

SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

# TROUBLED PERIPHERY

CRISIS OF INDIA'S  
NORTH EAST

SUBIR BHAUMIK

图书馆



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# Troubled Periphery

*To my father  
Amarendra Bhowmick  
and my little daughter  
Anwesha,  
a daughter of the 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

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 Luingham 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,