi, there were speculations about what would have happened if the Naga guerrillas had worked as the 'fifth column' for the Chinese (which they did not) and if the Chinese had pushed into the Naga Hills from Tirap after overrunning the Walong salient. The Naga rebels had been receiving assistance from Pakistan since 1957, but not from China. It was only in 1965 that the Chinese finally agreed to help the Naga rebels. Nevertheless, the prospect of a Chinese military drive through eastern Arunachal Pradesh and northern Burma into the Naga Hills for a Tibet-style 'liberation' weighed heavily on Nehru and his colleagues when they decided to break away from the 'Greater Assam' model of administration in India's North Eastern frontier and confer full statehood to Nagaland.

Within a few months of granting statehood to the Naga Hills district, Nehru also opened peace talks with the Naga rebels. A

Nagaland Peace Mission was set up with respected popular figures like Jayaprakash Narayan and Assam's chief minister, Bimala Prasad Chaliha. He did not live to see the failure of the Peace Mission and the Naga problem remains unresolved to this day. The worst-case scenario of a Chinese drive into Nagaland and adjoining states has also not materialized. In fact, after supporting several insurgent groups from northeast India for 15 years, Beijing stopped support to these groups in the early 1980s.

Within three years of the 1962 border war with China, India had faced a Pakistani offensive to 'liberate' Kashmir in 1965 through Operation Gibraltar and Operation Grand Slam. By 1966, Naga guerrillas had started reaching China in large numbers for training and Mizo rebels had unleashed Operation Jericho on the last day of February 1966. Manipur and Tripura also experienced the first stirrings of ethnic unrest and underground armed activity. In 1967, as the first batch of Naga rebels were returning from China after several weeks of intensive training in revolutionary guerrilla warfare, the tribal peasants of Naxalbari, on the Siliguri Corridor that the army calls the 'Chicken Neck', unfurled the banners of India's first Maoist rebellion. West Bengal was soon to be engulfed in a perilous escalation of violence that subsequently spread beyond its borders. With Pakistan as hostile as ever and now joined by China intent on teaching India a lesson for 'its collaboration with the American imperialists on Tibet', the worst-case scenario envisioned by Delhi looked like coming true.

Response to this situation called for a right mix of political acumen and military drive. The dull, thudding counter-insurgency campaign by the Indian army could go on in the Naga Hills and in the Mizo Hills but the generals in Delhi could ill afford several divisions locked up there. More troops were needed to man the long and difficult Himalayan frontier with China and the multi-climatic border with Pakistan. For those guarding the borders, there was always a need to look behind the back in the event of a war. The guerrillas might unsettle the supply lines and join up with Chinese or Pakistani special forces to wreak havoc in the rear. Counter-insurgency units also had to look out across the frontier from where the guerrillas were obtaining training, weapons, funds and encouragement.

The creation of Nagaland and the peace talks of the mid-1960s was intended to start a process of political reconciliation that would lead to the territorial reorganization in Assam. The spread of the prairie fires in India's North East forced Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to consider wide-ranging concessions to the battling ethnicities. Assam had been India's delegated overlord in the North East—its upper-caste ruling elite had run the hill regions of the North Eastern frontier for close to a quarter century. Anyone who went to the hills was likely to meet a *Bora* or a *Buragohain*, a *Borthakur* or a *Barpujari* running the local administration as its deputy commissioner or police superintendent, as its chief engineer or chief medical officer. Now, however, there was too much pressure on them to make way for a missionary-educated neo-literate tribal political and professional class. If the Nagas could have a state of their own, the Mizos, the Khasis and the Garos, the Bodos and the Karbis all wanted one for themselves. The ethnic homeland was catching the imagination of the struggling tribal communities in North East. At the forefront of these movements for separate tribal homelands, one could not miss the lead taken by the neo-literate Christian converts. Be it a Phizo or a Muivah, a Laldenga or a Zoramthanga, a Nichols-Roy or a Williamson Sangma, or much later, even a Bijoy Hrangkhawl or a Ranjan Daimary, the cross on their chests could not be missed.

The Naxalite movement in West Bengal and the evolving crisis in East Pakistan occupied much of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's attention as India entered its 'difficult years'. But she made the most of the opportunity. As she prepared for military intervention in East Pakistan after much initial reluctance, Mrs Gandhi used the military build-up on the border to crush the Naxalite movement in Bengal. Deployment of troops against the Maoist guerrillas concealed India's offensive intentions across the border until it was too late in the day for Pakistan. The same troops who combed the jungles of Birbhum during the monsoon of 1971 were, a few months later, marching to Jessore and Dhaka.

By decisively intervening in East Pakistan, Indira Gandhi cut off one of the main trans-border regrouping zones for the ethnic rebels of northeast India. A friendly government in Dhaka, though short-lived, ensured for Delhi that the jungles of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sylhet and Mymensingh were not available to the guerrillas from



the Alee Command (Foreign Command) of the 'Naga Army' or the Zampui manga battalion of the Mizo National Front. Despite other irritants in Indo-Burmese relations, Delhi followed up the success in Bangladesh by developing closer military cooperation with the Burmese. Indira Gandhi, however, was far too sagacious to rely exclusively on diplomatic and military options. She soon played the 'statehood' card in the North East to satisfy the aspirations of the battling ethnicities to consolidate the gains of the 1971 Bangladesh military campaign.

Even before the liberation of Bangladesh, Mrs Gandhi's government had taken the initiative for the territorial reorganization of the North East. The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act of 1971, which sought to 'provide for the establishment of the states of Manipur and Tripura and for the formation of the state of Meghalaya and of the Union Territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh by reorganizing the existing state of Assam', was finally passed in the parliament at almost the same time as the new secular and socialist Republic in Bangladesh was born. The vivisection of Assam and the creation of three new states and two Union Territories (finally upgraded to full states by Mrs Gandhi's son Rajiv in 1987) were intended to satisfy the aspirations of the neo-literate tribal political class so that they could draw away their fellow tribesmen from the path of armed opposition to the Indian state. The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act finally achieved what the likes of Hutton and Parry, Reid and Mackenzie had failed to carry out—the separation of the plains of Assam from its enchanting hills. Delhi did realize the need for some regional coordination when it set up the North Eastern Council to facilitate coordinated development and security planning. This was described by B.P. Singh, an Assam cadre IAS officer and later India's home secretary, as 'the new twin vision for the region'.<sup>14</sup>

In Indian—and South Asian—political-administrative discourse, Assam was finally replaced by 'the North East'. After the reorganization, Assam became just another state in the region east of the Siliguri Corridor, controlling a much smaller piece of territory made up of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys and the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The other hill regions that had been added to Assam by the British were all gone. It is debatable whether India gained

anything by creating so many small—and some say, economically non-viable—states in the North East. The region's leading historian, H.K. Barpujari, argued that breaking up Assam was a disaster. In his last book, he lamented: 'The policy-makers in Delhi utterly failed to realize that in a multi-racial and multi-lingual country, erection of linguistic states would unlock the Pandora's Box and open up the floodgates of racism, linguism and parochialism. This has happened elsewhere in India and is now happening in the North East'.<sup>15</sup> As time has shown, there is much truth in the last written words of Assam's greatest historian.

Although the North East has emerged as a distinct region in India, with clearly demarcated geographical contours, states within the region rarely betray any awareness of this. All the states carved out of Assam have border disputes with the mother state. Police forces of these states, particularly those of Nagaland and Assam, have fought pitched battles—the worst such clash occurring in 1985 at Merapani—to settle border disputes, the fighting sometimes resembling a border clash between separate countries. Furthermore, the region's many insurgent armies, as well as the state governments who try to combat them, have failed to work out any meaningful degree of cooperation among themselves.

Joint revolutionary fronts have been non-starters, unlike in neighbouring Burma, because even the Delhi-baiting rebels often find they are as different from their regional cousins as from the rest of India. Differences of ethnicity, religion and ideology have often blurred the tactical wisdom of joining hands against the common enemy. Some agitators, such as those leading the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam in the early 1980s, discovered, after initial hostility, that the Indian federal government was their only real safeguard against rampant illegal migration from Bangladesh that threatened to undermine the demographic character of Assam. The agenda of the Assam agitation is now considered a policy priority for the whole nation and Delhi, especially when ruled by a Hindu revivalist government appeared to be more enthusiastic than the Prafulla Mahantas and Bhriгу Phukans to identify and throw out illegal infiltrators from states bordering Bangladesh.

Despite its heterogeneity, the 'North East' as a constituent region of India has come to stay as a distinct entity. If India's south, made

up of the four states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, is seen as India's 'Dravidian under-belly', very different from the country's northern cow-belt, the North East is considered racially distinct from the heartland. That clubbing together of hugely diverse identities into a post-colonial region may be the cause of many a policy failure but there's no denying that Delhi is now beginning to see the North East as a possible bridge with the tiger economies of South East Asia. That's why, in 2001, a cabinet-level Department for Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) was launched to fast track the region's economic and infrastructure development. That makes the North East the only region whose development is the specific mandate of a stand-alone department of the federal government. There is an industrial policy for the region to attract private capital that's been sparse to come to the North East since the British left.

In fact, the government of India's Vision 2020 document for North East envisages the region as 'a prosperous part of India contributing, in some measure, to the growth of the national economy with the geo-economical disadvantages converted into productive opportunities'. The document says it wants to create 'a contented rural North East with developed primary sector impacting growth in the secondary sector, with minimum connectivity established and health and education for all ensured'. It further says that it aims at converting the North East into

an important hub of trade and commerce in relation to South East Asia with border trade developed and firmly rooted, an empowered and informed people through skill development and technology intervention, a community participating and involving in socio-economic planning, projectizing, implementing and monitoring and a peaceful society with level of unemployment drastically brought down.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, India's Look East foreign policy—a special effort to develop close ties with largely Mongoloid South East Asia, China, Japan and Korea—sees the North East not as a periphery anymore, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions (South East and South Asia) with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, transmission lines criss-crossing the region.

The mainland Indian perception of the North East has also changed, albeit rather slowly. Assam's former governor, Lieutenant-General S.K. Sinha, proposed installing the statue of the great Ahom hero Lachit Barphukan in the National Defense Academy at Khadakvasla. The logic is not difficult to see: if Shivaji can be a national hero for fighting the Mughals, why cannot Lachit be one for his great victory against the Mughal army at the Battle of Saraighat. The historical legitimacy of regional 'Indian' heroes for their resistance to foreign invaders like the Mughals has been growing in a climate of Hindu revivalism. And in this changing Indian milieu, the exploits of the soldiers of the Naga and the Assam regiments of the Indian army in the far-off battlefields of Kargil has found a place in the nation's television-engineered collective memory. The country's soccer team has, at any time now, a 50 to 60 per cent representation from North East, especially Manipur—something that prompted young Calcutta-based sports historian Kaushik Bandyopadhyay to explore soccer's potential to draw away potential insurgent recruits in Manipur.

Times have changed in the North East as well. Thousands of Nagas lined up to pay homage at the funeral of Lieutenant Kengruse, the Naga officer of the Indian army martyred in Kargil, as they did during the cremation of the great 'Naga Army' General Mowu Angami, who led the several groups of Naga rebels to East Pakistan and China in a saga of bravery and grit recollected in Nirmal Nibedon's *Night of the Guerrillas*. Scores of Nagas and Mizos, Khasis and Garos join the central services, the Indian army and the paramilitary forces and other national organizations every year. The national parliament has had a president and a speaker from the North East. There has been even a Congress president from the region.

Since the missionary-educated tribals of northeast India have a lead in English education over most other tribals from the Indian heartland, they are beginning to secure more and more positions in the central services by taking advantage of the Scheduled Tribes quota. Those who join these services and other federal organizations end up as part of the 'mobile Indian middle class', the strongest cement of India's post-colonial nationhood. Their influence on local society is not inconsiderable and they provide a direction for new aspirants in the region. At last, the university campuses in Delhi, Bombay and Pune are beginning to be as attractive for the educated youth in the North East as the guerrilla camps in the troubled region.

The creation of the new states and autonomous councils in the North East have indeed opened a Pandora's Box. The Bodos, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Hmars and even the Garos, who have produced more chief ministers in Meghalaya than the Khasis, have militant groups fighting for new states, autonomous regions and even independent homelands. If the Nagas and the Mizos can have states of their own, the argument goes, why cannot the Bodos or the Garos have likewise? But, none of the new states of northeast India can be called ethnically compact. They were formed by joining up the homelands of three, four or more important tribes. Meghalaya has three leading tribes, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. Mizoram has the dominant Lushais but has to reckon with the aspirations of the Hmars, the Lais, the Maras, the Chakmas and the Reangs. Pure ethnic homelands have proved to be a costly mirage and North East's battling ethnicities, in their relentless pursuit of the same, could reduce the region to a Bosnia or a Kosovo.

Since the North East has emerged as a distinct geo-political region, its inhabitants have a good reason to make a common ground on a host of issues to achieve the best possible deal with India. It is time for all separatist groups in North East to explore the limits of the 'special federal relationship' that Delhi is prepared to offer to the NSCN. As India's relations with China and the countries of South East Asia begin to improve, the importance of the country's 'Mongoloid' fringe has not been lost on Delhi or her neighbours. In years to come, if regional cooperation in the eastern part of South Asia increases, as it did in the ASEAN region, India's North East can emerge as the country's bridge to several growth quadrants across its borders, a land of opportunity for outsiders and natives alike. At last, a disadvantageous geographic location could give way to great eco-strategic advantage for India. But before Delhi could exploit that, it will have to overcome two of North East's perpetual deficits: the deficit of democracy and development. Festering—and multiplying—low-intensity conflicts in the North East are clearly inconsistent with India's image as a rising power and Delhi would do well to resolve these conflicts even as it pushes ahead with the Look East policy to turn the 'arc of instability' (the rebellious Indo-Burma frontier region) into a shared economic space with great promise for growth and prosperity.

## NOTES

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